HERTOGFOUNDATION

LEO TOLSTOY'S

ANNA KARENINA



Anna Bonta Moreland

Villanova University

Tuesdays, 6–8 PM ET
January 12, 19, 26 & February 2

Humanities at Hertog
Syllabus | Winter 2027

HERTOG WINTER 2027 HUMANITIES SEMINAR

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Anna Bonta Moreland, Villanova University

We tend to read a novel to find out what happens, and a work of philosophy to find out what is true — but *Anna Karenina*, like Plato's *Republic*, resists both of these expectations. The *Republic* is not a treatise that hands us a definition of justice; it is a dialogue that works on us, turning "the eye of the soul" gradually toward the good until we begin to want different things than we wanted when we started. Tolstoy asks the same of us. He does not tell us how to judge Anna, Levin, or Karenin; he immerses us so completely in each character that we are forced to practice a more patient, more generous, and more honest attention than daily life usually demands. The novel is less an argument about how to live than an education in charity. Read this way, the point of reading is not to be informed but to be changed. This course asks you to submit to that process — to let the book read you as much as you read it — and to notice, over the coming weeks, how it revises your first impressions and, perhaps, yourself.

Seminar Format: Please use a journal and pen or pencil alongside reading the novel. Journal entries should be handwritten. This means that you are free to write in bullet points, draw, jot half-thoughts, write down page numbers, etc. You are encouraged to share a photo of a journal page in the course Slack channel, but sharing is optional.

Meeting Schedule: Tuesdays, January 12, 19, 26, and February 2, 2027, from 6–8 p.m. ET. Online.

Course Materials

- Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition), ISBN 978-0-14-303500-8.

Session I | Tuesday, January 12, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. Eastern

Reading

- *Anna Karenina*, Parts I and II: pp. 1–236

Reading Journal Assignment: Choose two or three of the characters below. Write a separate handwritten journal entry of about one page per character. The questions below are meant to guide you, but disregard them if you want. Enter into the characters you're examining.

1. **Stiva Oblonsky.** How does Tolstoy make Stiva likeable despite his infidelity and irresponsibility? What does his easy charm reveal about the difference between being pleasant and being good? Everyone forgives him — what is Tolstoy suggesting about social grace as a kind of moral anesthetic? As he moves through both parts smoothing over other people's crises, how moral does his geniality start to look?
2. **Dolly.** The novel opens on Dolly's suffering, and she is often overshadowed by Anna and Kitty. What kind of moral seriousness does she embody? How does Anna's visit reframe our view of Dolly's marriage and her choices — and how does her wounded, clear-eyed endurance quietly set a standard against which the more glamorous marriages of both parts are measured?
3. **Levin.** Levin enters Part I awkward, earnest, and out of place in Moscow society. In Part II, rejected, he retreats to his estate and throws himself into farming, reading, and the rhythms of the land. What do his physical and emotional details reveal about his values, and what does his absorption in rural work reveal about where he locates meaning? How is he set up as a foil to both Stiva and Vronsky, and how does his solitude answer the world that rejected him?
4. **Kitty.** At the start, Kitty is poised between two suitors and two futures. What does her idealized image of Vronsky reveal about her youth and inexperience, and how does the ball shatter her self-understanding? Her collapse sends her abroad in Part II, where she idealizes Varenka and Madame Stahl and tries on a life of pious self-denial before recognizing it isn't hers. What does this false start reveal about who Kitty is — and about the difference between a borrowed identity and a genuine one?
5. **Anna.** Consider our first impression of Anna — the graceful, warm woman who mends the Oblonsky marriage. How does Tolstoy plant undertones of the disruption to come? In Part II she becomes Vronsky's mistress, and Tolstoy renders the consummation of their love in the imagery of a murder. How do guilt, shame, and exhilaration coexist in her?
6. **Vronsky.** Vronsky is handsome, confident, and well-liked — but how does Tolstoy quietly undercut him? Look at how he treats Kitty's expectations in Part I versus his own intentions. In Part II his pursuit of Anna succeeds and his ambition finds its emblem in the steeplechase, where a moment of carelessness rides Frou-Frou to her death. What does his treatment of the mare reveal about how he loves — and about the harm his confidence leaves in its wake? Compare his conception of honor and pleasure to Levin's.
7. **Karenin.** We glimpse Karenin only briefly at the end of Part I; Part II brings him forward. Confronted with evidence of Anna's affair, he responds not with passion but with anxiety about propriety, appearances, and the machinery of respectable life. How does Tolstoy use small physical details and his reflex toward official forms to characterize a man who reaches for procedure whenever feeling threatens to break through? Is Karenin cold or frightened — and how does the novel complicate our impulse to judge him?

