

WAS LEV TOLSTOY A SEXIST OR A MODERN MAN? THE *KREUTZER SONATA* AS AN EXAMPLE OF TOLSTOY'S LATE MORALITY

This article will discuss whether Tolstoy was a sexist or not. This will be done during a look at the heroes of his later novella The Kreutzer Sonata. An analysis of the women figures in the novella will show, that the women are very strong and emancipated figures on the contrary to the male figures. To solve the question if Tolstoy was a sexist or not the development of the key motifs «women» and «family» should be seen from the earlier works till the later works of Tolstoy.

Key words: women, gender, Kreutzer Sonata, family, motif.

В статье рассматривается вопрос, был ли Лев Толстой сексистом, на материале анализа персонажей «Крейцеровой сонаты» – произведения, которое относится к позднему периоду творчества писателя. Герои повести изображены сильными и эмансипированными женщинами, в то время как мужчины проявляют слабость и несамостоятельность. Для углубленного осмысления гендерной проблематики произведения отдельное внимание уделяется сопоставлению мотивов «женщина» и «семья» в ранних и поздних текстах Толстого.

Ключевые слова: женщина, гендер, Крейцера соната, семья, мотив.

У статті розглянуто питання, чи був Лев Толстой сексистом, на матеріалі аналізу персонажів «Крейцерової сонати», яка належить до пізнього періоду творчості письменника. Героїні повісті зображені сильними й емансипованими жінками, тоді як чоловіки проявляють слабкість і несамостійність. Для поглибленого осмислення гендерної проблематики твору окрему увагу приділено зіставленню мотивів «жінка» і «сім'я» у ранніх та пізніх текстах Л. Толстого.

Ключові слова: жінка, гендер, Крейцера соната, сім'я, мотив.

0. Introduction

The *Kreutzer Sonata*, written in 1887 by Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, refers to the music composition by Ludwig van Beethoven, which is also called *Kreutzer Sonata*. The novella is by far the most controversial story written by Tolstoy, because often it is called sexist [1, p. 128], misogynistic, Elisaveta Andreeva called it a «povest-pamflet» [8, p. 171] and Vladimir Porudominskiy said, that «Tolstoy protiv braka, sem'i, detorozhdeniya, eshche bole togo – «konets sveta» propoveduet» [2, p. 131]. Knowles called the *Kreutzer Sonata* «[...] the most controversy of all Tolstoy's books [...]» [3, p. 33]. The *Kreutzer Sonata* gained public attention because «it was discussed whether these problems were of moral nature and to be solved by a change of attitude in the individual, or whether they were of a political nature and to be solved by a social reform» [7, Introduction XII]. Also at the present time the *Kreutzer Sonata* is a current topic of literature scientists. Dudina explains that, because «[...] chto vse v etoy povesti vazhno dlya chitatelya, zhivushchego uzhe v znachitel'no izmenibshikhsya zhiznennykh realiyakh, otноsheniya mezhdu polami [...]» [9, 196]. Some even called Tolstoy a sexist, because they thought that the author himself had the meaning of Pozdnyshev, the main character of the *Kreutzer Sonata*.

This article will discuss the gender aspects of the *Kreutzer Sonata*. In which way is the *Kreutzer Sonata* sexist? The title does not indicate, that at the end of this article there will be a conclusion about Tolstoy – whether he was sexist or not – but rather whether the *Kreutzer Sonata* is misogynistic and what we can learn from the novella about the Russian author. The article's focus will be the two female figures of the novella.

1. The development of Tolstoy's ideas

Tolstoy is best known for his realistic novels such as *War and Peace* (1863) and *Anna Karenina* (1876). But in the late 1870s Tolstoy began to think more and more about religion and the sense of life. His late work is characterized by morality. Between the years 1878 and 1885 he wrote many theoretical and didactical works. His morality which is very strong in his later novels is based on his own Christianity. Tolstoy moved back to Yasnaya Polyana and in his theoretical works, criticized the Orthodox church and Russian society at that time. He also developed a new perspective on marriage and family that can be seen in the *Kreutzer Sonata*. Before the *Kreutzer Sonata* and its main characters are discussed, a short introduction about the controversy describing the *Kreutzer Sonata* is necessary.

2. The controversy about the *Kreutzer Sonata*

As shown in the introduction, the *Kreutzer Sonata* was called sexist and misogynistic. In this chapter the reasons for these opinions should be shown.

