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The Kreutzer Sonata

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy



The Kreutzer Sonata

Author(s): Tolstoy, Leo Nikolayevich (1828-1910)

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Description: Although now considered one of Tolstoy's best shorter stories, Russian authorities censored *The Kreutzer Sonata* after its publication in 1889. Similarly, other countries including the United States had banned the book's translations. The story concerns Pozdnyshev, a cynical young man overcome by passion, rage, and jealousy. The author plumbs the innermost depths of Pozdnyshev's crumbling mind; the callousness of that mind and its intentions can be profoundly unsettling. Tolstoy explains in the story's epilogue, however, that the downfall of the twisted Pozdnyshev serves only to show how carnal lust destroys lives. While all readers acknowledge the story's genius, its intended message of ascetic abstinence remains controversial. G.K. Chesterton, for example, wrote that "Tolstoy is not content with pitying humanity for its pains: such as poverty and prisons. He also pities humanity for its pleasures, such as music and patriotism. He weeps at the thought of hatred; but in *The Kreutzer Sonata* he weeps almost as much at the thought of love."

Kathleen O'Bannon
CCEL Staff

Subjects: Slavic
Russian. White Russian. Ukrainian

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EPILOGUE TO THE KREUTZER SONATA

by Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

1890

In the translation by Professor Leo Wiener

1904

I have received many letters from strangers asking me to explain in simple and clear words what I think of the subject of the story which I wrote under the title of the *Kreutzer Sonata*. I shall try to do so, that is, in a few words to express, so far as is possible, the essence of what I had intended to convey by my story, and of the conclusions at which one may arrive from it.

I wanted to say, *in the first place*, that in our society there has formed itself a firm conviction, common to all classes and supported by the false science, that sexual intercourse is necessary for health, and that, since marriage is not always possible, sexual intercourse outside of matrimony, which does not put men under any other obligations than that of monetary payment, is quite natural and worthy of emulation. this conviction has become so general and deep-rooted that parents, by the advice of doctors, arrange debauchery for their children; governments, whose only meaning consists in the care for the moral well-being of its citizens, establish debauchery, that is, regulate a whole class of women, who are to perish bodily and morally, in order to satisfy the imaginary needs of men, while unmarried men abandon themselves to this debauchery with the calmest conscience.

And so I wanted to say that this is not good, because it is not right that for the sake of the health of one class of people it should be necessary to ruin the bodies and souls of another class, just as it is not right that for the sake of health of one class of people it should be necessary to drink the blood of others.

The natural conclusion from this, it seems to me, is that it is not good to submit to this delusion and deception. And, in order not to submit, it is necessary, in the first place, not to believe in this immoral doctrine, no matter by what imaginary science it may be supported, and in the second, to understand that such sexual intercourse, where people free themselves from its possible consequences, from children, or shift the whole burden of these consequences to the woman, or prevent the possibility of childbirth, — that such sexual intercourse is a transgression of the simplest requirement of morality, that it is base, and that, therefore, unmarried men, who do not wish to live basely, must not do it.

But, in order to be able to abstain, they must, in addition, lead a natural life, not drink, not stuff themselves, not eat mean, and not avoid labour (I do not mean gymnastics, nor play, but fatiguing labour); they must not permit themselves to think of the possibility of intercourse with strange women, just as all men exclude the possibility of intercourse between themselves and their mothers, sisters, relatives, and the wives of their friends.

Any man may find a hundred proofs about him that continence is possible and less dangerous and injurious to him than non-continence.

So much in the first place.

Secondly, that in our society, on account of the current view in regard to carnal love as not only a necessary condition of health and as a pleasure, but also as a poetical, exalted

good of life, marital infidelity has become in all strata of society (especially among the peasants, thanks to militarism) a most common phenomenon.

I assume that this is not good. The conclusion which springs from it is that one ought not to do it.

But, in order not to do it, it is necessary for the view in regard to carnal love to change. Men and women ought to be educated in their homes and by public opinion to look, before and after marriage, on infatuation and the carnal love connected with it, not as upon a poetical and exalted condition, such as it is now considered to be, but as upon an animal condition, degrading to man; it is necessary that the violation of a promise of fidelity, given at marriage, should be punished by public opinion certainly in no lesser degree than are punished the violations of monetary obligations and mercantile frauds, and that it should not be extolled, as it is now, in novels, poetry, songs, operas, etc.

