


# Ideal Husband as a Key Symbol in *Anna Karenina*

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## Abstract

*This paper tries to symbolically evaluate the character, Alexi Alexandrovich Karenin, as an ideal husband figure in comparison with other characters from the movie Anna Karenina (2012) which is an adaptation of the well-known novel Anna Karenina by the prominent author, Leo Tolstoy. Here, the dramatic focus is not just bestowed to the protagonist and her lover, instead the side lined and betrayed meek character with his true heart is valued as ideal. The novel throws light towards the elements of love, lust and eventually to its consequences. While the exact focus can be brought towards the absence of selfishness, providence of love and trueness of sacrifice portrayed by Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin.*

**Keywords:** Anna Karenina, Symbol, Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, Leo Tolstoy, Ideal husband

‘But sin has a price, you may be sure of that’

When Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* travelled from the genre of a novel to become the vibrant motion picture, it efficiently captured the elements of love, lust and betrayal with more clarity and precision. As the institution of marriage and the practice of adultery is frequently questioned, the plot itself serves as the answer for the final scene of the suicide. Is adultery a sin? The most respectable high-ranking minister, Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, husband of Anna Arkadyevna Karenina, has many a time served as an angel of warning for his wife, and this act, without a single second of doubt was by purely out of love and fear of moral depravity. His actions, fears, expressions and stoicism can be related to an ideal husband in all concern.

Karenin’s political observations, moral ideologies and religious beliefs, responsibility and endurance towards his wife serve as a canopy for his title as an ideal husband. Apart from the intensified love between Anna and the dashing wealthy military officer, Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky, the plot can enrol itself to focus upon the husband Karenin to create a variant perspective in it.

In a more conventional concept, an ideal man can be distinguished by his qualities of acceptable temperament, stoicism, eloquent manners, moral acquittance, ability to adapt and love even amid chaos. Here the ideal husband does not fail to love and safeguard Karenina, even when her storms were hitting him hard just as Oscar Wilde opines in his *An Ideal Husband*, ‘It takes great courage to see the world in all its tainted glory, and still to love it. And even more, the courage to see it in the one you love.’ (Wilde)

The relationship between Karenin and Anna echoes a void and dull atmosphere, partially and unarguably, due to the unavailability of enthusiasm and the passion Anna secretly yearned for. After the passing years of marriage

and dried up love stories along with the dutiful actions of Karenin, Anna stood as a wife, but not as a sincere one and her inescapable passion burst out when she saw blue-eyed handsome military man Vronsky. The gorgeous, aristocratic nuptial tied woman that hails from St. Petersburg, whose pursuit of true love and emotional honesty not only made her an outcast from society but as a result she did not even find adultery as a sin but found love as more profound than institution of marriage.

In the initial scene of departure, nuptial bound Anna announces her need to be with her brother Stepan Arkadyich Oblonsky and mentions adultery, which in turn foreshadows her adultery. Her words intensify her perspective when she says 'adultery may be forgiven'. Rather than embedding moral concerns, Anna was trapped in her bubble filled with a fog of love and most importantly, lack of seriousness. 'Sin has its price' is what Alexi replies, which indeed serves to be true and it also, directly mentions the future events that were about to take place. The nature of the character of Anna is portrayed in such a way that one might think of Oscar Wilde's comment on love and women:

*Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on pedestals? We have all feet of clay, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not perfect, but the imperfect, who need love. (Wilde)*

Upon her visit to Stiva and Dolly, Anna repeats her ideology of forgiveness and advice Dolly and mentions that she is the most desirable one for Stiva. Whereas Stiva has his perspective of his wife as, 'So unfair, you marry for love. You're a good husband, children arrive, years depart and all of a sudden, your wife grow old and tires and her hair is thin and her body, you, you still have your vigour'. This attitude of Stiva can subtly be compared with Anna's, even though Anna doesn't showcase it explicitly, it is evident that Anna too was longing for an eccentric love, which she confirms with Vronsky as 'this is love' in their intimate moment of consummation.

Karenin can be seen as a direct antithesis with Stiva, who is unfaithful to his wife, Darya Alexandrovna (Dolly) whereas one could easily visualise Karenin as an ideal husband who wishes

his wife to be back with him and ask her to consider her duties as a wife and a mother. Karenin, whom Tolstoy modelled on the early Romantic heroes of literature, stood as a caring and responsible husband with moral conduct and religious beliefs. When Anna out of her guilt, kissed her husband's hands and said 'I'm writing letters to kitty and dolly', her eyes were shining with secrets that were recognisable for Karenin. All he said was 'it's time for bed', which creates an idea of a caring husband. Thus, Alexi's nature of giving his wife or another human adequate freedom and space is evident throughout the plot.

It does not entirely propagate as Anna does not have her choice of love, but Anna chose the wrong ways to acquire it without a bit of honesty or truthfulness. As the characters of Anna and Karenin are portrayed with different interests and tastes, it is evident that Anna is less or maybe not at all interested in Karenin when in comparison with her passion for Vronsky. It is apparent that both Vronsky and Anna were sharing their opinions and tastes on different matters during gatherings, but their interest never really seemed to sink. When Karenin enquires about Anas's absence in Countess Lydia's evening gathering, it becomes more obvious or palpable to the spectators that where Anna's curiosity resides.

