After Anna

by

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AFTER ANNA

It is not a rule, of course, but readers generally have certain expectations of title characters. One expectation is that the eponymous hero of a play or novel will stay the course, or at least stick around to the penultimate scene or chapter, as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

But what are we to make of those stories where the title character exits all too early, as in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, who is murdered by Clytemnestra about three-quarters of the way through the play; or Sophocles' *Antigone*, who leaves the stage a prisoner, never to return, even though there is more than a quarter of the lines yet to be delivered; or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, who is murdered by the conspirators in Act III, Scene 1; or Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, who flings herself under the wheels of a train on page 695 of a novel that does not conclude until page 740?

For this paper, I will focus on *Anna Karenina*, a complex novel, with fifty-eight principal characters, but you can relax: I certainly don't intend to talk about all of them. Here is a brief summary of the plot, in so far as it relates to those characters I am going to discuss, for the benefit of those who have not read the novel and to refresh the memories of those who have.

Dolly, wife of Stepan Oblonsky, has discovered that her husband has committed adultery, and the entire household is in turmoil. Oblonsky has invited his sister, Anna Karenina, to pacify Dolly and save his marriage. Anna, who is married to Alexey Karenin, twenty years her senior, is indeed the peacemaker that her brother had hoped for. She also enchants the Oblonsky children, as well as Dolly's eighteen-year old sister, Kitty.

Anna, on the way to visit her brother, encounters Count Alexey Vronsky for the first time, and there is an instant attraction, but nothing happens then. Vronsky, who looks on marriage as absurd, has a brief flirtation with Kitty, which breaks the teenager's heart when it becomes obvious that he is seriously, relentlessly, pursuing Anna.

Anna falls in love with Vronsky; she leaves her husband and her much beloved eight-year old son; she lives with Vronsky and has a child by him, causing great scandal in the aristocratic worlds of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Social ostracism and Vronsky's waning affections drive Anna into frenzy and, when she is convinced that her lover is going to leave her, she commits suicide.

The basic facts of the plot seem to be all about adultery, but they don't tell the whole story. As Lionel Trilling observed, in *The Opposing Self*, "It is the moral quality, this quality of affection, that accounts for the unique illusion of reality that Tolstoy creates. It is when the novelist really loves his characters that he shows them in their completeness and contradiction, in their failures as well as their great moments, in their triviality and their charm."

My summary only covers Parts I through VII, pages 1 to 695. Anna is dead. What more can be said? What is the purpose of Part VIII, those final forty-four pages after Anna's death?

Before I delve into these questions, a word is in order about my methodology, for I have done something I usually scorn: quantitative analysis of a literary text. When it comes to these matters, I am generally somewhat to the left of that curmudgeonly critic Edmund Wilson, who once complained that much of the work undertaken by literary scholars was no more than a boondoggle. His prime example was a team of eighteen scholars, hard at work on the literary assembly line, reading *Tom Sawyer* backwards.

Yes, backwards, punctuation mark, by word, by word: "period/ End/ The," and so on, right back to the title page of the novel, "Sawyer/Tom/Of/Adventures/The."

The purpose of this was to find out, Wilson said, how many times "Aunt Polly" is printed with a capital "A" and how many times it is presented in lower case. By reading it backwards, presumably, the team of eighteen scholars would not be distracted by Twain's story or style.

For this paper, rest assured, I have not attempted to read *Anna Karenina* backwards, for my purpose is not to ferret out textual variations in different editions. I do confess, however, to having skimmed over parts one through seven (pages 1-695), so that I might concentrate on part eight, those forty-five pages that follow the death of Anna. This is not some schoolboy attempt to cheat, for I have read the novel many times and, after concentrating on Part VIII, I did read the entire novel again, this time in a translation by Margaret Wettlin, an American-born woman who lived in Russia for some fifty years.

The quantitative analysis I have used for this paper is not very sophisticated. I simply ran a few textual searches of *Anna Karenina* on my Kindle. The title character of Tolstoy's novel is mentioned by name [Anna, Anna Arkadyevna; Madame Karenina] 1,007 times. She is never referred to as "Karenin's wife," but on the two occasions on which they are alluded to, it is "the Karenins, husband and wife." Anna is never referred to as "Vronsky's mistress," even though Vronsky is mentioned 851 times. The word "mistress" in the novel is used, in fact, primarily to describe the female head of a household; Oblonsky's lover is identified as a "mistress" on only three occasions, and Anna speaks of herself as "his," that is, Vronsky's, "mistress" on one single occasion.