The discussions were not about the content itself. The plot is indeed very simple: A man murders his wife because he thinks she has an affair with a musician. Pozdnyshev is the murderer who tells other travelers in a train coach the history of his life and marriage. He didn't love his wife while marrying her. He was a very primitive man who thought just about sexuality when meeting a woman. Pozdnyshev and his wife were very unhappy in the marriage, they had children but the marriage was rather more an arrangement than love. After the health of his wife became very instable after giving birth to a child, the couple shouldn't have more children, leading to the prohibition of sexuality. The wife became more beautiful; she developed several hobby's such as playing the piano. With a befriended musician she plays at a house concert the *Kreutzer Sonata*, that seems to Pozdnyshev like a sexual act. In his angry agony about the supposedly betrayal of his wife he kills her with a dagger. Afterwards he was acquitted of the charges for the murder of his wife. As shown above, the plot itself was not very spectacular. Pozdnyshev indeed expresses himself in a very radical way.

3. The sexist men – the old merchant as an example of the Moscovistic-Russia

The old merchant is an example for the sexist and misogynistic opinions of men in the novella. He is patriarchal and traditional. The main point in his line of reasoning is that education is harmful for women. The whole women question, all problems in marriage are just because women are educated and know their rights. Also in his opinion the education of women is the reason for adultery. Women would leave their husbands just because they are emancipated. In the Moskovistic Russia that was unimaginable.

From the merchant's point of view marriage is built on subjugation. »A v zhenshchie pervoe delo strakh dolzhen byt'» [4, p. 119]. A marriage is not connected to love and is a rational connection between two people, probably arranged by the parents. The merchant is sure that relations between the sexes will never change. A woman will always stand under a man. This fact is already justified in the Bible in Genesis 2.21/22, when God creates Adam out of a rib of Eve. The merchant refers to that Bible quote and uses the quote to give a reason for hierarchy between the sexes. The conversation itself is also very important to characterize the behavior of men and women. The merchant is very brusque and not respectful. He was raised with this misogynistic opinion and is not in trim to change his attitude. He even compares a woman to a horse by saying «ne ver' loshadi v pole, a zhene v dome» [4, p. 119]. Nineteenth century Russia was influenced by the *Domostroy*, an old book of household rules. This book was originally written in the 16th century but had influence on people (mostly on the countryside) until the 19th century. The other travellers name the old merchant as «a real *Domostroy*» which symbolizes the traditional view of marriage of the old merchant. It would be too much to characterize the whole

Domostroj but some points should be shown. The *Domostroy* is divided into 67 chapters and builds a line from God to the head of household. God is the highest authority, He rules everything underneath Him. The Russian Zsar is the authority for the country who should make clear that his orders are followed through the whole country. The smallest authority is the head of household, the husband, who is God and Zsar at home, who makes sure that the rules by the two high authorities are kept inside of the house. The head of house is the only one who has the right to decide what should be done at home. The book contains very certain rules of behavior at home, rules for every family member and almost every situation. The head of house is the one who has the right to speak to others, he represents the house to outside. The woman stays at home, guards the children and maids and has for example not the right to chat to other women. If she is not familiar with something she should ask her husband. This very small look onto the *Domostroi* already shows the positions between the sexes in the 19th century. The husband represents the house, the woman stays at home and makes sure, that the household is working. The views of the old merchant are exactly taken from the *Domostroy*. It is because of those opinions in the *Kreutzer Sonata* according to Ilma Rakusa, that the ex-cathedra conviction of women is rather grotesque in the late work of Tolstoy [5, p. 36]. Just because of her sex the woman is an inferior human being.

4. The strong women – the initial stages of the modern Tolstoy?

As described above, Tolstoy in his later years was a very strict man who had a very severe system of rules which he tried to maintain. In this section the role of the women figures of the novella will be analyzed. First should be examined the woman in the train who argued with the old merchant. Secondly the wife of Pozdnyshev will be described. Both women seem to be the only female figures in the novella which is why they are so important for the gender aspect of the *Kreutzer Sonata*. In the following characterization the focus will be on the portrayal of the women in the novella. Their appearance will be as important as their actions.