Session II | Tuesday, January 19, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. Eastern

Reading

- *Anna Karenina*, Parts III and IV: pp. 237–436

Reading Journal Assignment: Choose two or three of the characters below. Write a separate handwritten journal entry of about one page per character. The questions below are meant to guide you, but disregard them if you want. Enter into the characters you're examining.

1. **Levin.** Part III gives us Levin at his most alive — mowing through a long summer day alongside the peasants and losing his self-consciousness in the work. What does this scene claim about labor, class, and the sources of meaning, and why does it matter that Levin can join the peasants but never quite belong among them? In Part IV he wins Kitty back through the wordless chalk-letter proposal and then insists on giving her his private diaries. What do that courtship and that confession reveal about his need for absolute honesty — and about how differently he and Vronsky love?
2. **Kitty.** Recovered from the illness and disillusion of Part II, Kitty meets Levin again at the Oblonsky dinner. How has her suffering changed her — is accepting Levin a hard-won self-knowledge or a quiet settling? Read the chalk-letter scene closely: what does her instant grasp of his coded initials tell us about the intuitive, unspoken register in which she and Levin understand each other?
3. **Anna.** Part IV brings Anna to the edge of death in childbirth, and in her fever she craves reconciliation and forgiveness. How real is the remorse at her bedside, and what becomes of it once she recovers? Trace how she is trapped between a husband who has forgiven her and a lover she cannot give up — and how the impossibility of that position begins to harden into the fatalism that will define her.
4. **Karenin.** Parts III and IV are Karenin's severest test. In Part III he chooses to punish Anna by preserving the outward marriage; in Part IV, at her deathbed, he is unexpectedly flooded with genuine forgiveness and love. Is this his finest moment or a self-image he cannot sustain? What pressures threaten his forgiveness as Part IV closes? What is Tolstoy saying about the gap between a moment of grace and a settled character?
5. **Vronsky.** Humiliated by Karenin's magnanimity at the bedside, Vronsky shoots himself and survives. What drives the attempt — guilt, wounded pride, or the collapse of the self-assured world he has always inhabited? How does surviving change him, and what does abandoning his coveted military career for Anna cost him and reveal about him?
6. **Stiva Oblonsky.** Stiva reappears as the affable go-between in the divorce negotiations. What does it mean that the novel's most morally careless character is also its great social lubricant — the one who keeps everyone talking? How does his effortless goodwill both ease and evade the seriousness of what he is brokering?
7. **Dolly.** In Part III, Levin visits Dolly as she manages her children and a fraying household in the country. How does Tolstoy use her exhausted, unglamorous devotion as a moral touchstone? What do Levin and the reader see in her that the novel's more passionate figures lack?

Session III | Tuesday, January 26, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. Eastern

Reading

- *Anna Karenina*, Parts V and VI: pp. 437–670

Reading Journal Assignment: Choose two or three of the characters below. Write a separate handwritten journal entry of about one page per character. The questions below are meant to guide you, but disregard them if you want. Enter into the characters you're examining.