Kitty (Princess Catherine Alexandrovna), who had a school girl crush on Vronsky, but who eventually marries Levin, is mentioned 662 times.

Then I ran the numbers on Constantine Dmitrich Levin, who is tagged 1,637 times, far more than any other character, and fifty per cent more times than the title character. I cite these statistics, not out of pedantry, but to point out something that is obvious, but often overlooked by those who become enamored by the subtly bewitching personality of Anna.

Some readers, too, it seems also fall immediately under her spell, so much so that many are disappointed that the novel doesn't stop, as they think it should, with Anna's suicide.

Film makers and television directors seem to be in agreement with this class of readers, for the vast majority of the nearly thirty screen and television adaptations of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* end, in a variety of visually dramatic ways, with Anna tragically throwing herself in front of an oncoming train.

One capsule movie review narrowed the plot even further, but in a way that made me curious: “Tolstoy’s classic, the reviewer wrote, “[is] about a woman married to a stodgy bureaucrat who falls in love with a dashing army officer.” The lack of punctuation makes the whole matter ambiguous: was it the married woman or the stodgy bureaucrat who fell in love with the dashing army officer? If you see that movie version, please let me know whether it is Anna or Alexey Karenin who goes off with the dashing army officer. That might be a different story altogether.

Part VIII of the novel, the subject of this paper, is not included in any of the celluloid adaptations of *Anna Karenina*.

There is another story in *Anna Karenina* that develops simultaneously with the title character’s adulterous affair and that is the on-again, off-again, on-again relationship between Levin and Kitty. This is the subject that leads to those forty-five pages of the concluding Part VIII.

Part VIII takes place two months after Anna’s death. There are two retrospective glances at Anna, through the eyes of Vronsky’s mother (VIII, 4) and then of Vronsky himself (VIII, 5). Anna, however, is not mentioned by name, something my clever Kindle technology failed to notice.

Vronsky’s mother, as might be expected, sees Anna’s death only in terms of what it has done to her and her son. Oh, how she has suffered!

“You know,” she tells her train companion, “he [Vronsky] had once before shot himself on her account? Yes, she ended as such a woman deserved to end. Even the death she chose was mean and vulgar.”

Her companion, expressing sympathy for Countess Vronsky's distress, says, "It is not for us to judge," an echo of the famous epigraph to the novel, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, saith the Lord."

"No, say what you will," the Countess continues, "she was a bad woman. Such desperate passions! Only to prove something unusual. Well, she proved it! She ruined herself and two splendid men—her husband and my unfortunate son."

Vronsky, who is travelling on the same train, is suffering also—from a toothache. The sight of an engine on the rails, however, causes him to "suddenly remember *her*." His memory is of the mangled body at the railroad shed and his attempts to recall his best moments with her are forever poisoned. "He could think of her only as triumphant," Tolstoy writes, "having carried out the threat of inflicting on him totally useless but irrevocable remorse."

At an earlier station stop (VIII, 2), Vronsky encounters Anna's brother, Stepan Oblonsky, a scene which one might imagine as being awkward for both. Oblonsky approaches Vronsky, Tolstoy writes, "with not a remembrance in his head of the tears of despair he had shed over his sister's body, seeing in Vronsky now only a hero [going off to war] and an old friend."

The novel began, remember with the chaos and pain Oblonsky brought to his wife and family through his adulterous relationship with a governess. Tolstoy noted (Part I, 2) that Oblonsky "could not feel repentant that he, a handsome amorous man of thirty-four, was not in love with his wife, the mother of five living and two dead children, and only a year younger than himself. He repented only of not having managed to conceal his conduct from her."

Oblonsky observes to himself: “There’s something banal, a want of taste, in carrying on with one’s governess—but then, what a governess!”

Shortly thereafter, a servant offers Oblonsky a consoling idea: “Things will shape themselves, sir.” Oblonsky seizes on this hopeful notion as though it were a universal truth handed down by Plato. It is something to live by.

Oblonsky, in other words, is not a man of reflection. His deepest thoughts are, at best, egocentric rationalizations. We can envision him fumbling through life, committing adultery here and there, and hoping, time after time, to somehow to patch it up with a wife he no longer loves.

Vronsky, the soldier, the man of action, is equally shallow. In the famous steeplechase scene, his negligent riding breaks the back of his horse and, when the horse goes down, Vronsky tugs on the reins and, in his anger, kicks the mortally wounded horse in the stomach. The scene vividly prefigures his disregard for Anna and aptly symbolizes his attitude toward all human creatures.