But as an ideal man, Karenin sought to find Anna's interest and never hindered it from her. He stood as an invisible pillar for her, which assured only safety. 'I came to take you home' Karenin mentions amid the scandals and pinpointing of society. Anna stayed along with her interests and pleasures, while the ideal husband was a burning fire melting himself with pity and helplessness. When it was beyond the limit for an ideal character to stay idle, Karenin raises his words to give her the first warning. There are many other situations where Karenin warns her and each word had its impact on her in the posterity:

*You and Vronsky attracted attention tonight...I didn't notice anything myself, but I saw everyone else noticing. I consider jealousy to be insulting to you and degrading to me. I have no right to enquire into your feelings. They concern on your conscience. But it is my duty to remind you that we bound together by God and this bond can be broken by a crime against God.*

Anna, yet anna refuses to listen, blinded by the cloud of love. She indeed created an illusion of her future life, where every morning will arrive

with kisses of the same love, she experienced with Vronsky in the present.

The second warning commences after the race, when Karenin reminds her of her duties as a wife and a mother. What turned out to be the result is mere ignorance and acceptance of love-stricken destiny. Anna's response to Karenin's advice is, 'I'm tired'. Which is a subtle suggestion of her boredom and tired life she had to endure with Karenin, the man of wisdom, politics and etiquettes. He was more often concerned with the social order and virtues which can be seen as a drawback in knowing the vibrations of his wife's heart.

Anna's profound love was a pure pursuit of happiness and pleasure, but it must have been ended in the same. As long as it accompanies woes, agony and death, it's a failure. Thus, Anna serves the failure with her death. She recalls her gestures as sin and painted her lips with the guilty, urging to be drunken and lost. The conflict of love and marriage haunts every character in the novel. Kitty is one among them, who initially had the experience of bitter love, but from which she raised enough to see the buried true love of Vronsky. The constant moment of adultery among Anna and Vronsky occurred with an intense gesture of love and an insane amount of lust. They were indeed entwined by the poison of warmth of each other. Vronsky mentioned as someone is watching and all she could see was the sky above, which suggest the omnipresent observer. The guilt that began to grow in her mind was evident in her eyes.

Even when the society's sword of criticism hit upon Anna, and Karenin was doing nothing but only defending her. Once after witnessing the scandals the countless remarks that 'You are too tolerant' to Karenin, to which he defends his wife saying, 'she is after all my wife'. The injured horse in the race in which Vronsky was riding can be directly symbolised to Anna. Anna was about to be broken by Vronsky and will be led to the path of death by his undesirable actions. Even though Karenin was shadowing and letting her know about the hidden dangers she was numb and frozen by dreams. And, Anna couldn't see the truth.

Alexi had to face the dreadful truth of Anna's pregnancy from her, which broke his soul. He indeed

again played the role of dutiful husband and decided to take care of the child. In one of his vulnerable moment, he asks Anna, 'What did I do to deserve this?' On another occasion when Dolly advises him about forgiveness, Karenin mentions that 'I'm not a cruel man' which indeed was proved right when he takes care of her child as his own after Anna's death.

When Alexi received Anna's letter, he visited her without any reluctance and comforted her with his calm gestures. Along with easing Anna, he even supported Vronsky too. Is that a husband's duty, or a good human nature that made him feel pathetic and pity for Anna? Anna was still being loved by Karenin. Karenin decides to take care of Anna, but his attempts were futile and she decided to be with Vronsky.

At last, she was happily united with Vronsky. But where is the true meaning of love, life and marriage? Later, the cloud castle of ideal eccentric love falls, she loses herself and becomes conscious of her choices and mistakes. Anna being a strong woman at heart, strived to survive amid scandals. She discarded Karenin's third warning mentioning the profundity of her sin and the consequences she would face for it. The novels bring her struggles and inner conflicts to the peak, just to drop it from the very top. She goes by the beginning, where it all started and ended it there itself.

Konstantin Dmitrievich Levin can be compared to Karenin as a reflection of ideal love and an ideal husband, whereas Karenin serves to be the victim of tragedy. Levin gives forward the ideology of true and sincere bond of marriage and love, whereas his listeners mock him as an idealist. His words were profound and reflect the author's idea of marriage. Levin stands as a reflection of Karenin, a voice for the helpless husband.

Anna Karenina, as a tragic heroine, had her flaws and on scrutinising Karenina, the unfortunate husband, who is bound with Anna and happens to be affected by her actions becomes an ideal man or an ideal husband. What makes him an ideal man is his temperament and the way he strives to save her amidst the scandals. He foresees the future and tried to rescue her from the darkest roads of guilt. Anna had her choices, and as humans are bound to life and love, they are entwining with choices and the

consequences. Karenin, as an ideal hero, made his efforts, tried to be a pillar to hold on and a rope to stay calm. His choices were authentic and socially acceptable. His decision to take care of his wife after the scandals, make her child as his own and to let her go with Vronsky were gestures of pure love and can be considered as the symbol of ideal humanity.

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