

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Alston, Charlotte (2015) Leo Tolstoy, The Kreutzer Sonata. In: Patriarchal Moments: Reading Patriarchal Texts. Bloomsbury, pp. 139-146. ISBN 9781472589149

Published by: Bloomsbury

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/33080/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889)

Charlotte Alston

'You know,' he began while packing the tea and sugar into his bag. 'The domination of women from which the world suffers all arises from this.'

'What "domination of women"?' I asked. 'The rights, the legal privileges, are on the man's side.'

'Yes, yes! That's just it,' he interrupted me. 'That's just what I want to say. It explains the extraordinary phenomenon that on the one hand woman is reduced to the lowest stage of humiliation, while on the other she dominates. Just like the Jews: as they pay us back from their oppression by a financial domination, so it is with women. "Ah, you want us to be traders only, – all right, as traders we will dominate you!" say the Jews. "Ah, you want us to be mere objects of sensuality – all right, as objects of sensuality we will enslave you," say the women. Woman's lack of rights arises not from the fact that she must not vote or be a judge – to be occupied with such affairs is no privilege – but from the fact that she is not man's equal in sexual intercourse and has not the right to use a man or abstain from him as she likes – is not allowed to choose a man at her pleasure instead of being chosen by him. You say that is monstrous. Very well! Then a man must not have those rights either. As it is at present, a woman is deprived of that right while a man has it. And to make up for that right she acts on man's sensuality, and through his sensuality subdues him so that he chooses only formally, while in reality it is she who chooses. And once she has obtained these means, she abuses them and acquires a terrible power over people.'

”Shall I go to her?” I asked myself, and immediately decided that I must go to her. Probably it is always done, when a husband has killed his wife, as I had – he must certainly go to her. “If that is what is done, then I must go,” I said to myself. “If necessary I shall always have time,” I reflected, referring to the shooting of myself, and I went to her. “Now we shall have phrases, grimaces, but I will not yield to them,” I thought. “Wait,” I said to her sister, “it is silly without boots; let me at least put on slippers.”ⁱ

Tolstoy completed The Kreutzer Sonata in 1889. His novella offers a frank critique of the state of late nineteenth-century marriage and the relationship between the sexes. The story begins on a long train journey. A female passenger and her companion, a lawyer, allude to a recent scandalous case of divorce in their social circle. This prompts a discussion among a wider group of passengers about the incidence of divorce in Europe, whether it is reasonable and how it might be prevented. A tradesman opines that a wife ought to fear her husband, and through fear love him: this would prevent her straying. The female passenger, horrified at this reactionary stance, argues that marriage can only be based on ‘real’ love, and a community of ideals. A woman should not be forced into a marriage in which there is no love. This declaration prompts an intervention by Pozdnyshev, a short, fiery-eyed passenger who until this point has avoided conversation. In the course of the impassioned discussion, he reveals that ‘love’ led him to kill his wife. As other passengers make their excuses to leave the carriage, the narrator and Pozdnyshev drink tea together and Pozdnyshev tells the story of his marriage, which is presented as typical of the modern marriage.

The views Tolstoy put forward in this novella reflected the Christian anarchist philosophy that he espoused from the late 1870s onwards. His beliefs extended to the

realm of sexual relations. They were frequently and perhaps inevitably interpreted against the widely known backdrop of Tolstoy's own marital situation: by the 1880s his relationship with his wife, who had borne him thirteen children, had become increasingly turbulent. The clandestine circulation and later publication of The Kreutzer Sonata prompted an outpouring of discussion and criticism, both in public and private, that fed into and fuelled wider debates on sex and marriage in late nineteenth-century Russia, Europe and America. As readers and critics agreed with, disagreed with or dismissed the text, or used it as a starting point for the articulation of their own views, The Kreutzer Sonata allowed for both critiques and reinforcement of nineteenth-century patriarchy, from sometimes predictable and sometimes surprising quarters.

As Pozdnyshev tells his story, he explains that, before his marriage, he lived 'as everyone does, that is, dissolutely', and 'practiced debauchery in a steady, decent way, for health's sake', avoiding women who might tie his hands by having children or developing an attachment to him (123-4). He made sure to deal with any potential moral or emotional ties by paying the women appropriately. Here Tolstoy critiqued his own past behaviour, the attitudes of his class (for example the pursuit of these debauched men as worthy husbands for their daughters), of doctors, who advocated extra-marital sex for good health, and of the government, which licensed and regulated brothels.

