

Gyuwon Park

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### Spiritual Truths as a Compass for Life

People's diverse backgrounds and lifestyles render the effort of trying to pinpoint one rule or law that applies to everyone meaningless. Sometimes differences in life experiences can make it seem impossible for people to understand each other on a deep level. At the same time, regardless of race, gender, age, or nationality, and regardless even of space and time, there are certain spiritual truths that are inside of each person; to quote the words of Kostya Levin, one of the major characters in the 1997 film, *Anna Karenina*, "[Spiritual truths were] given to me, as [they are] to everyone." **In the film *Anna Karenina*, the importance of living according to inherent spiritual truths is highlighted through the contrast between Anna's tragic fate and Levin's newfound meaning of life.**

**Concerning the plot, *Anna Karenina* is a highly plot-driven story, with Anna's suicide marking the climax of the plot and forcing the viewers to ask, "Why did she have to die?"** Anna Karenina is first introduced as Karenin's wife; Karenin is an influential political figure and a kind, typical husband who loves Anna. Anna, however, is far from being a typical wife. Because Anna is not a submissive person and does not conform to her husband's expectations of how she should behave, while Karenin is someone with rather rigid ideas of what a wife ought and ought not to do, their very marriage was the beginning of her tragedy. The rising action is when rumors start spreading about Anna's affairs with Count Vronsky, and Karenin becomes suspicious and starts warning her about her behavior. The tension between Anna and Karenin becomes increasingly more severe. Finally, when her relationship with Vronsky turns ugly and Anna's grief from not being allowed to see her son

Seriozha increases, Anna commits suicide, marking the climax. As for Vronsky, he goes to participate in the Serbian war, saying that his life is now worthless. The final scene of the film takes place at Levin's farm, where everyday life, ordinary but blissful, is portrayed. The sharp contrast between Vronsky's attitude toward life and Levin's, leaves the audience with a sense of pity toward Vronsky and an earnest desire to learn from Levin.

**Furthermore, in order to mentally prepare the viewers for Anna's death, many instances of foreshadowing are used throughout the film.** The first instance of foreshadowing, and perhaps the most direct one, occurs early on, creating an ominous atmosphere from the very beginning. When Anna meets Vronsky for the first time, she is getting out of a train. Shortly after, she sees a man run over by the train and thinks the event a bad omen. The image of the bloodied man under the train and the following close-up of Anna's shocked expression form a strong connection between the man and Anna, pointing toward the possibility of them sharing the same fate. A similar kind of foreshadowing takes place a few days before she kills herself, where she has a nightmare of being run over by a train. In this scene, the moving train is shot from a very low angle, giving the viewers a feeling of the train running directly toward them and being run over by the train themselves. The chilling sensation effectively allows the viewers to emotionally connect with Anna's horror and despair.

**In addition to Anna, another major character of the story is Levin, who is mainly a reliable first person narrator, but who also occasionally takes on the role of a limited omniscient third person narrator.** This flexibility is in order to fill in the gaps, such as what happens at places where Levin is not present, and Anna's inner thoughts. For example, as Anna leaves a ball after dancing with Vronsky, the viewers hear Levin's voice, narrating, "These few brief moments intoxicated Anna like a light pouring into the dark room that was her life." However, Levin does not appear anywhere in the ball scene. Of course, the

fact that

Levin cannot be spotted in the scene does not necessarily mean that he was not at the ball, but even if he were, the fact that he knows about her inner state shows that he is more than a first person narrator. This flexibility allows the narrator to paint a more accurate picture of Anna's internal and external reality, helping the viewers to better understand what led her to her death.

