

Anna Karenina: One Story, Two Storylines, and the Importance of Oblonsky

Jeff L. Perron^{[a],*}

^[a]University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Scholars have debated whether Tolstoy's masterpiece, *Anna Karenina* is a work consisting of two separate stories or is one coherent story. Not disputed is that the work entails two distinct storylines: that of the Vronskys and that of the Levins. It is argued that Tolstoy's two distinct storylines are part of a single story, not two. As such, this article supports Tolstoy's original presentation of the novel and argues against those who assert that Tolstoy should have presented *Anna Karenina* in two separate novels. By demonstrating why Tolstoy presents the novel in this manner and how he weaves the two distinct storylines together, the necessity of having presented the novel in its original, unified form is underscored.

Key words: Anna Karenina; Tolstoy; Oblonsky

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1. ANNA KARENINA: ONE STORY, TWO STORYLINES, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF OBLONSKY

The debate over whether Tolstoy's masterpiece, *Anna Karenina* is a work consisting of two separate stories or is one coherent story is perhaps as dated as the work itself. There are certainly two distinct storylines: that of the Vronskys (Anna and Vronsky) and that of the Levins (Kitty and Levin). This is not commonly disputed. What is disputed is whether it was appropriate for Tolstoy to place

these two storylines within one novel. Tolstoy could have easily separated this one work into two novels. However, in order to present characters of vivid realism and to effectively convey certain messages, it was essential that Tolstoy include the two storylines within the same novel. Indeed, these *two storylines* are part of *one story* and *one novel*, as they should be.

The following demonstrates both *why* and *how* these two storylines are parts of one story. First, it will be shown how the merging of the two storylines was used by Tolstoy place emphasis on specific elements of the novel. These elements include the characters, the settings, and the magnificent yet tragic climax. Emphasis is focused on these elements through means of contrast. This is the 'why' of Tolstoy's meshing of the two storylines. Second, it will be shown that Oblonsky is the thread with which Tolstoy connects his two storylines. This is the 'how' of Tolstoy's meshing of the two storylines.

2. TOLSTOY'S REASONS FOR INCLUDING TWO STORYLINES

Anna Karenina has been praised for its brilliant characterization. The characters of *Anna Karenina* are read as "men and women of actual experience (Mirsky, 1958, p.764)." The chief characters of the novel have their traits accentuated when contrasted with other characters, namely characters from the opposing storyline with whom they seem to have little connection. Take for example, Levin. One cannot imagine Levin's morals, values, and struggle to uncover the meaning of life being as effectively presented without him being contrasted with characters from the opposing storyline. Levin's need for love and family is put into clear perspective when contrasted with Karenin's cold and rigid family life. Contrastd with Vronsky, Levin's connection to rural simplicity and pleasure in nature is impeccably conveyed to the reader. This is achieved by providing examples of

contrasting lifestyles. Vronsky's (as well as Oblonsky's and Karenin's) aristocratic lifestyle provides a crisp contrast.

Anna is another character heavily relied upon to convey certain messages to the reader. This, as with Levin, is achieved by contrasting her lifestyle with those of other characters. In comparison to her sister-in-law Dolly, Anna is young, passionate and volatile. The reader is given this impression through Tolstoy's painting of Dolly as a tired and subservient wife, subject to the consequences of her husband's misguided actions. Yet, when juxtaposed with Kitty, Anna is a soul worthy of pity. She is a lost soul who never experiences the pure joy of a warm, caring family life.

Not only are the characters of *Anna Karenina* put into contrast, but their living environments are subjects of direct comparison as well. Tolstoy's detailed narration, the type of which typifies the realist novel, helps the reader associate certain ways of life and morals with rural or urban settings. Levin's morals and his rural living environment are conspicuously associated with each other to suggest that the rural-living individual is on a path towards living a meaningful life. Meanwhile, the lives of Oblonsky, Karenin, Anna, and Vronsky all play-out in urban settings. As such, urban-dwelling becomes associated with unclear morals and a life that is quite unnatural, holding misguided purpose.

The two storylines are juxtaposed for more than the sake of contrast between characters and indirect critique of urban lifestyle. The juxtaposition of the two major storylines of *Anna Karenina* leads to what becomes a powerful and emotional climax. The climax here is two-fold. It consists of the culmination of two separate spiritual crises which, when contrasted, deliver the novel's moral message with great clout. First, the reader experiences the resolution of a crisis driven by passion and worldly pleasures. This crisis is that of Anna and its resolution is suicide. Following this, the reader is struck with the resolution of a crisis driven by philosophical introspection and depression. This crisis is that of Levin and its resolution is his acceptance of God.