After the age of thirty, Pozdnyshev began to look for a woman who was fit to be his wife. A woman who was attractive, he believed, surely must also be intelligent and deeply moral; he was convinced that his chosen bride understood all he thought and felt, when in reality 'it was only that the jersey and the curls were particularly becoming to her' (129-30). He opined that this focus on outward appearances was not

simply the responsibility of men, but also of women, and their mothers, who were aware that ‘we are continually lying about high sentiments, but really only want her body and will therefore forgive any abomination except an ugly, tasteless costume that is in bad style’ (132). The inequalities in this relationship and the ways in which they were manipulated by both sides are highlighted in the introductory quote above. On the one hand, the woman was ‘reduced to the lowest stage of humiliation’, while ‘on the other she dominate[d]’ (136).

After marriage, the Pozdnyshevs’ relationship developed from the anti-climax of the honeymoon, through to dullness, irritation and eventually hostility. Their five children were only the source of more jealousy, quarrels, and torment about their health and wellbeing. While The Kreutzer Sonata ends with the protagonist killing his wife, Pozdnyshev speaks about having killed her much earlier. Within marriage, he asserts, women become ‘mentally diseased, hysterical, unhappy, and lacking capacity for spiritual development’. This could not be altered through ‘equality’, or education, but only ‘by a change in men’s outlook on women and women’s way of regarding themselves’ (152). Things came to a head for the couple after doctors instructed Pozdnyshev’s wife not to have any more children, and taught her how to prevent this – a practice that Pozdnyshev found repellent. She became healthier and handsomer, and began to attract attention from other men, in particular a violinist named Trukhachevksy, with whom she played the piano, evidently enjoying both his company and the music. Their proximity and shared passion were displayed in a public performance of Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata. Pozdnyshev admits that his wife’s actual relations with this man, as they developed on his increasingly frequent visits to their house, were immaterial – what mattered was Pozdnyshev’s own ‘swinishness’, and jealousy. When he returned from a trip to Moscow and found them

together, Pozdnyshev stabbed his wife to death, and Trukhachevsky fled. The unnatural conventions of society imposed themselves even here, as Pozdnyshev considered running after Trukhachevsky, but remembered 'that it is ridiculous to run after one's wife's lover in one's socks: and I did not wish to be ridiculous but terrible' (202). He remembered to 'put on slippers at least' before going to see his dying wife (206-7).

What was the answer to all this misery generated by marriage? For Pozdnyshev, and for Tolstoy, the answer was clear. No good could come from marriage, which was simply a means of licensing the sexual exploitation of women by men. The 'Christian' ideal of marriage was effectively no better than the debauchery of unmarried men. It would be better for all men and women to strive for chastity. When Pozdnyshev describes his physical relationship with his wife after marriage as unnatural, the narrator responds that, if everyone thought along such lines, the human race would cease to exist. Pozdnyshev counters that if life has any meaning, it is that it should be lived through selfless brotherhood and love. If the realization of this ideal eventually brought the world to an end, it would be no bad thing. Tolstoy clarified these points in an 'epilogue' to The Kreutzer Sonata completed in 1890. The Christian ideal, in his view, was chastity. There could therefore be no such thing as a 'Christian marriage'. However, the true Christian teaching did not dictate codes of behaviour; it pointed towards an ideal that should be aimed at, but would not always be met.

The Kreutzer Sonata was not the first vehicle for the expression of Tolstoy's opinions on the role of women, sex and marriage. In the last thirty years of his life he devoted himself to the articulation of his newfound Christian anarchist faith. In a series of key texts he outlined his rejection of the church, the state, private property and money, and his commitment to absolute pacifism, vegetarianism, temperance and

chastity. The novels, plays and short stories he wrote in this period were brought into the service of this philosophy. However, Tolstoy's biographers routinely note that, despite the dramatic change he describes in My Confession (1884), elements of Tolstoy's struggle with life and faith inhabited his life and work from a much earlier period. In the later sections of Anna Karenina (1877) particularly, the traces of Tolstoy's disillusionment with contemporary society and his idealization of the simple life are visible. This is true also of the author's attitudes to women, family life, and the relationship between the sexes. Anna Karenina highlights the hypocrisy of society's attitudes to adultery and debauchery on the part of men and women. While Vronsky's affair with a married woman is accepted as routine, and only frowned upon because he takes it so seriously, Anna is ostracized by high society for her decision to leave her husband. Anna Karenina also offers a broader critique of marital and other relationships. The 'true love' that Anna pursues cannot ultimately make her or anyone else happy. Even Levin and Kitty, who represent purity, hard work and family happiness, by the end of the novel are potentially divided by Levin's faith.ⁱⁱ Some of the themes developed here – the corruption and worthlessness of high society, and the importance for family life of simplicity and hard work – built on those evident in Tolstoy's much earlier Family Happiness (1859).