a. The woman at the train

As described above, the arguing on the train is very important for the whole plot. As the ignition of the storytelling of Pozdnyshev the arguing was about marriage and divorce. The woman (her name is never said) discusses with a lawyer the rights of women and men. After the opinions of the old merchant, already shown above, the woman can be seen as modern. The woman is the only lady in the train coach. She is described negatively with the following words: «mekrasnaia i nemolodaia dama [...] s isuchennym litsom» [4, p. 115]. She is constantly smoking and is dressed like a man (i.e. unfeminine), maybe because she wants to be treated like a man. She debates very vivaciously with the old merchant and explains her opinions about marriage and love in detail. In the following lines will be shown why she represents the progressive woman and how the conflict modernism against tradition is solved. First of all her opinions are very unlike traditional ones. The woman expresses that

education is essential for woman. The existing oppression of women could, according to her, just be solved by increasing education among women. If women could know and defend their rights, they wouldn't be the slaves of their husbands. She is sure that «uzh eto vremia proshlo» [4, p. 118]. In contradiction to the opinions of the merchant she doesn't want to marry someone she never saw before (which was tradition at that time). For her not the parents are responsible to arrange a marriage but the spouses themselves. Love is the main motif for a marriage to her. The main point of her argument is the following question: «Nu da kak zhe zhit' s chelovekom, kogda ljubvi net?» [4, p. 118].

Her argument is logical but she loses the argument because of her nonverbal communication. Her whole appearance signals a lack of assurance. She smiles when she asks questions as if she doesn't want to seem brusque (like the old merchant), but wants to seem nice. That smiling she can't get through the old merchant with that. The merchant looks down on the woman and doesn't ask her questions. Desperately she tries to «win» the argument.

Another reason for the failure of the woman is the lack of support inside of the train coach. As described above there were several persons in the coach: The old merchant, the woman, Pozdnyshev, the narrator, the lawyer and a clerk. The arguing woman stands alone and has to defend herself alone. Later, when the old merchant got off the coach, they support her view by grumbling about the merchant. During the actual argument, they were too shy and feared to interfere. The merchant had the silent majority on his side. The argument was won by the traditional side but remarkably, and the reason why the woman's opinion is relevant here – her courage to revolt against the existing injustice. Bluntly she stands for the emancipation of women. Her aim is a marriage with equal spouses which makes her the opposite of the traditional merchant. She wants to be treated seriously and has to dress therefore like a man. Her resistance is small but exists.

b. The wife of Pozdnyshev

To describe the wife of Pozdnyshev is quite difficult because personally she is not present but is indirectly described by Pozdnyshev.

The first meeting of Pozdnyshev and his wife can be taken as a symbol of their whole marriage: Pozdnyshev is sitting next to her and he likes her waist and her locks. His wife is for Pozdnyshev not a real person to talk to for him but more a person he can have sex with and who gives birth to his children. His opinion of marriage before the murder will be shown after this section. Pozdnyshev's wife is very unhappy within the marriage. She raised five children and has to function as wife and mother. But then comes the change. After giving birth to their fifth child, her doctor forbids her to have any further children. This is the moment when she flourishes. She blooms like a woman. Concentrating on her private life, her free time and her interests, she begins to play the piano. With the ban of having children, sexuality is a taboo between the spouses. Pozdnyshev's wife is no longer under his control. Pozdnyshev dislikes her new way of living. He wants her to be his wife, to be sexually available to him

but she focuses on her own life. The murder happens because she plays the *Kreutzer Sonata* with another musician. This musician is an old friend of Pozdnyshev. Pozdnyshev comes home, sees the coat of the musician and for him the adultery of his wife is clear. He enters the room – and she is looking disappointed at him. This is the whole plot of the murder.

Pozdnyshev's wife is not committing adultery. Pozdnyshev's ideas and imaginations are wrong. She is a trustworthy wife and responsive mother and before she dies she tells him to give the children to her sister, out of the range of Pozdnyshev. She wins over him. That makes her to a very strong figure in the novella. A summary of Pozdnyshev's idea of marriage and family life before and after the murder will justify the discussion around the *Kreutzer Sonata*.

5. Pozdnyshev's idea of marriage before the murder

Pozdnyshev's woman is a typical representative of the privileged class. She is well-educated and has been at university. Pozdnyshev thinks not very much about that, since for him the education of a woman depends on the meaning of the men [4, p. 147]. Men define how women have to be, emancipation is not existent, in Pozdnyshev's meaning. And Pozdnyshev's opinion before the marriage was very superficial. He saw his future wife and liked her appearance, her locks and her waist. The woman is reduced to physical marks. Pozdnyshev is incapable of having a friendship with women because he doesn't consider them equal. He would never talk with a woman about politics or current social events, even if she would be educated enough. Pozdnyshev thinks of women as enjoyment, as for example status of the Venus. Women are an object to satisfy the needs of men, like alcohol or tobacco. The man chooses when he needs the woman. The whole situation is, according to Pozdnyshev, not just men's fault. Girls are raised to please; they wear tight clothes and jewels, to get a man's attention. The man chooses his future wife like on a bazaar, like she would be a kind of ware. According to Pozdnyshev the only aim of a young woman is to please men. To be a good catch for men, the women dress corsets and making their locks. In the whole marriage process the male is the active one because he chooses the woman. The aimed emancipation of the women is for Pozdnyshev just superficial because in bed women will always remain an enjoyment, that will not change during the emancipation process. The social emancipation of women would not exist in privacy. The opinions and thoughts of a women don't matter.

