

**Joseph Luzzi • *The Tolstoy Seminar: Anna Karenina* • Class 1
Virtual Book Club • April 6th, 2022 • Study Guide* • © Joseph Luzzi**

Please note: the below are only intended to help you “get inside” Tolstoy’s extremely complex, intricate work—please do not feel compelled to answer them in full, unless you wish to, and if there are questions or elements that you don’t understand, no worries, we will explain all when we meet for our upcoming seminar!

1. Why do you think that Leo Tolstoy is often considered one of the greatest novelists of all time? What do you believe are the particular sources of his brilliance? What are the qualities that make *Anna Karenina* such an enduring classic?
2. How would you describe the literary style of *Anna Karenina*? What are three adjectives that come to mind, and why?
3. The opening to *Anna Karenina* is justly famous:

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. [all refs. to the trans. by Pevear and Volokhonsky; Penguin ed.]

How does this sentence connect to larger issues and themes in the novel? How does it “set up” the narrative of *Anna Karenina*?

4. What does *Anna Karenina* reveal about Imperial Russian society? In what ways is the novel deeply “historical”—and in what ways does the novel resist such a label?
5. On p. 149 of the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation (Part 2, Chapter 11), we read:

That which for almost a year had constituted the one exclusive desire of Vronsky’s life, replacing all former desires; that which for Anna had been an impossible, horrible, but all the more enchanting dream of happiness—this desire had been satisfied. Pale, his lower jaw trembling, he stood her and pleaded with her to be calm, himself not knowing why or how. “Anna! Anna!” he kept saying in a trembling voice. “Anna, for God’s sake!...”

...

“My God! Forgive me!” she said, sobbing, pressing his hands to her breast.

What do the thoughts, reactions, and emotions of the Vronsky and Anna reveal about sexuality and questions of desire in Tolstoy’s society? And how do such descriptions of physical love, and its consequences, reveal the challenges faced by Tolstoy as a nineteenth-century author dealing with concerns about what could, and could not, be said about erotic life?

6. On p. 153 of the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation (Part 2, Chapter 13), we read:

Spring is a time of plans and projects. And, going out to the yard, Levin, like a tree in spring, not yet knowing where and how its shoots and branches, still confined in swollen buds, will grow, did not himself know very well which parts of his beloved estate he would occupy himself with not, but felt that he was filled with the very best plans and projects.

What does the passage reveal about the character of Levin, his personality? More broadly, what does it suggest about Tolstoy's powers of literary characterization?

7. Writing *Anna Karenina* in 1878, Tolstoy of course could not have known beforehand the remarkable convulsions that would shake his society, especially the Russian Revolution beginning in 1917. That being said, do you think that there are elements of the novel that anticipate or suggest some of these imminent changes that would soon transform Russian history, culture, and political life?
8. What is the role of religion in the novel? Which character(s) does it seem to impact and effect the most, and in what way(s)?
9. How does Tolstoy manage to string together so many different narrative strands while combining the life stories of so many different characters in his book? Is there a single overarching theme or technique that enables him to achieve this artistic unity out of such plurality?
10. What aspect or element of *Anna Karenina* do you find to be the most relevant to our world, and why?

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