After the onset of his spiritual crisis, the first clear articulation of Tolstoy's views on the role of women can be found in What Then Must We Do?, completed in 1886. Here Tolstoy railed against the inequality inherent in a society where some men worked while others profited from their labour. Just as he exhorted men to return to the land and earn their bread by labour, he demanded that women embrace their traditional roles as mothers and bearers of children. The nonsense called "women's rights", he maintained, came from a realization by women that men had abandoned

their real work, and a desire likewise to ‘make a pretence of labour ... to avail ourselves of other people’s work and to live only to satisfy our lusts’.ⁱⁱⁱ The Tolstoyan philosophy was radical but also retrogressive: it was about the observation of duties, not a demand for rights. In 1894 Tolstoy told Ernest Howard Crosby that

women do much harm because they use their liberty to neglect their duties of caring for their children, etc. In old times they were forced to keep in their place which was wrong; but all will be well when at least they use their liberty to accept their old domestic position.^{iv}

The Kreutzer Sonata, with its rejection of education as a step towards equality, its presentation of marriage as an institution fundamentally based on coercion, and its promotion of chastity as the ideal, built on all of these themes.

Steps were taken to censor The Kreutzer Sonata almost immediately. This included a ban on discussion of the book in print. In 1891 Tolstoy’s wife Sofia requested an audience with the Tsar in order to (successfully) protest the censorship of the text. Sofia confessed the motivation for this trip to her diary shortly afterwards:

I wanted to show that I wasn’t a victim at all; I wanted people to say my visit to St Petersburg was something I had done instinctively ... If that story had been about me and my relations with Lyovochka, I would hardly have begged him to let it be published.^v

In any case, even before the censorship was rescinded, The Kreutzer Sonata circulated at evening gatherings, where one or more individuals would read the text to avid

listeners. Its first reading, at the house of Tatiana Kuzminskaja and Alexander Kuzminskii (Sofia's sister, and brother-in-law) was of a penultimate draft. The story was read again at the Tolstoyan publishing house Posrednik a few days later, and within a week 300 lithographed copies had been produced.^{vi} This means of dissemination, and Tolstoy's continuing efforts to put the final touches to the story, resulted in the circulation of a number of versions in Russian society.

In England, the enthusiasm for publishing Tolstoy meant that four different editions of The Kreutzer Sonata appeared in 1890 alone. In Germany also, a Kreutzer Sonata fever took hold. Some publishers, translators and critics refused however to take any part in the promotion of the book, on moral grounds. While W. T. Stead told readers of the Review of Reviews that he refused to print it, because he found Tolstoy's prose coarse and brutal, and he fundamentally disagreed with the direction of his teachings, Isabel Hapgood, a prominent but unsympathetic translator of Tolstoy in America, refused to translate the work. In fact, the US post office took steps to ban conveyance of the novel by mail, under a law about the distribution of immoral content.^{vii} As in Russia, it is unlikely that steps taken to prevent distribution of the novel did anything to prevent its circulation, or to hinder its popularity – the reputation of the book as illicit reading probably only added to Tolstoy's appeal and to his readership.

The debate on The Kreutzer Sonata can be traced in reviews and responses in print, through counter-literature that directly engaged with the story, and through the personal responses that readers wrote to Tolstoy. The author's high profile conversion and his controversial but appealing philosophy meant he was inundated with correspondence in the 1880s and 1890s. Letters streamed in from readers asking for advice, agonizing over their own personal dilemmas, adding their perspective,

recommending their own work or the work of others, admonishing or correcting him. In the aftermath of The Kreutzer Sonata many of these letters described the correspondents' own marriages or relationships, asked for clarification of Tolstoy's views, or described the relief or revulsion they had felt upon reading his novella.^{viii}

Perhaps ironically, one of the first to break the ban on discussion of The Kreutzer Sonata in print was a senior figure in the Orthodox Church, Archbishop Nikanor of Kherson. Nikanor regarded censorship of Tolstoy as largely pointless, and preferred a robust and public defence of the Church's position. His Conversation on Christian Marriage refuted the idea that Pozdnyshv's marriage was typical, and asserted that good, Christian marriage was widely practiced in Russia. He used the royal family as the ultimate example. Peter Ulf Møller identifies three main strands in the Russian debate: firstly those, like Nikanor, who launched a defence of the 'Christian marriage', and saw Pozdnyshv's marriage (or Pozdnyshv himself) as unusual or unnatural; secondly, those liberals and progressives who used The Kreutzer Sonata to argue for equality in marriage, for equal status and education for women, and for marriage based on a community of ideas and interests; and thirdly, those who argued for chastity before marriage. Some engaged with Tolstoy's advocacy of chastity, principally to refute it, but many simply used the story as a starting point for their own opinions on sex, marriage and the relationship between the sexes. This was also true abroad. The publication of an article by Tolstoy 'On Marriage' in the British Christian journal The New Age in 1897 generated a storm of correspondence from clergymen and lay men and women alike, defending or critiquing the institution of marriage, noting the value of Tolstoy's contribution, but rarely agreeing with all his conclusions.^{ix}