So much in the second place.

Thirdly, that in our society, again on account of the false meaning which is ascribed to carnal love, the procreation of children has lost its purpose, and, instead of being the aim and justification of marital relations, has become a hindrance in the pleasant continuation of amatory relations; that, therefore, outside of wedlock and in wedlock, there has begun to spread, at the advice of the servants of the medical science, the use of means depriving women of the possibility of childbirth, or there has arisen a custom, a habit (that which had not been before and even now is not found in patriarchal peasant families) of continuing the conjugal relations during pregnancy and nursing. I assume that this is not good.

It is not good to use means preventive of childbirth, in the first place, because people are thus relieved of cares and labours in regard to children, who serve as a redemption of carnal love, and, in the second, because it comes very near to the act which is most repulsive to a human conscience, to murder. Nor is non-continnence during pregnancy and nursing good, because it is destructive of the physical, and still more of the mental, powers of woman. The conclusion which springs from this is that it is not good to do it. But, in order not to do it, it must be understood that continence, which forms a necessary condition of human dignity in the single state, is still more binding in marriage.

So much in the third place.

Fourthly, that in our society, where children appear as a hindrance to enjoyment, or as an unfortunate accident, or as a peculiar kind of enjoyment, when there are borne a predetermined number of them, these children are brought up, not in conformity with the problems of human existence, with which they will be confronted as sensible and loving beings, but only in conformity with those pleasures which they may afford their parents. In consequence of this, the children of human beings are brought up like the young of animals, so that the chief problem of the parents does not consist in preparing them for an activity which would be worthy of man, but (in which view the parents are supported by the false

science called medicine) in feeding them as well as possible, in increasing their stature, in making them clean, white, beautiful (if this is not done in the lower classes, the fault is that of circumstances, for the view there held is the same). In these pampered children, as in all overfed animals, there is early developed an unnatural and insuperable sensuality, which is the cause of terrible suffering for these children in their youth. The attire, the reading, the shows, the music, the dances, the sweet food, the whole circumstance of life, from the pictures on the boxes to the novels, stories, and poems, — everything still more fans this sensuality, and in consequence of this, the most terrible sexual vices and diseases become the usual conditions of the bringing up of children of both sexes, and frequently remain so through manhood.

I assume that this is not good. The conclusion which may be drawn from it is that we must stop bringing up the children of men like the young of animals, and that other aims must be kept in view in the bringing up of children besides a beautiful, well-kept body.

So much for the fourth place.

Fifthly, that in our society infatuation between a young man and a young woman, which has, after all, carnal love at its base, has been exalted into the highest poetical aim of human tendencies, to which all the art and poetry of our society bear witness. The best part of young people's lives are passed, by men, in discovering and taking possession of the best objects of love in the form of love-affairs or of marriage, and by women and girls, in alluring and drawing men into love-affairs or marriage.

Thus the best powers of people are wasted not only on unproductive, but even on dangerous, work. From this originates the greater part of the senseless luxury of our life; from this comes the indolence of men and the shamelessness of women, who do not disdain the fashions which are borrowed from notoriously debauched women, and which lay bare and accentuate the parts of the body that provoke sensuality.

I assume that this is not good.

It is not good because the attainment of the aim of being united in wedlock or of being outside of wedlock with the object of love, however much extolled by poetry it may be, is unworthy of man, just as the aim of obtaining sweet and superabundant food, which presents itself to many as the highest good, is unworthy of man.

The conclusion to which we may arrive from this is that we must cease thinking that carnal love is something peculiarly exalted; we must come to understand that the aim which is worthy of man is to serve humanity, his country, science, or art (let alone serving God), whatever it may be, as long as it is worthy of man, and that this aim is not attained through a union with the object of love in wedlock or outside of wedlock, but that, on the contrary, infatuation and union with the object of love (however much the opposite may be attempted to be proved in poetry and prose) never makes the attainment of the aim which is worthy of man any easier, but always impedes it.

