

## Selves and Others

A review of the film



**Anna Karenina**

(2012)

Joe Wright (Director)

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Reviewed by

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Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877/2000) may be the greatest novel ever written, and it certainly has one of the most famous opening sentences: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (p. 1). The story starts with Stiva Oblonsky (played in the current film adaptation by Matthew Macfadyen), whose affair with his children's former governess has been discovered by his wife, Dolly (Kelly Macdonald). Stiva sends a letter to his married sister, Anna (Keira Knightley), asking her to come and persuade Dolly to forgive him, and so repair their family's unhappiness.

But Anna's family becomes unhappy, in its own way, when, in response to Stiva's request, she goes to visit him in Moscow. She arrives from Saint Petersburg by train (for Tolstoy, a symbol of modernity), and at the station she meets Count Vronsky (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), a dashing cavalry officer. He is at the station to meet his mother, who has also traveled from Saint Petersburg. A few days later, at a ball at which Vronsky was expected to propose to Dolly's 18-year-old sister, Kitty (Alicia Vikander), Anna monopolizes his attention and soon afterward begins an affair with him. She becomes pregnant with his child and leaves her young son, Seryozha, and her husband Alexei Karenin (Jude Law).

Alongside these events runs a parallel series of events in which Konstantin Levin (Domhnall Gleeson), a friend of Stiva from their early youth, comes to Moscow at the start of the story to propose to Kitty. She rejects him because she is infatuated with Vronsky, but halfway through the novel she accepts him. For Levin, Tolstoy writes a piece of almost-straight autobiography; he even includes a scene that repeats a crucial moment in his wooing of Sofya, who became his wife. Just as Tolstoy asked Sofya to guess words of his thoughts for which he offered her just the initial letters, so in the novel and the film, Levin asks Kitty to do the same. Both Sofya and Kitty succeed, and their wooers take this as an indication of intimacy.

In the story's later parts, we see Anna's rejection by almost everyone she knows. With this rejection, she can no longer sustain her sense of herself, even in her relationship with Vronsky, and she commits suicide by throwing herself under a train.

The film, directed by Joe Wright with screenplay by Tom Stoppard, is both stylish and surprising. Rather than being set predominantly in drawing rooms, it is set in a lush and slightly decaying theater, with occasional cuts to railway stations, bedrooms, and wheat fields. In this way Stoppard, one of the world's most accomplished playwrights, suggests that although some of our actions may seem private, they are presented to others as in a theater: the theater of public life. In discussions and perceptions, they achieve meanings that become known to others and ourselves. How do private meanings of individual experience mesh with such public meanings? *Anna Karenina* is a searching consideration of this question.

We know from biographers such as Wilson (1988) that Tolstoy started to write *Anna Karenina* in 1873. At first he worked quickly, but he then took four years to complete the book. From the beginning he had in mind a woman who succumbed to an adulterous affair. Kitty and Levin weren't in the book at all to start with, and the affair of the woman he came to call Anna, whom at first he found "disgusting" (Wilson, p. 270), led—rightly in the mind of Tolstoy, the moralist—to her downfall.

But Tolstoy was ever ambivalent. He was not just a moralist but, like most novelists as he drafted and redrafted, he came to identify with his protagonist, came to understand her from within, so that she, too, became an aspect of his autobiography, an autobiography of his soul. This contributes to making *Anna Karenina* a very great novel, and a very real tragedy.

So what is this conception of Stoppard's, of *Anna Karenina* as publicly staged theater, of ourselves as audience, and of Anna as an object of public discussion? One may enter this issue through the work of Erving Goffman, who in 1959 proposed the dramaturgical theory of social life, the idea that each of us gives performances of ourselves, as in a theater, and that the reality of life is in the meanings that groups of us make for each other and ourselves in these performances.

Some commentators, for instance, Gouldner (1970), have sneered at Goffman because they have said that in this conception he eroded the distinction between the decent person who is understood by actions and the manipulator who is known only by appearances. But

this is deeply to misunderstand Goffman, whose work implies that, for us human beings, it is up to us to create societies with moralities that guide our actions and attitudes toward each other. The question raised by this film of a theatrically staged impression of a long-vanished society might be “What kind of society, with what kind of morality, are we creating for ourselves now in the 21st century?”

It’s almost as if Tom Stoppard and Joe Wright were intently discussing Goffman as they made this movie because the sequence in which Anna is most clearly confronted with her social rejection is when she decides to go to the theater, which, at this point toward the end of the film, is depicted as a social gathering. Anna’s friends and acquaintances snub her. There comes to mind one of Goffman’s most poignant sayings, from his 1961 book: “There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive or, by a glance, a gesture, or a remark, shriveling up the reality in which one is lodged” (p. 41).

One can, of course, question Goffman’s approach and even, in the way that Gouldner (1970) did, bemoan it for eroding the distinction between sincerity and cynicism, but to do this is to become cynical oneself. More productively, we can consider an issue that Goffman raises: If we think across our various roles and relationships, how engaged are we in each of them?

In his novel, Tolstoy is careful to show how, when they first meet at the railway station, neither Anna nor Vronsky is fully engaged in what he or she is doing. Anna has become bored with her marriage, and Vronsky is meeting his mother out of a slightly wearisome sense of duty. At the station, in the gap between their actions and their engagement in what they are doing, they take the opportunity to indulge in a flirtatious exchange.

In the essay “Fun in Games,” from which I quoted in the previous paragraph, Goffman (1961) explored this issue. What is it, he asked, that enables us to have fun in games? It’s the possibility of being easily and fully engaged in a certain kind of social interaction. From this beginning, he moved to how we might understand emotions of wholeheartedness in our relationships as compared with more superficial interaction. Scheff (2006) argued that what Goffman presented is critically important for understanding emotions, including happiness and unhappiness, as related to the depth of our involvement.

In both the novel and the film *Anna Karenina*, Kitty and Levin are portrayed in contrast to Anna and Vronsky because their narrative is of a fuller involvement with each other and also with friends and relations as well as with the world of work. This, therefore, can lead to a truer kind of happiness.

In the West at least, sexual passion has come to be seen as the very paradigm of full engagement in what one is doing. Is this why, in so many movies, love conquers all? This adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, with its stagey Goffmanesque presentation, brings this issue to our film-going consciousness.

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