

Unhappy in a unique way

Steven Livingstone on difficult paths and last taboos in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

In summer 2004 *Oprah's Book Club* highlighted *Anna Karenina*. Oprah had confessed that she always had a fear of reading *Anna Karenina*, mainly because of its length. Hence, she and her viewers approached their summer's reading of *AK* like an arduous long-distance run. Through the magic of the internet, I am able to re-live the show as though it were yesterday...

Narrator: 'They came from across the globe, Oprah Book Clubbers ready to take on the *Anna Karenina* 2004 challenge. Eight long sections, 817 pages, 23 complicated Russian names. The only thing to fear was fear itself. They would battle the elements, summer heat, busy family schedules, obstacles at every turn. Some would stumble, exhausted from reading. But could they pick themselves up and press on to the final chapter? Could they do it? Could they read *Anna Karenina* in just one summer? Could they conquer Tolstoy?'

Group of people, chanting in unison: 'Anna, Anna, Anna, Anna.'

The opening guest of the Book Club episode was a regular on the couch, The Music and the Passion himself, Mr Barry Manilow. Manilow began by singing, to the tune of 'Copacabana', 'Her name was Anna, Anna Karenina ... The hottest broad north of the Kremlin.'

But the final word of the show came from Megan Mullally, aka Karen from *Will and Grace*, who was most intrigued in her reading by Anna's mental unravelling: 'Of course, now she'd just, like, take some Paxil and it'd all be good. But they didn't have mood stabilisers back then apparently.'

So, that is to say that Oprah and her army of Nike-shod women did indeed, chapter by chapter, 'conquer' Tolstoy, practically trampling him under their air-cushioned feet. And I would not like to say that this is a bad thing, since doubtless Oprah brought *AK* to hundreds of people who would never have otherwise attempted it. *Oprah's Book Club* is off-air now, and her viewers are patiently awaiting her instructions, but

the question remains: if Anna were alive today, in our more liberal society and with a prescription for an antidepressant, would things have worked out better for her?

Into life's corridor

Written in instalments from 1873 to 1877 in the periodical *The Russian Messenger*, *AK* still enjoys huge popularity and a high profile in popular culture: curiously it even pops up in *Will and Grace*, where Jennifer Lopez makes a guest appearance reading it on the subway. Its continued success is striking considering its length and complexity, as alluded to by Oprah. If it is a masterpiece, it is certainly not the 'flawless' masterpiece that both Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Vladimir Nabokov described it as, and the long passages on Russian peasant agricultural techniques will hardly be of interest to modern readers, if indeed they were ever of interest. What, then, is the key to *AK*'s enduring appeal?

Most of us, even those who have not read *AK*, may nonetheless be familiar with both how it begins and how it ends. The novel opens with the famous and oft-quoted sentence, 'All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way.' The novel ends with one of the most famous suicides in literary history, and the inevitability of Anna's death only serves to make the tragedy of her life all the sadder.

Anna is married to Karenin, an important government official, a dry and self-satisfied man 20 years her senior. The famous opening sentence refers to the family of Stephan Oblonsky, Anna's brother. Stephan has been cheating on his wife with his children's French governess, and his wife Dolly has found out. Our sympathies are with Anna from the very

beginning, as she arrives in Moscow to try, with her usual tact and sympathy, to effect reconciliation.

At Stephan's house Anna meets Vronsky, a dashing cavalry officer, with whom Dolly's younger sister Kitty is infatuated. The character of Levin is introduced, a troubled and introspective young man, who is in love with Kitty, and who returns to his country estate in despair when his proposal is rejected by her. Vronsky, however, is fascinated by Anna, and recklessly pursues her. She initially spurns him, but in the end she cannot deny that she has fallen in love with him.

The couple leave Russia together, but Karenin refuses to grant a divorce, unless Anna renounces the right to see her son. She is miserable at having left her son in Karenin's care, and returns in secret to see the boy. Far from pacifying her, this meeting only sharpens her despair. Vronsky is restless and misses his military career, which he had to abandon to follow her. Anna goes from disillusionment to disillusionment, becomes consumed with jealousy, and ultimately her life becomes intolerable to her. When she throws herself under a train, she fulfills the

epigram of the novel:

'Vengeance is mine, and I shall repay.' Vronsky is consumed with remorse and enlists to fight the Turks, a course of action equivalent to suicide.

In counterpoint to this dark, violent story, there is the relationship of Kitty and Levin.

After initially rejecting him, Kitty returns to Levin, won over by his integrity and strength of character. Levin is surely one of the most rounded characters in fiction, and one Tolstoy drew on his own character to create. His relationship with Kitty, which is essentially a happy one, is complex and totally believable.