So much in the fifth place.

These are the essentials which I wished to express, and which, I think, I have expressed in my story. It seemed to me that there might be a difference of opinion as to how the evil to which these propositions point may be mended, but that it was impossible not to admit their truth. It seemed to me that it was not possible to deny the truth of these propositions, in the first place, because they are entirely in agreement with the progress of humanity, which has always marched from looseness of morals to an ever increasing chastity, and with the moral consciousness of society, with our conscience, which always condemns looseness of morals and values chastity; and, in the second place, because these propositions are the inevitable deductions from the teaching of the Gospel, which we profess, or, at least, even though it be only unconsciously, assume as the basis for our ideas of morality.

But it has turned out quite differently.

Nobody, it is true, directly disputes the proposition that debauchery should not be practiced, either before or after marriage, that it is wrong artificially to destroy childbirth, that children are not to be made playthings, and that amatory union ought not to be placed higher than anything else, — in short, nobody denies that chastity is better than looseness of morals. But they say: “If the single state is better than wedlock, then people ought evidently to do that which is better. But, if people do that, then the human race will come to an end, and therefore the destruction of the human race cannot be its ideal.” Yet, not to mention the fact that the destruction of the human race is not a new conception for the people of this world, being a dogma of faith with the religious people and for the scientific men an inevitable deduction from the observations in regard to the sun’s congealment, — there is in this expression a great, wide-spread, and old misunderstanding. They say: “If people will reach the ideal of complete chastity, they will be destroyed, and therefore the ideal is wrong.” But those who say so purposely or unwittingly mix up two different things, — a precept and an ideal.

Chastity is not a rule or a precept, but an ideal, or, more correctly, one of its conditions. An ideal is only then an ideal when its realization is possible in the idea only, in thought, when it presents itself as attainable only at infinity, and when, therefore, the approach to it is infinite. If an ideal were not only attainable, but we could imagine its realization, it would cease to be an ideal. Such is Christ’s ideal, the establishment of the kingdom of God upon earth, — an ideal which had been foretold even by the prophets when they said that the time would come when the people would be instructed by God, when the swords would be forged into ploughshares and the spears into sickles, when the lion would lie with the lamb, when all the creatures would be united in love. The whole meaning of human life consists in a motion toward this ideal, and therefore the striving after the Christian ideal, in all its entirety, and after chastity, as one of the conditions of this ideal, not only does not exclude the pos-

sibility of life, but, on the contrary, the absence of this Christian ideal would destroy all movement forward and, consequently, all possibility of life.

The reflection that the human race would come to an end if people should with all their power tend toward chastity resembles that other reflection which might be made (and it is made), that the human race will perish if people, instead of struggling for existence, should with all their power tend to the realization of love for their neighbour, for their enemies, for all living beings. Such reflections spring from the inability to distinguish between two rules of moral guidance.

Just as there are two ways for indicating the road to a traveller, even thus there are two ways for moral guidance in the case of a man who is seeking the truth. One way consists in indicating to the man the objects which he will come across, and then he is guided by these objects.

The other way consists in giving the man the direction by the compass, which he is carrying with him, and on which he observes the one immutable direction, and, consequently, every deflection from it.

The first way of moral guidance is the way of external definitions, of rules: man is given definite tokens of acts which he must perform and which not.

“Observe the Sabbath, be circumcised, do not steal, drink no intoxicating drink, kill no living being, give the tithe to the poor, make your ablutions, and pray five times a day,” and so forth, — such are the injunctions of external religious teachings, — of the Brahmanical, Buddhistic, Mohammedan, Hebrew, and the ecclesiastic falsely called Christian.

The other way is to indicate to man unattainable perfection, the striving after which man is cognizant of: man has pointed out to him the ideal, in relation to which he is at any time able to see the degree of his divergence from it.

“Love God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbour as thyself. — Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect.”

Such is the teaching of Christ.

The verification of the execution of external religious tenets is the coincidence of the acts with the injunctions of these tenets, and this coincidence is possible.