When Oblonsky and Vronsky meet at the station, Tolstoy does not tell us what they say to one another, but only that while Stepan was “talking with animation,” his companion was “frowning and looking straight before him, as if not hearing what Oblonsky was saying.”

Vronsky, in a subsequent conversation with another friend, says he is sick of life and hopes to die in combat. Somehow, one can’t believe that this military man who failed in two suicide attempts will die, as Macbeth did, with his “harness on his back.” He will find other battles, other horses, and other women to distract him.

When we focus our attention on Constantine Levin, particularly in sharp contrast to the shallow adulterers, we begin to see what Tolstoy is suggesting by abruptly dropping the wonderful Anna and devoting so much space to Constantine Levin.

Levin, who some critics say is a self-portrait of the young Tolstoy, first appears in this novel called *Anna Karenina* in Part I, chapter 5—twelve chapters before the title character makes her appearance. Anna is the focus in approximately fifty-nine chapters, while Levin is front-and-center in eighty-one chapters before Anna's death, and ten more after. It may be Anna's tragedy, but it is also the story of Levin's life.

Levin, age thirty-two when the novel begins, is a bearded, broad-shouldered man, who is fond of doing gymnastic exercises with two thirty-six pound dumbbells. He has come to town with the singular intention of proposing to the eighteen-year old Kitty. He had been in love with her two older sisters, Dolly and Natalia, but he was not assertive enough to win either.

He stays in town for nearly two months, seeing Kitty almost every day, but does not propose, fearing she will reject him.

When Levin first came to town, he had dinner with Oblonsky, his boyhood friend, and even what they desired to eat is revealing. Levin, the country mouse, prefers buckwheat porridge and cabbage soup, while the city mouse orders three dozen oysters, soup, turbot, capon, roast beef, and, oh yes, dessert thereafter.

Oblonsky, looking for sympathy, says, "Well, it's like this. Supposing you were married and loved your wife, but had been fascinated by another woman…"

Levin interrupts him: "Excuse me, but it's quite incomprehensible to me. It's as if I, after eating my fill here, went into a baker's shop and stole a roll."

Oblonsky doesn't seem to get the point, and so he tries again. "What am I to do? Tell me. My wife is getting old and I am full of vitality."

"Don't steal rolls," Levin repeats, and follows that up with a brief disquisition on love, based on Plato's *The Symposium,* which seems too difficult for Oblonsky to grasp.

The contrast between the rationalizing Oblonsky and the rational Levin could not be more obvious.

A short time after this dinner, through the eyes of Kitty's father, Prince Shcherbatsky, Levin is contrasted with Vronsky as potential suitors of his daughter Kitty. "Levin," Shcherbatsky tells his wife, "is a man of serious intentions," while Vronsky is a "popinjay who only wishes to amuse himself. Levin is a thousand times the better man. This one [Vronsky] is a little Petersburg fop. They are machine-made by the dozen, all to one pattern, and all mere rubbish."

Kitty likes Levin, but she sees him, "like a brother," that perception which is fatal to all notions of romance.

When Levin does muster up the courage to propose, he stumbles over his words, and Kitty, with eyes only for Vronsky, says, "It cannot be…forgive me."

Levin retreats to his country estate, but his notions of marriage are still marked by high seriousness. "He could not imagine the love of a woman without marriage," Tolstoy writes, "and even pictured to himself a family first and then the woman who would give him his family. His views on marriage therefore did not resemble those of most of his acquaintances, for whom marriage was only one of many social affairs; for Levin it was the chief thing in life, on which the whole happiness of life depended."

Levin, depressed and even suicidal over his rejection by Kitty, throws himself into work on his estate, and wonders if he will ever marry. “All his ideas and feelings,” Tolstoy explains, “separated themselves into three different lines of thought. The first was how to renounce his old life and discard his quite useless education. This renunciation would afford him pleasure and was quite easy and simple, the second was concerned with his notion of the life he now wished to lead. He was distinctly convinced that in it he would find satisfaction, peace, and dignity, the absence of which was so painful to him. But the third thought was the question of how to make this change from his present life to that other one.”

Levin concludes that “all his former dreams of family life are nonsense.” He walks back from the meadow toward the village well after midnight, noting the beauty of the evening. A coach-and-four is approaching and he absent-mindedly glances at a young girl in the coach awakening at the glow of dawn.