Anna's story, on the other hand, is primarily one of depression. One of the few descriptions of Anna's happiness comes early in the novel. Recognising the young Kitty's coquettish excitement before a ball, Anna says, 'Oh yes, it is good to be your age... I remember that blue haze, like the haze on the mountains in Switzerland. That haze which envelops everything at the blissful time when childhood is just coming to and end, and its huge merry circle narrows to a path which one treads gaily yet with dread into life's corridor, bright and splendid as it appears... Who has not passed through it?'

Anna will enter the bright and beautiful path one last time to triumph at

"Anna breaks what may be our last taboo: she is a woman who abandons her child for her lover"

the ball, where she boldly dances the mazurka with Vronsky. From that beautiful, blue-misted high point the path indeed grows ever narrower for Anna. But would her path, as suggested by Megan Mullally, be any easier to tread today? Certainly, in the 21st century, the apex of female achievement extends beyond dancing the mazurka, and she would no longer be trapped a ballroom like a great fluttering swan. There would be no boredom – with her intelligence, charm and beauty, it is easy to imagine Anna in any of the hip, high-powered *Sex in the City* jobs (*Sex in the City*, incidentally, being another show to have referenced *Anna Karenina*). When Carrie is turned off by her Russian lover's overly romantic gestures, Miranda advises her to tell him that 'He's dating you, not Anna Karenina'). With her love of literature, it is possible to see Anna writing an inspirational, *Shirley Valentine*-type story, perhaps with the aid of sympathetic psychologist, and – if need be – an appropriate SSRI. Paxil could be seen as a more sophisticated substitute for its 19th-century equivalent, the morphine Anna was using to self-medicate. She might even get a six-figure advance and a slot on Oprah's couch.

The last taboo

So in answer to the question posed on Oprah: yes, thanks to the ways in which society has moved on, in the present day Anna's story might have ended happily. But this answer ignores the fact that Anna breaks what may be our last taboo: she is a woman who abandons her child for her lover.

In *The Female Eunuch*, published in 1970, Germaine Greer painted a devastatingly bleak portrait of family life, in which she argued that women should not be afraid to walk out of their marriages, if necessary leaving their children behind. 'Mother is the dead heart of the family', wrote Greer. But back in the real world, high-profile women who abandon their children face widespread disapproval. Princess Diana was only six when her mother left to marry another man. She would later recollect that she and her younger brother, Charles, cried themselves to sleep together. The actor John Thaw's mother ran off with another man, leaving him in charge of his younger brother, while his lorry-driver father was away. Thaw was seven. His widow, Sheila Hancock, concluded that his abrasive approach to life stemmed from this early experience. As a child, the artist Sam

Taylor-Wood remembers feeling bemused the day her mother handed her a note that said, 'Give this to your step-dad because I'm leaving you all.' Taylor-Wood recalls how 'one day I saw her and she was living three doors away. I saw the blind in the kitchen go up, and there she was. Then she pulled it down again. I still can't believe she was there. It was extraordinary.'

Stories like this are painful, the mothers seem selfish, unnatural and hard

to find a moral and yet also fulfilling way to lead one's life. Anna is trapped in the dilemma of whether to choose her love for Vronsky, at the expense of abandoning her son, or to choose her love of her son, at the expense of her own happiness. *Plus ça change plus c'est pareil*, as the pretentious and moralising Countess Lydia Ivanovna might have put it.

The complexities involved in the pursuit of happiness are as relevant today as they ever were, and pose a dilemma

that will be familiar to psychologists both in our personal and professional lives. In fact, the principle that in any system no one factor guarantees success but many guarantee failure, has become known as the Anna Karenina principle, and is based on the quotation from the novel, 'All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way.'

Writing in the *Telegraph Magazine* in 2006, Judith Wenban-Smith, a chartered psychologist with a special interest in children, wrote, 'Mothers who walk out on their children can now support themselves and maintain social profiles – they are neither beggars nor pariahs – and that's a good thing.' It is true that today, Anna would not have had to leave the country, as she does in the novel. But that doesn't mean children don't get hurt. 'Children suffer more

from the absence of mothers

than they do fathers, undoubtedly,' Wenban-Smith continues. 'Almost invariably, the mother has been the main carer in infancy and it's to mothers that children have the strongest and most secure attachment.' Mothers who leave can have the best possible motives, but to a child, it boils down to one thing. 'They will come to the conclusion that mummy didn't love them enough, and that can be devastating.'

So no, a prescription for Paxil would not be the solution.

to understand. It's the child we feel sorry for, not the mother.

To me, the exploration of this complex and still contemporary issue is one of the keys to *AK*'s enduring success. In *Anna*, Tolstoy has created a character who we can understand and sympathise with, and while the reader is left to make up their own mind about the rights and wrongs of her actions, most will find it hard to either condemn or condone. To the casual reader, the novel may seem like nothing more than a tragic romance set in the top tier of 19th-century Russian aristocratic society, and as such, Anna's difficulties have little connection to the way we live now. Look beyond the surface, however, and we will see that the major theme of the novel is the struggle

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