The verification of the execution of Christ’s teaching is the consciousness of the degree of its non-correspondence with the ideal perfection. (the degree of approximation is not visible; what is visible is the deflection from perfection.)

A man who professes an external law is a man who is standing in the light of a lamp which is attached to a post. He is standing in the light of this lamp, he sees the light, and he has no other place to go to. A man who professes the teaching of Christ is like a man carrying a lamp before him on a more or less long pole: the light is always before him; it always incites him to follow it, and continually opens up in front of him a new illuminated space which draws him on.

The Pharisee thanks God for executing everything.

The rich youth also executes everything from his childhood, and he cannot understand what may be wanting to him. Nor can they think otherwise: there is not in front of them that toward which they may continue to strive. The tithe has been delivered, the Sabbath has been kept, the parents are respected, there is no adultery, not theft, no murder. What else shall it be? But in him who professes the Christian teaching the attainment of any new round of perfection incites the necessity of stepping on the next round, from which a still higher round is perceived, and so on without end. He who professes Christ's Law is always in the position of the publican. He always feels himself imperfect, not seeing the road behind him, which he has passed, but only the road in front of him, which he has not yet travelled upon and which he must pass over.

In this consists the difference between the teaching of Christ and all other religious teachings, — a difference consisting not in the difference of demands, but in the difference of the way of guiding men. Christ gave no definitions of life. He never established any institutions, he never established marriage. But people who do not understand the peculiarities of Christ's teaching, who are accustomed to external tenets, and who wish to feel themselves in the right, as does the Pharisee, contrary to the whole spirit of Christ's teaching, — have out of the letter made an external teaching of rules, and have substituted this teaching for Christ's true teaching of the ideal.

The church teachings, which call themselves Christian, have in all manifestations of life substituted for Christ's teaching and ideal the external injunctions and rules which are contrary to the spirit of the teaching. This has been done in reference to government, courts, armies, churches, divine service; this has also been done in reference to marriage. Disregarding the fact that Christ nowhere established marriage, — on the contrary, whenever he mentioned an external rule it was to oppose it ("Forsake thy wife and follow me"), — the church teachings, which call themselves Christian, have established marriage as a Christian institution, that is, they have established external observances which make sexual love sinless and entirely lawful for a Christian.

Since in the true Christian teaching there are no foundations for the institution of marriage, the result has been that people of our world have departed from one shore without landing on the other, that is, they do not believe, in reality, in the church definitions of marriage, feeling that this institution has no foundation in the Christian teaching, and at the same time not seeing before them Christ's ideal, which is concealed by the church doctrine, — the striving after complete chastity, they are left without any guidance in relation to marriage. From this comes the seemingly strange phenomenon that with the Jews, Mohammedans, Lamaists, and others, who profess religious teachings of a much lower order than the Christian, but who possess precise external injunctions in regard to marriage, the

family principle and conjugal fidelity are incomparably more firmly rooted than with the so-called Christians.

They have definite concubinage, and polygamy, and polyandry, limited by certain restrictions. But with us there is complete looseness, — there is concubinage, and polygamy, and polyandry, not subject to any limitations, and concealed under the aspect of supposed monogamy.

Only because over a small part of the persons united the clergy performs a certain ceremony, called church marriage, people of our world naively or hypocritically imagine that they are living in matrimony.

There cannot be and never has been such a thing as Christian marriage, just as there has not been and cannot be a Christian divine service ([Matt. vi. 5-12](#); [John iv. 21](#)), nor any Christian teachers and fathers ([Matt. xxiii. 8-10](#)), nor Christian property, nor army, nor courts, nor state.

Thus the early Christians always understood it.

The Christian's ideal is love of God and his neighbour, self-renunciation in order to serve God and his neighbour; carnal love, marriage, means serving oneself, and therefore is, in any case, a hindrance in the service of God and men, and, consequently, from the Christian point of view, a fall, a sin.

Entering into matrimony cannot cooperate with the service of God and men even in that case when those who enter into marriage have in view the continuation of the human race. Rather than enter into marriage in order to procreate children, it would be much simpler for such people to sustain and save the lives of those millions of children who are perishing around us through want of material, not to say of spiritual, food.