**In order to understand why Anna Karenina had to die, examining what part her antagonists played in her life is important.** In Anna's mind, Karenin was no doubt her greatest antagonist, at least before Vronsky became her enemy. Karenin is a fairly developed character, and as far as one can tell from observing his speech and actions, he is a kind person. His only "flaw" may be that he is rather dull; but then again, how can he not be when Anna is almost completely indifferent towards him and does not even try to hide it? In that sense, even that flaw is not his fault. Thus, when Anna considers him to be her greatest antagonist and treats him accordingly, the viewers feel sympathy for Karenin and become somewhat detached from Anna. The detachment lessens the sadness of the viewers upon seeing her tragic death. However, when she asks for Karenin's forgiveness shortly after her miscarriage of Vronsky's child, and Karenin forgives, Karenin is no longer her greatest antagonist. Her next antagonist becomes Vronsky, as their relationship drastically deteriorates. The decline is no surprise, as their relationship was no more than the "realization of all [of Vronsky's] deepest desires" to begin with. Vronsky is also a developed character, who is hot tempered and full of hypocrisy. His hot temper and dishonorable character is particularly well illustrated in an incident that takes place during a steeplechase. Vronsky is a contestant who is eager to win. However, toward the end of the race, he falls off of the horse. In a fit of anger, he grabs the gun from a man nearby, and shoots the horse. Adding to Anna's anger and resentment, she finds that society too has become her antagonist, forcing her to stay indoors against her will. Anna struggles to fight against these perceived enemies but fails.

**To understand the background in which the characters lived, analyzing the meaning of the train as a major symbol for the setting of time and place is necessary.**

Temporally, it represents the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Russia was going through the phases of modernization. Spatially, it connects St. Petersburg and Moscow, drawing attention to the two city's differences. The fact that Anna Karenina's death is caused by a train indicates the role of setting as a cause of her death. Just as every person is influenced on some level by the environment, so too was Anna Karenina. At this time of patriarchal Russian society, it must have been especially difficult for a woman like Anna to play the role of a dutiful wife. Moreover, going back and forth from Petersburg to Moscow and encountering diverse social groups allowed her to realize what she was missing out on as a married woman. These environmental factors certainly influenced Anna's tragic downfall, showing that Anna is not to be blamed completely for her own death.

**However, what prevents the whole story from merely being a cautionary tale or a tragic love story is Levin's newfound meaning of life.** He is the character that redeems the story and somewhat balances Anna's death. Levin's search for true identity, meaning, and purpose is the main theme that is revisited over and over again. His search is motivated by the death of his brother, which propels him to seek the truth within himself. He experiences an existential crisis and declares, "I cannot live without knowing. What I am and why I am here, and that I cannot know." Despite his very best efforts, he does not find out the answers to these questions in a certain way. The answers he realizes are unclear, and difficult, if not impossible, to put into words. All he manages to describe is a "new feeling." Although it cannot be articulated, after his realization, he is subtly yet profoundly changed.

**Through the sharp contrast between Anna's grim ending and Levin's newfound spiritual meaning, the main cause of her death can be deduced.** The reason is that Anna did not live according to the inherent spiritual truths that were inside of her. As an attempt to

stop Vronsky from going to fight in the war after Anna's death, Levin shares his new insights with him. In this conversation, he says to Vronsky, "I know what is right and wrong. I wasn't taught this. It was given to me, as it is to everyone." In other words, the capacity to discern what is right and wrong is inherent within each person. Naturally, one should not neglect this capacity, which Anna made the mistake of doing. Ultimately, she was her own worst enemy because she did not live according to the spiritual truths that she was born with. Another scene that adds to this theme is the moment when she leans forward and falls onto the railway. The audience hears her voice say, "God, forgive me everything." The prayer for forgiveness was probably the last thought going through her mind before her death. At last, she turns to faith. Her final thought indicates that she should have all along, although turning to it finally, albeit too late, gives some sense of relief and peace. The value of living according to one's innermost, innate spiritual truths is the theme that is highlighted by both characters, Anna and Levin. She is an example of what may come if one chooses to neglect them, and he is an example of finding new meaning in life through searching for the truth inside one's own soul.



