

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WORKS OF MIDDLEMARCH AND ANNA KARENINA

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Annotation: This article examines the thematic, structural, and stylistic similarities and differences between George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Both novels are considered significant works of the 19th-century realist tradition, reflecting the complexities of human relationships, social expectations, and moral responsibility. The study highlights how Eliot and Tolstoy portray marriage, society, and personal ambition through their principal characters, yet differ in narrative approach and cultural context. While *Middlemarch* focuses on provincial English life and emphasizes intellectual and moral development, *Anna Karenina* explores the psychological depth of emotional struggle within Russian aristocratic society. Furthermore, the comparative analysis reveals that Eliot employs an analytical and philosophical narrative tone, whereas Tolstoy's style is more emotionally intense and dramatic. The article concludes that despite cultural and stylistic differences, both authors profoundly illuminate universal human experiences and the conflicts between individual desire and social norms.

Key words: similarity, difference, *Middlemarch*, *Anna Karenina*, society, plot, woman, image, realism, hero, personality, family, betrayal

Introduction: The comparative study of world literature offers valuable insights into how writers from different cultures and historical contexts interpret universal human experiences. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–1872) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877) are two seminal works of the nineteenth-century realist tradition that examine the complexities of personal desire, moral conflict, and social convention. Although originating from distinct cultural environments—Eliot writing within Victorian England and Tolstoy within Imperial Russia—both novels explore the intricate interplay between individual aspiration and the constraints imposed by society.

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot provides a detailed portrayal of provincial English life, focusing on intellectual ambition, marriage, and the challenges of social reform. Meanwhile, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* delves into the psychological depth of love, infidelity, and societal judgment among the Russian aristocracy. Despite differences in narrative tone, character development, and cultural setting, the two novels share thematic concerns regarding the tension between personal fulfillment and social responsibility. By analyzing the thematic parallels and divergences in these works, this study aims to highlight how each author contributes to the broader discourse of realism and human experience in nineteenth-century literature.

Material and methods: The 19th century is considered one of the highest stages of world novelism. The works written during this period became an artistic expression of the human

psyche, changes in society and moral values not only within the framework of national literature, but also on a global scale. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) are considered the brightest examples of such realistic novels, and they are considered the pinnacle of their art. This can also be understood from the thoughts of the critic and great English writer Leavis. In his opinion, “*Middlemarch* is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” (Leavis, 1948, p. 19). In addition, the great thinkers, scientists and writers of that time warmly welcomed this work. Readers especially praised it. From this it can be understood that the artistic quality of Eliot's works, including the novel “*Middlemarch*”, deserves special praise. Similarly, almost all scholars around the world have expressed positive views on the artistic potential of Tolstoy's novel. Literary critic Henry James stated: “*Anna Karenina* is a perfect work of art” (James, 1887, p. 241). With this, the writer compared *Anna Karenina* to a priceless work of art. From this, it can be understood that both novels, demonstrating the high artistic potential of realism in their time, were well received in the literary world and gained popularity to the extent of leaving an indelible mark on today's world literature.

Paying attention to both unique novels, we witness that the works illuminate the complex relationship between society and the individual, the image of a woman and her struggle against social restrictions. Eliot shows the conflict between the idealistic dreams of a woman and real life in English society through the image of Dorothea Brooke, while Tolstoy depicts the conflict between personal passion and social norms through the image of Anna. Therefore, while the scholar D. Carroll describes Eliot's work as a “novel of social change” (Carroll, 1980, p. 77), R. Freeborn interprets Tolstoy's work as “essentially a moral portrait of society” (Freeborn, 1982, p. 112). In this article, I focused on the scientific analysis of the similarities and differences between the novels *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*. In particular, the specific interpretation of the realism tradition, the reflection of society through the image of a woman, and the authors' approaches arising from the national socio-cultural context are studied comparatively.