Only then could a Christian enter into marriage without the consciousness of a fall, a sin, if he saw and knew all the existing lives of children to be secure.

We may reject the teaching of Christ, that teaching which permeates all our life and upon which all our morality is based, but, if we accept this teaching, we cannot fail to acknowledge that it points out the ideal of complete chastity.

The Gospel says clearly and without any possibility of misinterpretation, in the first place, that a married man must not be divorced from his wife, in order to take another, and that he must live with the one with whom he has come together ([Matt. v. 28-29](#)), and, in the third place, that for an unmarried man it is better not to marry at all, that is, to be absolutely chaste ([Matt. xix. 10-12](#)).

Many, very many people will regard these thoughts as strange and even contradictory. They really are contradictory, but not among themselves. These thoughts are contradictory to our whole life, and involuntarily the doubt arises who is right: these thoughts, or the lives of millions of people and my own? I experienced the same feeling in the highest degree, as I arrived at the convictions which I am expounding here: I had not in the least expected that

the progress of my thoughts would bring me to what it has. I was terrified at my deductions and wished not to believe them, but it was impossible not to believe. However much these deductions contradict the whole structure of our life, however much they contradict that which I thought and expressed before, I was compelled to acknowledge them.

“All these are general reflections, which may be just. But they refer to the teaching of Christ and are obligatory for those who profess it; but life is life, and it is impossible, by pointing out Christ’s unattainable ideal, to leave people in one of the most burning and common questions, which produces most misery, with nothing but this ideal and without any guidance whatsoever.

“A young, impassioned man will at first be carried away by the ideal; then he will not be able to endure it and will break loose, and, not knowing, nor acknowledging any rules, he will fall into complete debauchery!”

Thus they reason usually.

“Christ’s ideal is unattainable, therefore it cannot serve us as a guide of life; we may speak and dream of it, but it is not applicable to life, and therefore we must abandon it. We need, not an ideal, but a rule, a guidance, which shall be according to our strength, according to the mean average of the moral powers of our society: an honourable church marriage, or even one which is not entirely honourable, where one of the parties entering into matrimony, as the man with us, has already come together with many individuals of the other sex, or at least marriage with the possibility of divorce, or civil marriage, or (proceeding in the same path) a Japanese marriage, for a definite time, — why may we not also reach the houses of prostitution?”

They say that this is better than street debauchery. The trouble is that, having allowed ourselves to degrade the ideal in accordance with our weakness, we are unable to find the limit at which to stop.

But this reflection is false from the start: first of all it is a false supposition that the ideal of infinite perfection cannot be a guidance for life, and that, looking at it, it is necessary to dismiss it with a motion of the hand, saying that it is useless to me because I can never attain it, or to degrade the ideal to the level on which my weakness wants to stand.

To reflect in this manner is the same as though a navigator should say: “Since I cannot go in the direction indicated by the compass, I shall throw away the compass or cease looking at it, that is, I will abandon the ideal or will fasten the needle of the compass to the place which at a given moment will correspond to the direction of my vessel, that is, I will degrade the ideal in accordance with my weakness.”

The ideal of perfection which Christ has given us is not a dream or a subject for rhetorical sermons, but a most necessary, most accessible guide of moral life for man, just as the compass is a necessary and accessible implement guiding the navigator; all that is necessary is to believe in the one as in the other. In whatever situation a man may be, the teaching

about the ideal, given by Christ, is sufficient in order to obtain the safest indication of those acts which one may and which one may not perform. But it is necessary completely to believe in this teaching, this one teaching, and to stop believing in any other, just as it is necessary for the navigator to believe in the compass, and to stop looking at and being guided by what he sees on both sides. One must know how to be guided by the Christian teaching, how to be guided by the compass, and for this it is most important to understand one's position, and to be able not to be afraid precisely to indicate one's own deflection from the one, ideal direction. No matter on what round man may stand, there is always a possibility of his approaching this ideal, and no position of his can be such that he should be able to say that he has attained it and no longer can strive after a greater approximation.