The Kreutzer Sonata generated a range of counter-literature, in Russia and abroad. While many of these texts were polemics, others simply used the story's popularity as a means of generating sales. There were many attempts to end the story differently, or to tell it from the wife's point of view. In one instance Pozdnyshev's wife survives and flees to a nunnery in England, where she confesses all to a monk who turns out to be her ex-lover Trukhachevsky. Some stories missed the point entirely: in D. N. Goltizin's Thou Shalt Not Kill, the author contests what he understands to be Tolstoy's assertion that a man has the right to kill his adulterous wife.^x Mrs James Gregor, in Whose Was the Blame? A Woman's Version of the Kreutzer Sonata, cast the Trukhachevsky character as a good and moral man, where Pozdnyshev was small-minded and jealous: the principal character points out how different her story might look if her husband were to have written it.^{xi} Gerhardt von Amyntor's Ciss-Moll Sonata, published in Leipzig in 1891, sought to demonstrate the damaging impact of Tolstoy's work. In this tale, a reading of The Kreutzer Sonata persuades the husband to remain chaste towards his wife, against her wishes. The story ends with him killing her would-be lover; a scenario that could have been avoided were it not for the malign influence of Tolstoy's book. The Tolstoy family also contributed their own additions to the counter-literature: Sofia through her unpublished manuscript Who is to Blame: A Woman's Story, based heavily on the Tolstoys' marriage, in which a self-absorbed, womanizing husband neglects his beautiful and hardworking wife, not realizing her value until he has killed her in a fit of jealousy; and their son Lev L'vovich in his Chopin's Prelude (1900), which both of his parents dismissed as talentless, if sincere.^{xiii}

Because of its notoriety, The Kreutzer Sonata provided a focus for discussion of established and developing attitudes to sex, marriage, and gender relations.

However, at a time when demands for political and social equality were gathering momentum across Europe, Tolstoy's attitude to patriarchy was a curious combination of the radical and the retrograde. He condemned marriage as an institution that licensed the sexual exploitation of women. Yet he encouraged women to embrace domestic duties rather than seeking to be liberated from them. Tolstoy's writings on sex and marriage were just one dimension of a wider series of Christian anarchist polemics, in which he advocated a return to manual labour, and denounced all forms of coercion. Even amongst Tolstoy's Christian anarchist followers, the author's attitudes to women, sex and marriage were controversial. Their refusal to acknowledge church or state meant that many Tolstoyans rejected marriage ceremonies, and entered into 'free unions' instead. The making and breaking of these unsanctioned arrangements led critics outside and within the movement to accuse them of being dissolute rather than chaste. For female followers of Tolstoy, his rejection of the women's movement was a source of great frustration.^{xiii} In society more widely, few commentators took The Kreutzer Sonata's central message – the ideal of chastity – seriously. The novella became the centre of a debate in which many points of view were articulated, but Tolstoy's key concerns were often lost. Tolstoy's blunt exposure of the inequalities inherent in marriage proved a powerful source of fuel for these discussions, but his emphasis on duties, rather than rights, sat uncomfortably within contemporary debates about patriarchy.

ⁱ 'The Kreutzer Sonata', in Leo Tolstoy, The Devil and Cognate Tales (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 136, pp. 206-7. Subsequent page references to this edition are made in brackets within the text.

-
- ⁱⁱ Amy Mandelker, Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question and the Victorian Novel (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1993), p. 32.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Leo Tolstoy, What Then Must We Do? (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 352.
- ^{iv} Ernest Crosby's Russian Journal, Box 4, MS218, Michigan State University Library.
- ^v The Diaries of Sofia Tolstoy, transl. Cathy Porter (London: Alma Books, 2009), p. 117.
- ^{vi} Peter Ulf Møller, Postlude to the Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoj and the Debate on Sexual Morality in Russian Literature in the 1890s (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1988), pp. 93-4.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 115-27.
- ^{ix} Leo Tolstoy, 'On Marriage', The New Age, 16 December 1897, pp. 173-4. See also The New Age for 23 December 1897, 30 December 1897, and 6 January 1898.
- ^x Prince Galitzen, 'Thou Shalt Do No Murder', in Mrs James Gregor (ed.), Whose Was the Blame? A Woman's Version of the Kreutzer Sonata (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1894), pp. 3-47.
- ^{xi} Gregor, Whose Was the Blame?, pp. 51-174.
- ^{xii} Møller, Postlude, p. 177-180. For a survey of 'counter-literature' see *ibid.*, pp. 163-180.
- ^{xiii} Charlotte Alston, Tolstoy and his Disciples: the History of a Radical International Movement (London: I B Tauris, 2013), pp. 180-87.