A quote from Tolstoy helps shed some light on his views about constructing meaning in *Anna Karenina*. Here one can understand that Tolstoy wishes not to state explicitly the messages that he attempts to convey or the connections between elements of the story. He says:

I was guided by the need to gather together interrelated thoughts in order to express myself; but every thought expressed separately by words loses its meaning and is terribly degraded by being taken out by itself from that linking in which it is found. The linking itself is brought about not by thought, but by something else, and to express the basis of that linking immediately in words is in no way possible; it can only be done indirectly by describing with words, images, acts, situation (Gerhardt, 1966, p.316)

The characters of *Anna Karenina*, their lives and their psyches, are so effectively delivered to, and received

by, the reader because of the contrast each has with one or more characters from the novel's opposing storyline. Without these two seemingly disparate storylines so beautifully packaged into one novel, the effectiveness of the story's characters, action, and moral messages would be infinitesimally diluted.

Providing evidence for the intricacy and effectiveness with which the storylines are linked is the debate that continues over Tolstoy famous opening quote, "All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way (Tolstoy, 1995, p.1)." Most have attributed this quote to the plight of each of the novel's profiled families, however some (Meek, 2012, p.1) have attributed the quote too specifically to the Oblonskys. Not only does this line of thought mirror the debate over whether the novel should have been written as a single or two separate novels, it also supports the argument presented herein which emphasizes the importance of Oblonsky himself. Regardless, once the purpose and result of subsuming two storylines under one title are understood, how the story of the Vronskys and that of the Levins intersect can be explored.

3. TOLSTOY'S MECHANISM FOR LINKING STORYLINES

Oblonsky is a constant throughout the novel. He undergoes little change and maintains the relationships he has with other characters, regardless of the family or storyline to which they belong. He is the character who sets the story's action in motion. Not only is what he introduces the theme of adultery via his own infidelity, but his own infidelity sets off a chain reaction of critical events. The arrival of Oblonsky's awe-inspiring sister, Anna, is directly connected with his actions. Anna comes to Moscow to console her sister-in-law, Dolly (Oblonsky's wife), who is emotionally wounded by her husband's affair.

While Levin's trip to Moscow was unrelated to Oblonsky's marital distress, it is through Oblonsky that he had met Kitty, the woman who he had come to Moscow to be seen. Thus, early on in the novel Oblonsky has drawn both Anna and Levin to Moscow. Upon arriving in Moscow, Levin learns of another suitor for Kitty: Vronsky. Of equal importance, Anna too learns of and meets Vronsky. During these early stages of the novel, Levin proposes to Kitty, only to be rejected, as Kitty has fallen for Vronsky. Vronsky, meanwhile, falls in love with Anna.

Literary critic, George Steiner speaks to the importance that Oblonsky's adulterous act has on the plot of the novel:

The Oblonsky episode is more than a prelude in which the principal motifs are stated with consummate artistry; it is the wheel which sets the multitudinous wheels of

the narrative in effortless motion. For the havoc wrought in Stiva's [Oblonsky's] domestic affairs leads to the encounter of Anna and Vronsky. (1955, p.59)

Upon reflection, the indirect implications of Oblonsky's affair become quite clear. It is through Oblonsky that the two disparate storylines become connected from the very beginning of the novel. After Levin leaves Moscow, these two storylines rarely intersect. When they do, Oblonsky plays a large part in catalyzing their brief convergences.

For some time after Levin's departure to his country home, the reader is unaware of the fact that Levin and Kitty will eventually reunite. It is Oblonsky, of course, who brings Levin the news of Kitty's ill-health and the disconnect between her and Vronsky. When he visits Levin at home, Oblonsky repairs the link between the Scherbatskys and Levin, a crucial turning point of the story. This is an important event in the polarization of the two stories. The reader begins to see the development of the separate storylines of the Levins and the Vronskys. It is Oblonsky through whom this information is delivered to the reader and to Levin. Of note, Levin actually speaks of Vronsky during Oblonsky's visit. Levin distinguishes himself from Vronsky. Interestingly, Levin himself provides a direct and clear contrast between the two characters. He explains that the likes of Vronsky should not be considered to be aristocrats, as they have not worked as hard as he has for what their respective positions in society. Outside of Part I of the novel, rarely are the names of Levin and Vronsky mentioned in the same chapter.

Due to the seemingly tangential connections between the Levins and the Vronskys, it would be easier to gloss over the importance of Oblonsky's role. One could be forgiven for viewing him as a rather unimportant character. Unimportant that is, to both plots. It has even been said that the two storylines of *Anna Karenina* are "not bound together in a single plot any more than they would be in real life" (Lovett, 1968, p.6). Even to suggest that Oblonsky's transience between the two storylines must be considered coincidental or happenstance understates the importance of his role. Such a perspective fails to appreciate not only the critical role that Oblonsky plays in both storylines, but the fact that he is the very thread that joins the two together.

In *Part II, Chapter XXVII*, Oblonsky is seen as a part of the Vronsky storyline. Oblonsky's name is not again mentioned until *Part III, Chapter VII*. This time, however, he is involved in the Levin storyline. Although not directly involved at this point, it is he who sends Dolly to the Oblonskys' country home, near Levin. This example gives evidence of Oblonsky's vascillation between the two storylines, and in doing so connecting the two. In the country, Dolly provides Levin with more information about Kitty. Hope for a life with Kitty is once again aroused in Levin. This is significant as it forwards the Levin storyline, bringing him emotionally close to Kitty

once again. It is Oblonsky, by sending his wife to the country, who facilitates this communication between two different aspects of the story.