The girl’s candid eyes fell on Levin. “She recognized him and joyful surprise lit up her face. He could not be mistaken. There were no other eyes in the world like them. In the whole world there was only one being able to unite in itself the universe and the meaning of life for him. It was Kitty.”

Levin does get a second chance, and this time Kitty accepts, and her parents approve. A state of “blissful absurdity” ensues as they go through the usual trials and tribulations of preparing to be married. The most serious moment comes, however, when Levin confesses that he is an agnostic, which Kitty passes over without comment. He also gives her his diary, believing that there should be nothing secret between them.

This diary documents Levin's unchaste past. Yes, shocking as it may seem, even "Mr. Don't Steal Rolls" has, on more than one occasion, stepped off the path of his peculiar honesty. Kitty is initially devastated by this revelation, but ultimately she forgives him. (Tolstoy, himself, had presented his diaries to his fiancé, Sophia, just prior to their marriage, and with very similar results: bitter weeping, a night's sleep, and then forgiveness. Tolstoy's wife is often presented as a shrew, who finally drove the hapless genius out of the house to his untimely death at age 82. But I prefer the view of Maxim Gorky, a writer who lived with the Tolstoy family for two years. Gorky reminds us that that she prepared, by long-hand, the fair copies for the printer of all his major literary works; that Sophia shielded her husband from the many parasites who would distract him; and, most important of all, she was, for all those fifty years of their married life, his best friend.)

After three months of marriage, Tolstoy describes Levin as "happy, but having embarked on family life he saw at every step that it was not at all what he anticipated. At every step he took he felt as a man who would feel, after admiring the smooth happy motion of the little boat upon the water, [and] had himself got into the boat. He found that besides sitting quietly without rocking the boat he had to keep a lookout, [and] not for a moment forget where he was going, or that there was water under his feet, and that he had to row, although it hurt his unaccustomed hands; in short, that it only looked easy, but to do it, though very delightful, was very difficult."

The metaphor of the boat is an effective summary of what the concluding chapters of *Anna Karenina* are about: the sometimes impulsive and the sometimes thoughtful ways these two people, Levin and Kitty, learn to reconcile differences and live together in

harmony. Their marriage, one might say, is a work in progress, and it will always be a work in progress, for life, unlike a novel, is rarely neat and tidy. The mutual strivings of Levin and Kitty, out of sincere love and respect for each other, are presented as a final commentary on the failed marriages of Oblonsky and Dolly, Karenin and Anna, and the failed love affair between Vronsky and Anna.

George Steiner, in his *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism,* said "The vitality of a Tolstoyan novel is achieved not only by a dense interweaving of various plots but also by a disregard of architectural finish and neatness. The major novels of Tolstoy do not 'end' as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Bleak House*, or *Madame Bovary* can be said to end. They [Tolstoy's novels] must be compared, not to a skein which is unraveled and rewound again, but to a river incessantly in motion and flowing beyond our sight….Thus Book VIII of *Anna Karenina*…is not an accretion adhering clumsily to the main structure of the novel. It expands and clarifies that structure."

When *Anna Karenina* was selected by Oprah's Book Club in 2010, perhaps to mark the centenary of Tolstoy's death, that novel hit the top of the best-seller charts.

There was a flurry of new discussions of the novel, but many found Tolstoy's great novel disappointing. Stephen Emms, a blogger for *The Guardian,* voiced his displeasure in the very title of his essay: "*Anna Karenina,* great novel, shame about the ending."

"This masterpiece is flawed," Emms went on to say. "It is a serious shock to find this book ending with a whimper."

He then approvingly quotes another *Guardian* blogger who complains, “The last chapter is not very good by any means. It is actually quite boring and much of a letdown.” (By “chapter,” I assume he means Part VIII.)

Perhaps these criticisms make sense if one considers the way that the Oprah’s Book Club Guide introduced the old novel to apparently new readers. Oprah’s guide called it a “sexy and engrossing read.” And if that weren’t enough to win you over, it was also praised as “*the* Harlequin Romance of its day.”

Anna Karenina, the Harlequin romance of its day! It must cheer the hearts of all readers of Russian literature to know that now Tolstoy’s novel ranks right up there with those Harlequin classics, *Russian Billionaires* and *The Russian’s Ruthless Demand*.

I must confess however, that in my most recent reading of Tolstoy’s novel, I did not notice, after Anna was struck by the train, whether her nail polish was intact.

I don’t think Tolstoy mentioned it, but I could be wrong.

But, then again, as Henry Thoreau observed, “Not all books are as dull as their readers.”

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