

# Natasha Rostova vs. Anna Karenina: A Comparison of Falls from Grace

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In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy describes the fall of a beautiful society woman, Anna. He provides a glimpse of the same in *War and Peace* when Natasha Rostova falls from grace and happiness midway through. In *War and Peace*, Natasha recovers from this fall and goes on to live a happy life. Anna Karenina, however, is caught in a downward spiral of unhappiness and turmoil until she ends her own life. Why is it that Natasha recovers but Anna does not? Tolstoy depicts their falls in a very similar manner. A close comparison between their falls reveals the important role her family and God play in Natasha's eventual happiness, while Anna's lack of faith and family lead to misery.

The initial experiences of the falls of both Natasha and Anna are very similar. Both become enraptured with their respective suitors at big social events. In Natasha's case, it is at the opera that she first meets and notices Anatole Kuragin. Although Anna meets Vronsky as she first gets off of the train, it isn't until the ball that she truly begins to be seduced. In both cases, there is description of flesh, showing that it is something of a carnal experience. Natasha is described as having "bare arms and neck" and is surrounded by "women with gems on their bare flesh" (*War and Peace* 596, 598). Similarly, at the ball Anna is wearing, "a low-necked black velvet dress which exposed her full shoulder and bosom" (*Anna Karenina* 78).

For both Anna and Natasha, it has been a while since they were the center of attention. Natasha has been in the country while waiting for Prince Andrew, and Anna, as a married woman, is no longer the focus of suitors and balls. Both women experience very similar feelings upon reencountering the social scene. In *War and Peace*, Natasha feels "a sensation she had not experienced for a long time" that eventually leads to "a state of intoxication" (596, 599). Anna also "was intoxicated by

the rapture she had produced” (*Anna Karenina* 80). This state of mind opens them up to succumb to the temptations presented them.

When confronted with their suitors, Anna and Natasha also react in similar manners. Both of them feel that what they are doing is wrong, but attempt to rationalize it. At the opera, Natasha “was pleased to see that [Anatole] was captivated by her and it did not occur to her that there was anything wrong with it” (*War and Peace* 601). Later on, however, “she felt all the time that by talking to him she was doing something improper” and “she felt agitated and tormented, and the cause of this was Kuragin” (*War and Peace* 603, 604). After the opera, she tries to justify her actions to herself by saying, “What happened to me? Nothing! I have done nothing, I didn’t lead him on at all. Nobody will know and I shall never see him again” (*War and Peace* 605).

In *Anna Karenina*, while at the ball, “Every time [Vronsky] spoke to Anna the joyful light kindled in her eyes and a smile of pleasure curved her rosy lips. She seemed to make efforts to restrain these signs of joy, but they appeared on her face of their own accord” (80). After the ball, however, Anna feels that she is “wicked,” but justifies it by saying she “was really not to blame, or only a very little” (*Anna Karenina* 97). On her train ride back to St. Petersburg, “when she remembered Vronsky, the feeling of shame grew stronger” (*Anna Karenina* 100). However, she rationalizes this feeling by telling herself that nothing occurred “between [her] and this officer-lad (Vronsky) any relations differing from those with other acquaintances” (*Anna Karenina* 100). By rationalizing their feelings of guilt and shame, both Natasha and Anna allow themselves to be taken in by Kuragin and Vronsky, respectively. Instead of listening to their first feelings, they belittle the indecency of their relationships.

Another similarity between Natasha’s fall and Anna’s fall is the boldness of their suitors. This boldness initially frightens them, but eventually convinces them that what they are feeling is real love. Anatole Kuragin pursues Natasha relentlessly. Even after she tells him that she is engaged, he tells her, “I tell you I am madly, madly in love with you! Is it my fault that you are enchanting?” (*War and Peace* 611). Although he won’t visit her properly, he sends her secret love letters and convinces her to elope with him. Natasha is confused by his pursuit, picturing herself with both Prince Andrew and Anatole, but knows that she must choose between them. By renouncing her engagement to Prince Andrew, Natasha finally gives in to the immediacy and excitement of Anatole’s love.