Unsurprisingly, it is Oblonsky who holds a dinner party (*Part IV*) in which characters from both storylines cross paths. Oblonsky and Dolly, Karenin, Kitty, and finally Levin arrive at the party. Oblonsky reunites Levin and Kitty, who had not spoken since the evening in Moscow on which Levin met Vronsky. Soon after, and very subtly, Kitty shows her feelings for Levin: "There was a prayer for forgiveness, and trust in him, and a caress – a timid tender caress, and a promise, and hope, and love for him in which he could not but believe and which suffocated him with joy (Tolstoy, 1995, p.350)."

Would Kitty and Levin have come together without Oblonsky's involvement? A quote

from the novel provides insight into how Levin may answer the question. After he and Kitty confessed their love for each other, Levin told Oblonsky that he, "was happy and fond of him and would never, never forget what he had done for him (Tolstoy, 1995, p.363)." It is with such quotes, though few and far between throughout the novel, that Tolstoy masterfully hints at his own brilliance. This example conjures up images of Tolstoy cheekily inserting clues for critics to devour. Such clues, taken together, lead to the inevitable conclusion that Tolstoy's linking of the two storylines was wholly purposeful. In fact, it would be unfair, given Tolstoy's skill, to imagine that the linking of the storylines was haphazard. Surely such an author would not haphazardly link two seemingly disparate storylines. Further, an author of Tolstoy's stature would only subsume two such storyline within one novel if he believed that doing so would lend not only to the reader's enjoyment but also to the impact with which the novel's morals and principles are hammered home.

Tolstoy's playful and intricate linking is further evidenced by Oblonsky's connection to the Karenins. Along with playing a major role in Levin and Kitty's storyline, Oblonsky involves himself with both Anna and Karenin at many points. Oblonsky listens to Karenin's concerns and his lamentations regarding Anna and their potential divorce. Of course, Oblonsky consoles Anna as well, speaking with her about her relationships with both Karenin as well as with Vronsky. At this point in the novel, with mounting evidence for the role that Oblonsky plays in threading together the two storylines, it is difficult to wonder how any experienced and balanced critic could not plainly see the importance of Oblonsky and the justification for subsuming the two storylines within one novel. Further, it is surprising that there has not been universal appreciation and understanding of the reason for which Tolstoy linked the two storylines.

The commentary above not with standing, critics of Tolstoy's linking of the two storylines have one possible alibi. That alibi is the fact that *Anna Karenina* is written in such a manner that Oblonsky moves from storyline to

storyline almost imperceptibly. As such, it is possible that some readers, on the first pass, either do not perceive or do not fully appreciate the importance of linking the two storylines. That said, as evidence mounts for Oblonsky's role and its importance throughout the novel, Tolstoy's method of linking the two stories become increasingly transparent.

Ultimately, Oblonsky is used as a tool to justify the structure of *Anna Karenina*. Without him, Tolstoy would have been found it difficult to justify including both storylines within one novel. This is not to say that without Oblonsky there would not be the contrast between the characters that makes their personas and motives so vivid. What it does mean is that there would be little relevant connection between the two storylines. Thus, there would have been no grounds to subsume both of them under the title *Anna Karenina*.

CONCLUSION

Anna Karenina is a single story. It is a single story with two distinct storylines, each relating to separate romantic relationships. One of these is the love triangle that exists between Karenin, Vronsky, and the ill-fated Anna. The other is the loving relationship between Kitty and Levin. As has been demonstrated, these stories have one subtle common thread woven between them. This thread is the unchanging but adaptable Oblonsky. He is a friend to all. At some point in the novel each character confides in him, regardless of the storyline to which he or she belongs. He is seamlessly integrated into each of the main characters' lives, making the two storylines inseparable, as distant as they may appear.

Through Oblonsky, Tolstoy is allowed, in a sense, to present both storylines within one novel. It is through Oblonsky that these storylines are connected. Intentional or not, the effect of connecting these two storylines is clear. By letting the reader into the lives and minds of contrasting characters, each one's every action and every

trait is contrasted, leading the reader to, naturally, more deeply analyze these traits and actions.

Created by contrasting two storylines connected in chief by one character, *Anna Karenina* presents its reader with vivid characters. The reader develops relationships with these characters as this detailed story progresses. Knowing the story's characters so well allows the reader to comprehend the actions of each one, insofar as one can understand another's actions. This understanding between the reader and the characters allows the reader to see the cause and effect of characters' actions. Thus, the reader learns from the triumphs and mistakes of characters throughout the length of the story. No such effect could have been produced without linking the two storylines. Furthermore, the two storylines could not have been linked without one character common to each one. Tolstoy succeeds in linking the two stories, and does so in just this manner through. The result is a timeless masterpiece chronicling the lives of characters so life-like that the reader cannot help but to identify the novel, and reflect upon its greater meaning.

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