Pozdnyshev's main point is the difference in raising of men and women at the point of sexuality. Men are raised to sexual freedom while women are raised to sexual virginity before marriage. That fact gives men the right to have as many premarital affairs as they wish to have. The tasks within the marriage are very clearly defined, according to Pozdnyshev. The duty of the wife is to giving birth to children and to be sexually available for the husband. This duty is set and can't be changed. While the man is having enjoyment in his marriage, the wife has the task to obey without question. Pozdnyshev doesn't care about his wife, she doesn't matter to him as a person. She has a duty to fulfill and she is replaceable for him as wife and woman. It seems to be strange that at the time of

the murder Pozdnyshv and his wife had known each other for eight years but he tells the narrator that his wife is a stranger for him. He never says her name. She gets exchangeable with that.

To summarize Pozdnyshv's opinions before the murder, it can be said that his idea of marriage was very traditional and patriarchal. Women are the property of men and are used to satisfy their needs. An emancipation of this set role seems to be impossible, because a woman is defined by the men and under his influence. Love is more connected with sexuality than with emotions.

6. Pozdnyshv's idea of marriage after the murder

After the murder of his wife, the idea of marriage and the gender roles change basically for Pozdnyshv. He considers sexuality as negative and even dangerous, because a woman wants to seduce a man to have sex with her. Sexuality, and here the moral concept of the later Tolstoy can be found, is degrading. Women are instruments of the devil, to degrade men moralistically [6, p. 370]. Pozdnyshv calls sexuality «stydno», «gadko» and «zhalko» [4, p. 138]. Sexuality is desecration of women, a crime.

Those meanings seem to be difficult for Pozdnyshv. In section six it was shown that Pozdnyshv was a selfish man before the marriage who used women for his satisfaction like tools. Now Pozdnyshv argues as strict as he did to the contrary before. Sexuality is an addiction like alcohol or tobacco. It damages body and soul of a human being and spoils the one who is addicted. Hugh McLean summarizes that with the following words: «The *Kreutzer Sonata* represents human sexuality itself as intrinsically evil» [10, p. 210]. Before the murder Pozdnyshv denies love but approves sexuality, after the murder its quite to the contrary: He approves love but denies sexuality. Love is, according to him, theory, sexuality on the contrary practice, which is, as shown above, degrading. Love on the contrary is illustrious and ideal. This love is for Pozdnyshv the ideal people should strive to. He even wants to build a whole society on love, a society which would live in chastity.

7. How can the sexes live equally?

The whole argument of Pozdnyshv leads to the very important question: How can the sexes live equally? The view of Pozdnyshv corresponds with the later Tolstoy's one: The sexes will be equal when they live in chastity. That should be explained in the following section. Pozdnyshv voices his opposition against sexuality and children which seems to be strange because he is a father of five children. In his marriage the children are used like weapons between the parents. Every parent has his favorite child. The wife gets her revenge by sending the children to her sister outside of the range of Pozdnyshv. Pozdnyshv wants to tell his children about his ideas of chastity but he is allowed to see them just several hours. In his opinion, they will be raised as he was and they will become what he became – victims of sexuality. One of the main problems in Pozdnyshv's argumentation is that he derives his whole argument from his marriage. He had an unlucky marriage; he doesn't like children and that's why everyone should live in chastity without children. In his opinion everyone has such an unlucky marriage and such a trouble at home like he does. He sees himself as

the man who discovered the truth and has to tell his theory to everyone. His lack of competence to judge over everybody is obvious, because he is very self fixated. His idea of chastity though cannot be considered practicable. The main idea is that a man and a woman live together without sexuality (in chastity). With this chastity equality between the sexes will be reached, because, as shown above, women are treated like an object. If sexuality would disappear, they were equal to men, so much for the idea. In practice that idea doesn't work because women were not as educated as men. Pozdnyshv doesn't talk with his wife about politics, he doesn't treat her like a human being. Even if sexuality would disappear and they would live in chastity, they wouldn't be equal. By the way, if everyone would live in chastity, it would be the end of mankind. But Pozdnyshv doesn't care about that aspect of his theory, because the theory is morally acceptable and will make the mankind better.