Such is the striving of man after the Christian ideal in general and after chastity in particular. If the most varied positions of people, from innocent childhood until marriage, when continence is not practiced, were to be considered in respect to the sexual question, then at every stage between these two positions the teaching of Christ, with its ideal which it puts forward, will always serve as a clear and definite guide to what man ought and ought not to do at every one of these stages.

What are a pure young man and girl to do? To keep themselves pure against temptations, and, in order that they may be able to give all their strength to the service of God and men, to strive after a greater and greater chastity of thoughts and desires.

What are a young man and girl to do, who have fallen a prey to temptations, whose thoughts are absorbed in indefinite love or in love for a certain individual, and who thus have lost a certain portion of their ability to serve God and men? Again the same: not to allow themselves to fall, knowing that such weakness will not free them from temptation, but will only strengthen it, and to continue to strive after greater and greater chastity in order to be able the more fully to serve God and men.

What are people to do if they have not come out victorious from the struggle and have fallen? To look upon their fall not as a lawful enjoyment, as people now do, when it is justified by the ceremony of marriage, not as an accidental enjoyment which may be repeated with others, not as a misfortune if the fall has been committed with an inferior person and without the ceremony, but to look upon this first fall as the only one, and upon themselves as having entered upon an indissoluble marriage.

This entering into marriage, with the consequences springing from it, the birth of children, determines for those who have entered into matrimony a new, more limited form of serving God and men. Before marriage man could serve God and men directly, in most varied forms, but his entering into matrimony limits his field of action and demands of him the bringing up and education of the progeny arising from marriage, the future servants of God and men.

What are a man and a woman to do, who are living in wedlock and performing the limited service of God and men, by means of bringing up and educating their children, as befits their position?

Again the same: to strive together after liberation from temptation, after self-purification, and cessation of sin, by exchanging the relations which impede the general and particular service of God and men, by exchanging carnal love for the pure relations of brother and sister.

Therefore it is not true that we are not able to be guided by Christ's ideal because it is so high, so perfect, and so unattainable. We cannot be guided by it only because we are lying to ourselves and deceiving ourselves.

When we say that we must have more realizable rules than Christ's ideal, or else we, without reaching Christ's ideal, shall fall into debauchery, we do not mean by this that Christ's ideal is too high for us, but that we do not believe in it and that we do not wish to determine our acts by this ideal.

When we say that having once fallen we become subject to debauchery, we only say by this that we have decided in advance that a fall with an inferior individual is not a sin, but a pastime, an infatuation, which need not be mended by what we call marriage. But if we understood that the fall is a sin which must and can be redeemed only by the indissolubility of marriage and all the activity which springs from the education of children born in wedlock, then the fall could in no way be the cause of becoming debauched.

This would, in reality, be the same as though a farmer should not consider as a sowing that sowing which gave him no crop, but, sowing in a second and third place, should regard as real sowing that which was successful. It is obvious that that man would ruin much land and seed, and would never learn to sow properly. Make chastity your ideal, consider every fall, of any person, with any person, as the only marriage, indissoluble through life, and it will become clear that the guidance given by Christ is not only sufficient but also the only possible.

"Man is weak, — he must receive a task which is according to his strength," say people. This amounts to saying: "My hands are weak and I cannot draw a straight line, that is, one which is the shortest distance between two points, and therefore, in order to make it easier for myself, though wishing to draw a straight line, I will take a curved or a broken line as my guide." The weaker my hand is, the more perfect must my guide be.

It is not right, having come to know the Christian teaching of the ideal, to act as though we did not know it, and to substitute external definitions for it. The Christian teaching of the ideal is open to humanity because it can guide it at its present age. Humanity has passed out from external religious injunctions, and nobody believes in them.

The Christian doctrine of the ideal is the only one which can guide humanity. We must not, we should not substitute external rules for the ideal of Christ, but this ideal must be kept firmly before us in all its purity, and, above everything else, we must believe in it.

To him who was navigating near the shore it was possible to say: "Watch that elevation, promontory, tower," and so forth.

But a time came when the navigators passed away from the shore, and their guides could be and must be only the unattainable luminaries and the compass which points out the direction. Both are given to us.

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