



Great Books
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Anna Karenina

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**THE UNIVERSITY OF
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An introduction from Professor Stephanie Trigg

Nineteenth-century fiction creates the illusion of a fully realised social world – one that shapes the psychological development of its main characters. In many novels from this period, individual desires clash with dynastic imperatives, social conservatism, the careful negotiations of marriage and family life, and the traditional distribution of wealth.

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (serialised between 1875 and 1877, then published in book form in 1878) is a pre-eminent example of this kind of fiction. It often features on lists of the greatest novels ever written, not least for its moving dramas of the self and its vividly realised scenes of urban and rural life.

In structural terms, *Anna Karenina* features several overlapping narrative arcs: a passionate love story, a family saga, and a conversion narrative. These plots are set against Tolstoy's powerful evocation of pre-revolutionary Russian society and its uneasy social, cultural, religious, and economic politics. The action moves between Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the feudal estates of Konstantin Levin in the Russian countryside, while the novel's emotional energies are concentrated around two quite different characters: the unhappily married Anna Karenina in her search for happiness, and Levin himself, in his search for meaning in his life, work, and community.

This masterclass will focus on the narrative arcs of Anna and Levin, and the different dimensions of the emotional and social fabric of the novel. We will also make a special study of the way Tolstoy uses facial expressions to draw attention to moments of greater intensity and emotional interaction between characters. How do these forms of facial rhetoric — and their capacity to invoke visual images — contribute to the experience of reading this immersive novel?



[Stephanie Trigg](#) FAHA is Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor of English Literature at the University of Melbourne, and the current President of the New Chaucer Society (2022–2024). Most of her teaching and research is in the areas of the history of emotions, medieval literature, and medievalism. Her chief publications include *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (2002) and *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* (2012); and with Thomas A. Prendergast, *Affective Medievalism: Love, Abjection and Discontent* (2019) and *30 Great Myths about Chaucer* (2020).

Her current research is focussed around an Australian Research Council Discovery Project, with Joe Hughes and Tyne Sumner at the University of Melbourne, and Guillemette Bolens at the University of Geneva: 'Literature and the Face: A Critical History'. This project stretches from medieval to contemporary literature, examining the

representations of the human face and faciality from medieval poetry and the pre-history of the novel into contemporary fiction and lyric poetry. It pays special attention to the face as a turning-point in narrative structures, the rhetoric of facial expression, the relation between visual and textual imagery, facial and perceptual difference, and questions of surveillance.

Extra resources

[Rereading Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy](#), *The Guardian*

Why does this novel written in 1878 continue to stand the test of time? James Meek argues that Tolstoy's distinctive writing style transcends space and time.

[Guide to the Classics: Anna Karenina](#), *The Conversation*

Judith Armstrong, Honorary Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts, offers a reading of *Anna Karenina* through Tolstoy's moral values.

[Rereading Russian Classics in the Shadow of the Ukraine War](#), *The New Yorker*

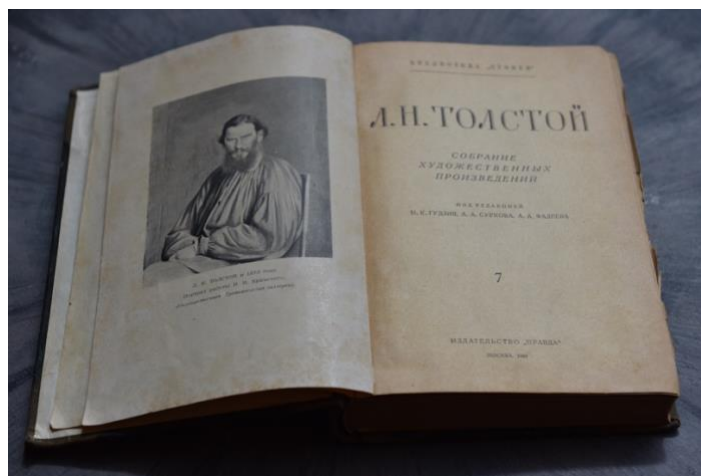
What do stories tell us about how the world works? Does literature look different depending on where you read it? Elif Batuman delves into the messages, hidden or otherwise, in the great works of Russian literature.

[Infidelity, Grandly Staged.pdf](#), a review of the 2012 Joe Wright movie adaptation by *The New York Times*

NYT critic A.O. Scott compares *Anna Karenina* with Wright's other big-screen adaptations, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Atonement* (2007).

[Maggie Gyllenhaal narrates Anna Karenina](#), Audible

There are many different editions and translations of this widely published book. Professor Trigg recommends this audiobook version, narrated by actress Maggie Gyllenhaal.



L.N. Tolstoy's *Collected Works*, Vol. 7. Moscow: Pravda Publishing House, 1948. Baillieu Library Rare Book Collection, University of Melbourne.

Discussion questions

Reading the face

Tolstoy uses the face as a very expressive medium in *Anna Karenina*. This raises the question of what we as readers “see” and “feel” — both phenomenologically and emotionally — when a face is described in a work of literature.

As you think about the novel now, what are the most striking scenes featuring faces and facial gestures and expressions?

One novel, two plots

The character of Anna gives the novel its title, but of course the book is equally, if not more, concerned with Levin himself. What is your response to the “double plot” of the narrative, and the way Tolstoy moves between his main characters? What is the effect of this dialectic narrative structure? If you have read his *War and Peace*, what comparisons would you draw between the two novels and their similar structural method?

Adaptations

Like many other Great Books, *Anna Karenina* has been adapted many times for stage and screen. What versions have you seen or experienced? What do they add to your reading of the novel?



Anna Karenina (2012), directed by Joe Wright.

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