8. The narrator, the author and Pozdnyshv

Some marks of the composition of the *Kreutzer Sonata* should be done. It is not just the division into two parts what is important to understand the novella. We have a very special situation in the *Sonata*: The narrator tells us what Pozdnyshv tells him. That means we just have the view of Pozdnyshv who retells his life from the age of 16. The retelling of Pozdnyshv means that we just see his side of the story. Maybe the history went another way? We never know. Pozdnyshv tells just what led him to the murder, nothing more about his life or history. The view of his wife is not possible because she is already dead.

The style of telling his history can be called as a warning to other people not to make the same mistakes as he did. The structure of the novella is typical for Tolstoy later works, he begins to tell the end. Pozdnyshv first words are the confession that he killed his wife and after that he tells the history before the murder (similar as in *Smert' Ivana Il'icha*, where Tolstoy begins with the dead and retells afterwards the life of Ivan Il'ich).

There is no exposition in the novella, the reader gets right into the story. Pozdnyshv does not miss any detail of the description. He is at the same time the narrator and the main actor of the scene. He retells the story while analyzing himself and the society around him.

9. Conclusion

The article's main aim was to discuss the gender aspect of the *Kreutzer Sonata*. The *Kreutzer Sonata* was one of the last novellas of Tolstoy and is often considered as sexist. The article showed that this view is justified. The old merchant is sexist and against women. He has the silent majority on his side in the discussion. Also Pozdnyshv's view of the marriage before the murder was very misogynistic. Remarkable are the two women figures in the novella. As shown are there two very strong women in the novella who both have no name. The woman in the train argues against the merchant, she falls out of her role of the silent woman and wants to emancipate herself. Pozdnyshv's wife wants to become a self dominated woman and gets outside the influence of her husband. When the men next to them are characterized it is obvious that the women are the stronger figures while men seem to be the traditional and weak ones. As was described the

wife of Pozdnyshev never committed an adultery. The death of his wife is very illustrious and shows her as a dignified person. Pozdnyshev on the contrary pulled out his shoes, murders her and runs in socks through the house. Next to her he appears to be a ridiculous figure.

The murder happened because Pozdnyshev's role as a man was offended against his honor. The strong and decisive role of the husband as head of the household was weakened because of the rival. Because of the negative experiences in his marriage and with the children he developed the idea of chastity.

Tolstoy does not judge Pozdnyshev or his wife for what they did. The history of Pozdnyshev can be seen as a warning or an example what happens within a marriage if both spouses act like society wants them to. Here can be seen Tolstoy's morality: He shows a small story, a relationship between two people, but makes at the same time sure that the whole society acts like that. He comes from the small to the big, from private to general. The composition of the novella is similar to a drama, which brings Elisaveta Andreeva to say, that «Esli by zdes' ne bylo kommentiruyushchikh fras rasskazchika, publitsisticheskikh otstuplenniy, to možno bylo by chitat' ikh kak dramaticheskie dialogi na stsenie» [8, p. 178].

In the epilogue of the *Kreutzer Sonata* Tolstoy himself makes clear, that he detests sexuality outside the marriage. Men would often have sexual relations (even they are recommended to do so by society and doctors), that perishes women, morally and bodily. Above all things unmarried men are allowed to have as many relationships with women as they wish which spoils the

women. The women have the burden to deal with the unborn child; men stay outside of any responsibility. Tolstoy himself hated carnal love in his later years, as shown above. The expression of that is Pozdnyshev's view. Pozdnyshev can be considered as the voice of the later Tolstoy. Many similarities between the marriage of Pozdnyshev and his wife and the marriage of Lev Tolstoy and Sofya Andreevna Tolstaya are obvious. Sofya Tolstaya wrote an «answer» to the *Kreutzer Sonata Who's to blame* (ch'ya vina?) which has a similar plot. Tolstoy and his wife also had the same starting situation like Pozdnyshev and his wife had. They had children but in a certain point of the marriage she was not allowed to have any more children. Sophia Tolstaya started to play the piano and therefore she hired a musician. Many people took the *Kreutzer Sonata* as a novel about the marriage of the Tolstoy's. Answering the original question posed in the title, Tolstoy is not a sexist. The young Tolstoy was influenced by the morality of the time. A woman had to stay at home and to guard the children. The later Tolstoy struggled with this morality, especially after he created his own religion. Hugh McLean even means, that «the origin of these grooves [that means the sexual crimes committed by men against women in the novellas *The Devil*, *Father Sergius* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*] no doubt lay deep in Tolstoy's past» [10, p. 72] which should be the reason for many literary scientist to call Tolstoy a sexist. The article showed that the later moral Tolstoy hated sexuality and preached chastity. If we can call him a sexist or not should be the topic of another article.

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