

## BEREAVEMENT IN THE ARTS

## The Kreutzer Sonata

Leo Tolstoy



In: **The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories**

Translators: Louise and Aylmer Maude, JD Duff  
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Recently, hearing Janacek's string quartet No 1, *The Kreutzer*, at a concert and learning that the story involved the killing of a mother by her husband, I was inspired to read the Tolstoy short novel, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, on which the quartet is based. (In turn, Tolstoy named his story after a violin sonata of Beethoven's.) I was particularly excited because, when I and my co-authors were writing the book *When Father Kills Mother*, we had found that, although there was much written about uxoricide (spouse-killing) in both the psychological and other literature, the children of the marriage and how they were affected was rarely mentioned. Almost the only literary reference we found at that time was in *Wozzeck*, a German play by Buechner, made into a powerful opera by Alban Berg, and there the child is a shadowy figure. Now, in Tolstoy's story I had found another.

The story, told by the killer, Pozdnyshev to a fellow-passenger on a long Russian train journey, is of a jealous husband who suspects his wife of having an affair with a violinist. She, an amateur pianist, plays the Kreutzer sonata with the violinist, a handsome, rather effete young man, at a soirée organised by

the husband. Later, he has to go away for a few days on business but returns early, consumed with suspicion, and surprises the musicians at their instruments, late at night. He plunges a dagger into his wife's breast in a violent rage, and the violinist flees. She lives long enough to reject her husband's plea for forgiveness and to say that he should be denied custody of their five children. The children then go to their maternal aunt to live. The husband is acquitted of a crime and released because he was 'defending his family's honour'(!) but is denied access to the children.

The story is a long discursive essay expressing Tolstoy's views on the way women were disadvantaged in Russian society, and has some very perceptive things to say about relationships. 'If there's to be equality,' says Pozdnyshev 'let it be equality! Woman's lack of rights arises not from the fact that she may not vote or be a judge...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.'

In describing the increasing hostility between the couple, Pozdnyshev says, 'So the presence of children not only failed to improve our life but poisoned it. Besides, the children were a new cause of dissension. As soon as we had children they became the means and object of our discord, and more often the older they grew. They were not only the object of discord but the weapons of our strife. We used our children as it were, to fight one another with. Each of us had a favourite weapon among them for our strife. I used to fight her chiefly through Vasya, the eldest boy and she fought me through Lisa. Besides that, as they grew older and their characters became more defined, it came about that they grew

into allies whom each of us tried to draw to his or her side. They, poor things, suffered terribly from this, but we, with our incessant warfare, had no time to think of that.'

Here Tolstoy describes a phenomenon that we found commonly in our research. We saw over 500 children where one parent killed the other and in two-thirds of the cases there had been previous domestic violence. When we saw the children after the death of their mother (90% of our sample), they told us that they felt the killing was their fault, because they had provoked dissension between their parents. Sometimes they had been told, 'we never quarrelled until you were born'. It was not until he had destroyed his wife that Pozdnyshev realises for the first time that she was a human being with a right to an independent existence, and not merely his property to do with as he wishes. 'I looked at the children and at her bruised disfigured face and for the first time I forgot myself, my rights, my pride, and for the first time saw a human being in her.' He spends the rest of his life atoning for his deed, a broken man who has to tell his story over and over again.

Tolstoy himself had a happy marriage and his wife bore him 17 children. He was profoundly religious and was one of the first Russians to free his serfs. This story reflects his sensitivity to the low status of women in Russian society, and what it can lead to, his love of children and compassion for the lot of criminals. ●

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HARRIS HENDRIKS J, BLACK D, KAPLAN T (2000). *When Father Kills Mother: Guiding Children Through Trauma and Grief*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.