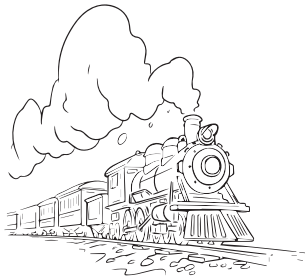


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

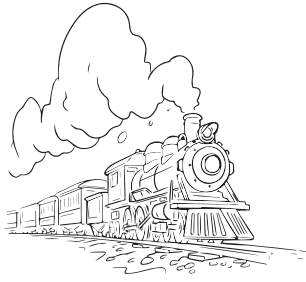
ANNA KARENINA



Sean Johnson

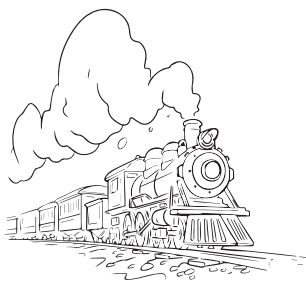
canonpress
Moscow, Idaho





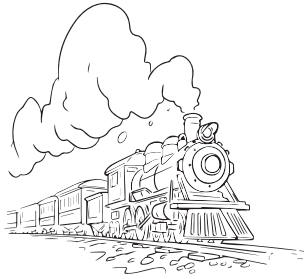
CONTENTS

Introduction	I
The World Around	3
About the Author	5
What Other Notables Said	7
Plot Summary, Setting, and Characters	9
Worldview Analysis	13
Quotables	27
21 Significant Questions and Answers	29
Further Discussion and Review	41
Taking the Classics Quiz	43



INTRODUCTION

Anna Karenina is not merely a story, but an argument about which stories are the truest and best. The novel's first words threaten to dissolve all "happy families" into a sea of uninteresting sameness, while unhappy families are unique, intriguing, even romantic. But if the opening line is a universal truth, it is also a challenge Tolstoy sets himself: to shine light on the damnable tragedy that gives unhappiness its luster, and commend the unsung glories of an ordinary life.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Anna Karenina's opening line—equal even to “Call me Ishmael” or “It was the best of times...” in literary greatness—is like a stage director’s introduction before the curtain rises and the real drama begins. It stands slightly apart from the paragraphs that follow, like an invitation to let that first sentence unravel the rest of the novel for us: “All happy families resemble one another; but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (1).⁹ It is a kind of riddle, and we are meant to ask “Why?” What is

9. The existence of multiple translations may explain why, great as it is, *Anna Karenina's* opening line is not as familiar in the mouths of English readers. I have cited Louise and Aylmer Maude’s 1918 translation, which is one of the best. They were friends of Tolstoy and lived much of their lives in Russia developing interest in his work. During his lifetime, Tolstoy considered their version to be the best existing translation of his novel. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, ed. George Gibian (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

it about happy families that makes them so similar, while unhappy ones are so diverse?

The first clue comes in the intellectual habits of Stephan Oblonsky, himself the head of one of those unhappy families. Oblonsky's opinions and commitments are not grounded in anything objective or permanent. "He firmly held to the opinions of the majority and of his paper on those subjects [science, art, and politics], changing his views when the majority changed theirs,—or rather, not changing them—they changed imperceptibly of their own accord" (6). Oblonsky is the man St. Paul describes in Ephesians 4:14, "carried about by every wind of doctrine" and shifting public opinion. This disposition extends, predictably, into the rest of his life, too. Oblonsky is also carried about by every appetite, every pretty dancer, and every young French governess he encounters, which is precisely why his household is fracturing when we meet him.

Oblonsky's sister, the title character, Anna, follows her passions to even greater ruin than Oblonsky. Tolstoy repeatedly associates her with fluctuation between extreme temperatures—"rapid changes from steaming heat to cold, and back again to heat" (91)—to punctuate her sudden cooling toward her husband and hasty warming toward Vronsky. In the end she will begin to suspect her new lover of the very inconstancy she herself has been guilty of in her marriage, and that jealousy is what drives her to her sorrowful, suicidal end. All of these unhappy