

«THERE IS NO END OF COMMENTS»: «ANNA KARENINA» BY L.TOLSTOY  
IN CONTEMPORARIES' PERCEPTION

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**Abstract:** *The article examines the perception of L.N. Tolstoy's novel "Anna Karenina" by his contemporaries. An analysis of the conflicting assessments of the novel leads to the conclusion that Tolstoy's contemporaries were unable to grasp its true meaning. This is seen as a result of their failure to understand the ideological and compositional role of the character Konstantin Levin, and the nature of the relationship between the two plotlines of Anna and Levin within the novel's artistic structure. In other words, the contemporaries failed to see the "inner castle" (L.N. Tolstoy) that ensures the artistic unity of the novel.*

**Keywords:** *L.N. Tolstoy, "Anna Karenina", contemporary criticism, the character of Konstantin Levin, "inner castle".*

"Anna Karenina" was written between 1873 and 1877, during a period when the author had come to recognize the futility of the upper class's way of life and was on the verge of breaking away from his own social class. "Anna Karenina" is a "novel of modern life" in which Tolstoy "wanted to present a picture of contemporary Russia, or at least contemporary society" [1].

The novel began to be published in 1875 in the journal Russian Messenger, edited by M.N. Katkov, and immediately sparked numerous responses. Some readers expressed clear admiration for the author's work, noting the deep psychological insight into the characters and the lifelike portrayal of situations and people. Others, however, were dissatisfied with the novel, offering even negative critiques that reflected a superficial understanding of Tolstoy's vision.

In a letter to L.N. Tolstoy dated April 8, 1876, N.N. Strakhov stated: "Anna Karenina provokes such admiration and such fury, the likes of which I do not recall in literature. There is no end to the discussions" [8]. The following year, in another letter sent to Tolstoy after the publication of the sixth part of Anna Karenina, the critic wrote: "Your novel captivates everyone and is read voraciously. The success is truly incredible, even mad. Only Pushkin and Gogol were read with such fervor, with readers pouncing on every page, disregarding everything else that had been written by others" [8].

Following the initial praise, negative evaluations also emerged. Upon the first reading, when the novel had not yet been fully published, it disappointed I.S. Turgenev, F.M. Dostoevsky, V.V. Stasov, and M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin. In 1875, Turgenev wrote: "... so far, it is pretentious and shallow—and even (dare I say!) boring." Saltykov-Shchedrin described the novel as "built solely on sexual motivations." P.N. Tkachov, a well-known populist figure and literary critic, also claimed that Tolstoy was only interested in sexual and personal relationships. Another populist critic, A.M. Skabichevsky, called the early parts of

Anna Karenina "an idyll of baby diapers" and "melodramatic nonsense in the style of old French novels" [2].

Essentially, society was divided into two camps in its perception of Anna Karenina: the democrats criticized the novel, while the liberals, on the contrary, praised it highly. However, both groups, influenced by political sentiments, often distorted the true essence of the novel.

One of the first articles about "Anna Karenina" was written by the reactionary writer and critic V.G. Avseenko, who, having read only the first two parts of the work and completely misunderstanding Tolstoy's intention, declared the writer a singer of aristocratic society, while also stating that there was a lack of "coherence" in the novel.[2]

The idea of the absence of artistic "coherence" in "Anna Karenina" was picked up by many of Tolstoy's critics. For instance, P.N. Tkachev, in his 1878 article "Salon Art," even denies "Anna Karenina" the right to be called a novel: "It is nothing more than a collection of records of human actions, a collection of photographic snapshots. This collection was evidently assembled completely randomly, without any overall plan or meaningful idea. The photographer was not picky; he was absolutely indifferent to what they depicted." [3]

The publication of the seven parts of "Anna Karenina" in "Russky Vestnik" (the 8th part was never published in M.N. Katkov's journal due to ideological disagreements between him and the author) prompted many writers and critics to change their initially superficial and unfair opinions about Tolstoy's novel, leading to a new wave of responses.

F.M. Dostoevsky wrote in his "Writer's Diary": "Anna Karenina is a perfection as a work of art, which has come just at the right time, and nothing similar from European literature in the present era can be compared to it." The writer was captivated by the moral issues presented in the novel. I.A. Goncharov noted Tolstoy's mastery in depicting various layers of society: "He [Tolstoy] casts, like a bird-catcher, a huge net over the human crowd, from the upper layer to the lower, and nothing that falls into this net escapes his gaze, analysis, and brush." [10]

However, the statements above do not mean that after the full publication of the novel it was unconditionally accepted by readers. For example, Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, a French writer and literary historian, author of the book "The Russian Novel" (1886), noted several shortcomings in "Anna Karenina": a lack of symmetry and numerous long passages, unnecessary and drawn-out, photographically precise descriptions (to which he referred the chapters on hunting and the races in Krasnoye Selo). He saw the work as just another family novel, not understanding why reflections on land and the paths of Russia's development were included. Consequently, for Vogüé, the genre specificity of "Anna Karenina" remained unclear, which cannot be determined without considering the ideological and compositional significance of the character Levin, with whom those reflections (on land and paths of Russia's development) that the French critic found "superfluous" in the novel are precisely connected. [2].