1. **Levin.** Part V opens with Levin's wedding — his near-panic, his doubts at the altar, the strangeness of the ritual — and then the unglamorous friction of early married life that neither he nor Kitty expected. What does Tolstoy show about the distance between the idea of marriage and its daily reality? At his brother Nikolai's deathbed Levin is paralyzed by the sheer fact of death while Kitty acts; what does that helplessness expose in him, and how does it feed the crisis of faith that shadows him?
2. **Kitty.** The wedding makes Kitty a wife; Nikolai's deathbed makes her something more. While Levin recoils, Kitty quietly takes charge of nursing his dying brother with a tenderness and competence that astonish everyone. What is Tolstoy claiming about a courage that is undramatic and practical rather than heroic? How do her steadiness at the deathbed and the pregnancy discovered in its shadow define the moral center she is becoming?
3. **Anna.** Part V follows Anna through the aimless idyll of Italy, then home to the secret, wrenching visit to Seryozha on his birthday and the public humiliation at the opera. Trace how her world narrows: cut off from her son and cast out by society, what does she have left besides Vronsky? By Part VI, how has love curdled into anxiety, possessiveness, and a constant need to be reassured she is still loved? What is Tolstoy showing about a passion made to carry the entire weight of a life?
4. **Vronsky.** In Italy, Vronsky plays at painting until the real painter Mikhailov exposes his dilettantism; back home he pours himself into his estate, a model hospital, and provincial politics. Is this genuine purpose, or a search for something to fill a void that Anna alone cannot? How does his need for independent standing — the elections, a public role — collide with Anna's need for his undivided presence?
5. **Karenin.** By Parts V and VI, Karenin has surrendered his inner life to Countess Lydia Ivanovna and a borrowed religiosity. How does his forgiveness at Anna's sickbed curdle into a colder cruelty — refusing the divorce, letting his son be told his mother is dead? Is Karenin now a villain, a victim, or a hollowed-out man clinging to the only supports he has left?
6. **Dolly.** Part VI sends Dolly to visit Anna at Vronsky's estate, and the journey becomes a meditation on her own worn, self-sacrificing life. How does Tolstoy use Dolly's clear, unenvious eye to reveal what is hollow beneath the luxury of Anna's household? What does she see that Anna can no longer see about herself — and why does the visit leave Dolly, for all her hardships, grateful for her own life?

Session IV | Tuesday, February 2, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. Eastern

Reading

- *Anna Karenina*, Parts VII and VIII: pp. 671–818

Reading Journal Assignment: Choose two or three of the characters below. Write a separate handwritten journal entry of about one page per character. The questions below are meant to guide you, but disregard them if you want. Enter into the characters you're examining.

1. **Anna.** Part VII carries Anna to her death. Isolated from society and her son, dependent on morphine, and consumed by jealousy, she spirals toward the station. Read her feverish final wandering through Moscow closely — how does Tolstoy use her stream of thought to show a mind turning on itself, indicting everyone it lands on? Is her suicide an act of despair, of revenge against Vronsky, or a last bid for control? What does it mean that the railway which opened her story also ends it?
2. **Levin.** Parts VII and VIII belong, finally, to Levin. Fatherhood arrives without the instant joy he expected — only terror and tenderness at his son's birth. Then, at the height of his outward happiness, he is seized by the conviction that life is meaningless because death unmakes it, to the point of hiding a rope from himself. How does Tolstoy trace a man who has everything and still cannot say why to live? What does it mean that his deliverance comes not from argument but from a peasant's offhand remark that some men live "for the soul, for God"? Is Levin's final, unspoken faith a solution or a way of living without one?
3. **Kitty.** In Part VII Kitty becomes a mother, and Tolstoy gives childbirth the same unflinching attention he gave death. How does motherhood complete the transformation begun at Nikolai's deathbed? Note her sharp jealousy after Levin's visit to Anna: what does it reveal about her clear-eyed understanding of her husband and of Anna's power? In the closing storm, how does Kitty anchor the ordinary, continuing life that Levin's new faith learns to affirm?
4. **Vronsky.** Anna's suicide destroys Vronsky. In Part VIII we meet him hollowed out, tormented by guilt and a raging toothache, boarding a train to the Serbian war with no wish to survive it. How does Tolstoy render a proud man's collapse? Is his departure penance, a search for death, or the last performance of a nobility that no longer means anything? What remains of the confident officer of Part I?
5. **Karenin.** By Parts VII and VIII, Karenin has abdicated judgment entirely — his decision on the divorce now steered by Lydia Ivanovna and the séances of the "clairvoyant" Landau. What is Tolstoy's verdict on a man who lets a medium's trance decide his wife's fate? And yet Karenin takes in Anna's orphaned daughter after her death: how do we weigh that quiet mercy against the cruelties that came before it?
6. **Stiva Oblonsky.** Even amid catastrophe, Stiva keeps angling for a lucrative post and brokering favors, breezing through Petersburg drawing rooms while the lives of his sister and his friends are falling apart. What does Tolstoy achieve by keeping this genial, self-absorbed operator in motion to the very end? Is Stiva comic relief, moral indictment, or simply the world carrying on as it always does?