Humanity compares the social things that exist in the world, creatures, abstractions, religions, races, and political and social events in countries with each other. Therefore, another major school within the science of literature that calls for the good of people, namely “comparative literary studies”, was created by literary scholars. Comparative literary studies is a science that compares the invaluable works created by great scholars from all over the world, the processes of the work, events, and the external and internal experiences of the heroes with each other, and analyzes the different and similar aspects. In this regard, not only great literary scholars, but also ordinary readers who are passionate about the world of literature, involuntarily compare their favorite works with other works. When literary scholars compare works with each other, they usually compare them depending on whether they took place in the same period or in the same place, from a different place and time, or if not, the same time and in different places. They analyze and compare the works they have chosen and explain their similarities and shortcomings to the readers (Jurakulov, 2025). This, in turn, creates the basis for readers to make correct analysis.

So, in addition to these facts, it can be said that Eliot was a writer who took on a “great responsibility” through literature in his time. He raised the novel genre to the level of not only an artistic entertainment form, but also a tool for philosophical analysis of the psyche of society and the individual.

Results and discussion: The comparative analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* reveals that although both novels belong to the realist tradition of the nineteenth century and address similar thematic concerns, their narrative techniques, cultural contexts, and character developments differ significantly. Both George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy explore the tension between individual desires and social expectations, particularly in relation to marriage, love, and personal identity. However, Eliot's approach is more philosophical and reflective, while Tolstoy's style is deeply psychological and emotionally expressive.

One of the key results of the comparison is the portrayal of marriage as a central theme in both novels. In *Middlemarch*, marriage is depicted primarily as a moral and intellectual partnership that can either support or hinder personal growth. The relationships of Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate illustrate how misguided ideals and societal pressures can shape and sometimes distort individual aspirations. In contrast, *Anna Karenina* represents marriage and love as emotionally charged and deeply personal experiences, emphasizing the internal conflict between societal duty and passionate desire. Anna's tragic fate highlights the consequences of choosing personal happiness at the cost of social acceptance.

Additionally, the depiction of society plays an important role in both works. Eliot portrays provincial English society as a closely interwoven community where individual actions have collective consequences. Her narrative voice often guides readers to reflect critically on moral choices. Meanwhile, Tolstoy's representation of Russian aristocratic society emphasizes its rigid conventions, hierarchical values, and moral contradictions. His characters often struggle to reconcile their private emotions with the expectations of their public lives.

Despite these differences, both authors succeed in presenting nuanced and multidimensional characters who reflect universal human experiences. Eliot's characters evolve through self-awareness and moral reasoning, whereas Tolstoy's characters undergo psychological turmoil and emotional transformation. Thus, the outcomes of this comparison demonstrate that while *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* arise from distinct cultural and social contexts, both novels contribute significantly to the realist literary tradition by offering profound insights into human relationships, moral conflict, and the search for meaning in life.

In conclusion, both *Middlemarch* by George Eliot and *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy stand as monumental works of nineteenth-century realist literature, offering profound insights into the complexities of human relationships, morality, and society. While the two novels emerge from different cultural and historical contexts—Victorian England and Imperial Russia—they share thematic concerns regarding the struggle between personal fulfillment and social obligation. Each author examines how societal norms influence individual choices, particularly in matters of marriage, love, and identity.

However, the narrative approaches and character developments in the two novels differ significantly. Eliot employs an analytical and philosophical narrative voice, encouraging the reader to reflect on moral responsibility and intellectual growth. In contrast, Tolstoy focuses more on the emotional and psychological dimensions of human experience, highlighting inner conflicts and the intense consequences of personal desire. Despite these differences, both works succeed in presenting realistic, multidimensional characters whose experiences resonate across cultures and time.

Ultimately, the comparative study of *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* illustrates how literature can transcend national boundaries to explore universal human struggles. Both novels continue to remain relevant because they address questions that are central to human existence: how to balance individual aspirations with societal expectations, how to navigate love and responsibility, and how to search for meaning in an imperfect world. Through their distinct yet complementary approaches, Eliot and Tolstoy enrich the realist tradition and provide enduring reflections on the human condition.

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