At the same time (in 1887), the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold, in his article "Count Lev Tolstoy," characterized "Anna Karenina" as a work that "...breaks the boundaries and frameworks of the traditional family novel." [2].

Readers gradually came to understand the ideological and artistic meaning of "Anna Karenina." As we can see, the significance of the character Konstantin Levin was not immediately recognized, as his figure was initially overshadowed by the vivid image of the main character, Anna Karenina. Once they finally noticed the importance of Levin's character in the novel, contemporaries interpreted it in various ways. Readers quickly formed an impression of the autobiographical nature of the character Konstantin Levin. The image of Levin, who, being a nobleman, works alongside the common people to harvest hay and mow grass, was directly associated by contemporaries with the author himself. Tolstoy's close friends and acquaintances understood the character's surname as derived from the name Lev. Not only the identity of Levin's actions and words but also the correspondence of his inner turmoil with that of the author was noted by the populist critic N.K. Mikhailovsky: "In the emotional journey of Konstantin Levin, Count Tolstoy has given us a series of reflections on a drama that he once experienced deeply and profoundly, and which has now happily come to an end." [6]. F.M. Dostoevsky also wrote about the autobiographical nature of the character Levin in his "Writer's Diary" for 1877, with one significant caveat: "Many assert, and I myself clearly see, that in the character of Levin, the author expresses many of his own beliefs and views, almost forcibly placing them in Levin's mouth, even at times sacrificing artistic quality for this purpose; however, I do not confuse Levin's character, as portrayed by the author, with the author himself." [4].

Foreign readers were attracted to the character of Levin by his spiritual purity, sharp alienation from the privileged classes, and his desire to find harmony within himself. For example, Romain Rolland, the author of the book "The Life of Tolstoy" (1911), noted the autobiographical nature of Levin's spiritual quest, believing that it is precisely these spiritual pursuits-where the hero rejects all social conventions and turns to the truth of the peasantry-that constitute the main interest of the novel. [2].

However, the character of Levin was not received so unambiguously by everyone. For example, K.N. Leontiev, a religious philosopher and writer, disapproved of Levin's "excessive" reverence for the peasant, for which he condemned Tolstoy. Leontiev saw not Levin, but Alexei Vronsky as the figure who was "more necessary and valuable to Russia than Tolstoy himself." The critic V.P. Meshchersky echoed this sentiment, highlighting Vronsky as the main character and asserting that it is he who could "bring revolution out of the native land." [2]

It became evident that understanding the meaning of the novel was impossible without grasping the essence of Levin's character. In the newspaper "Grazhdanin," an anonymous critic wrote: "We cannot remain silent about the remarkable typical figure of landowner Levin, who is entirely devoted to the rational organization of his estate and genuinely loves the people..." The critic continued, "...Levin's personality stands out vividly in the novel, and it should be noted that this aspect in the new work of Count Tolstoy attracts perhaps even more attention than the main intrigue between Anna Karenina and Vronsky." [2]

The closest among contemporaries to understanding the meaning of "Anna Karenina" was N.N. Strakhov. Speaking about the reflection of the "intellectual ferment of the era" in "Anna Karenina" and calling Levin "the best representative of this ferment," on whose side

"all the author's sympathies" lie, Strakhov emphasizes Levin's significance in the novel and, consequently, the importance of the plotline connected to this character in its artistic structure.[7]

However, alongside the gradual recognition of Levin's importance in the novel, the idea that Levin's plotline does not harmoniously blend with Anna Karenina's storyline remained fairly persistent in contemporary criticism. Moreover, some critics, such as V. Chuyko (in "Golos," 1875), found that the "Levin chapters" were "... a mistake that detracts from the interest of the novel." Even Strakhov noted their "coldness" and "listlessness." "The story of Konstantin Levin," asserted N.K. Mikhailovsky, "is forcibly inserted into the story of Anna Karenina." [5]

Even when the significance of Levin's character in the artistic structure of the novel was acknowledged, critics remained unclear about how the two plotlines in the novel were connected. This is evidenced by a letter from the well-known educator and professor S.A. Rachinsky, who wrote to Tolstoy in 1878 about a "fundamental flaw in the construction of the entire novel": "There is no architecture in it. Two themes develop side by side, and they develop magnificently, but are not connected in any way." [1] In response to this letter, L.N.Tolstoy wrote: "I believe your judgment on 'Anna Karenina' is incorrect. On the contrary, I take pride in the architecture-the arches are constructed in such a way that one cannot even notice where the castle is. And this is what I strove for most of all. The connection in the structure is not made through the plot or the relationships (acquaintances) of the characters, but through an inner connection. Believe me, it is not a reluctance to accept criticism-you are looking for it in the wrong place, or we understand connection differently; but what I understand by connection the very thing that made this work significant for me is indeed there; look for it you will find it." [9]

Thus, why does Tolstoy introduce two plotlines into the novel, associated with two main characters? Where is this "castle" that connects them? What is the basis of the "inner connection" of the novel's "construction"? What is the ideological and compositional significance of Levin's character? These are the questions we will ponder further.

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