

Title: How a Man Killed His Wife: Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata" and Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Dead House"

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Abstract:

One of Tolstoy's drafts for "The Kreutzer Sonata" features a drawing room scene wherein those gathered – including the future murderer and his victim – read Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Dead House." The text makes a profound impression on the group, and especially on Pozdnyshev's bride-to-be, whose eyes well with tears at its account of corporal punishment. Pozdnyshev sees her response to the reading as a demonstration of her idealism and her readiness "to live not for herself." Both this scene and the draft's focus on the woman's character before her marriage disappear in the final version of "The Kreutzer Sonata" (1889). However, its traces remain, as does the text's deep engagement with Dostoevsky's "Dead House" (1862). "The Kreutzer Sonata" may easily be called Tolstoy's most "Dostoevskian" text. The framing situation and Pozdnyshev's narrative itself undermine his credibility and put his version of events and ideas into question in ways that make the text both profoundly unsettling and open-ended. It has been fruitfully compared with "Notes from the Underground" and "The Meek One." And yet I would argue that it is, in fact, most closely related to Tolstoy's beloved "Notes from the Dead House." The most striking parallels arise when we compare "Kreutzer Sonata" with the inserted narrative of "Akulka's Husband." Both present unrepentant confessions told by potentially deranged wife murderers in the middle of the night to variously attentive audiences. This paper examines these parallels to demonstrate that "Kreutzer Sonata" and its meditation on art, love and violence should be read in light of Tolstoy's conscious dialogue with Dostoevsky. By analyzing the way Tolstoy engages with the earlier work, this paper notes how the texts mutually illuminate one another and answers the call of the "Tolstoyevsky" Stream by putting these authors in conversation with each other.