Anna also attempts to resist Vronsky’s brazen courtship. When she leaves Moscow to avoid him, he follows her to St. Petersburg, telling her that, “You know that I am going in order to be where you are” (*Anna Karenina* 102). She responds by telling him, “What you are doing is wrong” (102). He insists on pursuing her, however. After some time, she attempts to confront him once and for all, telling him that he has behaved badly. He insists that he loves her and “she exerted all the powers

of her mind to say what she ought; but instead she fixed on him her eyes filled with love and did not answer at all” (*Anna Karenina* 139). From this point on it is only a matter of time before she gives in to Vronsky completely. She attempts to resist him, but allows herself to give in to his dogged attempts to seduce her.

It is from this point on that Anna’s and Natasha’s situations differ significantly. Up until this point, Tolstoy has portrayed their situations very similarly. After this point they still behave in similar fashions, but Natasha has the support of her family to prevent her from completing her fall by eloping with Anatole. Anna, on the other hand, meets all of her husband’s “efforts to bring about an explanation by presenting an impenetrable wall of merry perplexity” (*Anna Karenina* 147). Natasha is also pulled out of her fall by fostering a relationship with God, while Anna never seeks comfort in the divine. Without the support of her family or religion to help her, it is inevitable that Anna commit adultery with Vronsky.

The support of Natasha’s family is best demonstrated by Sonya’s stand outside her door. Sonya declares, “If I don’t sleep for three nights I’ll not leave this passage, and will hold her back by force and not let the family be disgraced” (*War and Peace* 620). She is willing to risk everything to ensure that Natasha and the Rostov family are not disgraced by Natasha’s rash behavior. Even though Natasha declared, “Go away! Go away! You all hate and despise me!” Sonya stayed by her bedside, ready to comfort and help her (*War and Peace* 628). When Natasha attempts to commit suicide but changes her mind, she is able to awake Sonya to tell her what she has done. Though she becomes very ill, she avoids death. During her slow recovery, her family did everything they could to help her. Tolstoy writes that, “Even to Natasha herself it was pleasant to see that so many sacrifices were being made for her sake” (*War and Peace* 702).

While all of her family’s efforts helped her along in her recovery, it is not complete until she sets herself right before God. She begins to be happy and more energetic when she begins to attend mass. As she goes to church early in the morning, she has a “sense of the possibility of correcting her faults, the possibility of a new, clean life, and of happiness” (*War and Peace* 704). It is easy to see that her recovery is mostly complete when “she prayed to God to forgive them all, and her too, and to give them all, and her too, peace and happiness. And it seemed to her that God heard her prayer” (*War and Peace* 709). When she finally forgives herself and seeks forgiveness from God, she is able to find peace again.

Because Anna has no familial support, and has shunned God, she is not able to find freedom from her situation. When she comes to believe that Vronsky’s love for her is diminishing, she is alone with her fears. Since she shunned her family and society in order to have Vronsky, there is nowhere and nobody that she can turn to for consolation and comfort. She eventually begins to blame her problems on Vronsky. Tolstoy says that, “The torture of expectation, living betwixt heaven and earth, which she endured there in Moscow, Karenin’s dilatoriness and indecision, her loneliness—

she attributed all to [Vronsky]” (*Anna Karenina* 732). When she, like Natasha, finally attempts suicide, she is all alone. After throwing herself under a train, “she wished to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down. ‘God forgive me everything!’ she said” (*Anna Karenina* 760). Though she has second thoughts, there is no one there to help her. Though she cries to him at the last moment, Anna could not turn to God for peace—it was too late. Living an immoral life, she doesn’t enter a church to take communion or make confession. She never finds the peace that Natasha does. She hates Karenin because of his virtues and because it makes her feel so much more guilty. Unlike Natasha, she does not have her family to help her, and won’t allow herself to find peace in God.

When comparing the fall of Natasha in *War and Peace* to the more extended fall of Anna in *Anna Karenina*, their falls follow a very similar pattern. From their initial intoxication with society to allowing themselves to be taken in by their ill-intentioned suitors, they both fall from grace. Natasha, however, is able to recover from her fall while Anna is not. By looking at the differences in their situations, it can be seen that it is because of a caring and supportive family that Natasha recovers. In addition, Natasha is able to find peace through a relationship with God. Anna, on the other hand, never looks heavenward for help and abandons her family. Stripped of these two safety nets, Anna has nothing to stop her downward spiral.

### **Works Cited**

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.  
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