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“From the Ideal to Femme Fatal: Tolstoy’s Thoughts on a Peasant Woman”

‘They are all writing my biography-and it’s the same with all biographies- there won’t be anything about....And it will be the same up to the time of my liason with the peasant woman Aksinya- she’s still alive.’ July 9, 1908, Tolstoy’s “secret diary.”¹

Upon meeting his biographer P.I. Biriukov, three months before his death, Leo Tolstoy, at the age of 82, had remarked: ‘You always write what is good about me. That is misleading and incomplete. The bad should also be told. When I was young I led a very bad life, and there are two occurrences in particular that torment me even now. I tell you this, and ask you to write it in my biography. Those occurrences were an affair with a peasant woman in our village before my marriage- which is referred to in my story *The Devil*. The other was the crime I committed earlier with a maid servant, Masha, who lived at my aunt’s. She was a virgin, I seduced her, and she was dismissed and perished.’²

In his youth, Tolstoy had had his share of romances, and had spent innumerable nights with gypsy women. When younger he seemed to be constantly falling in love with society women that he had met in passing. It was not until the fall of 1858, at the age of thirty, that Tolstoy experienced the full impact of a sustained romance, this time with a twenty three year old married serf woman on his estate, Aksinya Bazykina.³ Aksinya, who appears as a footnote in most Tolstoy biographies may have had a far greater impact on the thinking of the future literary giant and social activist, than many critics have suspected. Their clandestine relationship lasted four years, and by all accounts, resulted in the birth of Tolstoy’s peasant son, Timothy (Timofei) who was eventually to become a coachman on one of the Tolstoy estates.⁴ Although Tolstoy never publicly admitted paternity of

1R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, volume 2, Cambridge, 1985, p. 597.

2Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata, The Devil and Other Tales*, Oxford, 1940, p. vii, Aylmer Maude’s introduction.

3 3 Aksinya Aleksandrovna Bazykina (née Annikanova), 1836-1920.

4 Timofei Ermilovich Bazykin (1861-1934), was never officially recognized by Tolstoy as his son. There is only one entry in Leo Tolstoy’s diary concerning Timothy and it dates to 1894 (The peasant’s on the estate had

Timothy, the likeness of the father and the son, left little doubt as to the connection. As Tolstoy's youngest daughter Alexandra observed:

Aksinya had an only son, Timothy, whose likeness to Tolstoy was striking. In later years he was powerfully built, broad shouldered, tall with shrewd grey eyes, a reddish beard and strong features. He was not well educated but liked to read books, and in the village he was respected as an honest man. His unusually pleasant voice and cultivated speech involuntarily attracted the attention of anyone who met him.⁵

Even though Tolstoy did not acknowledge his peasant family, the strength of his connection to the peasantry persisted a lifetime. When Tolstoy first met Aksinya in the spring of 1858, he had returned to his estate after his first tour to Europe. He lived with his Aunt Tatiana in one of the wings of the manor house (the main house having been dismantled and carted away as a result of a gambling debt a few years back), and was experiencing financial difficulties. Tolstoy had decided to become a gentleman farmer, while continuing his literary pursuits. Similar to his literary hero Prince Nekhludov, he saw his primary responsibility and "sacred and direct duty," to care for his serfs and exert a benevolent influence on their lives.⁶

In his youth, Tolstoy had believed in being a responsible landlord and had felt anguish for the poverty of the peasants- but he did not question the master-serf relationship at this point. It was from the vantage point of an aristocrat that he had conceived of his role as "benefactor to his serfs." As he himself explained the familial state of mind: "The idea that this sort of thing ought not to be, but that serfs should be set free, was quite unknown in our circle in the forties; the possession of serfs by inheritance appeared a necessary condition of life, and it was thought that the only thing that could be done to prevent this possession from being evil was that the landowner should concern himself with the moral welfare of his peasants as well as their material condition."⁷ Living in close proximity to his serfs, in those last years of serfdom, would change and radicalize Tolstoy's

revealed to Andrei, Tolstoy's legitimate son that Timofei was also Tolstoy's child).

5 Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy*, p. 103 William Shirer in *Love and hatred: The Stormy Marriage of Leo and Sonya Tolstoy*, p. 50, suggests that Timofei, lived with his mother, and initially worked the stables of Tolstoy, then worked as a woodman and eventually became his half-brother Sergei's coachman.

6 Pavel Biriukov, *Leo Tolstoy: His Life and Work*, volume I, (New York, 1906), p. 107.

7 Pavel Biriukov, *Leo Tolstoy*, pp. 213-214.

views on serfdom.⁸

In that spring of 1858, living on his estate, Tolstoy was working on *The Cossacks*, reading literary journals, and spending much time musing (he called it, ‘generally did nothing.’). Following his beloved Rousseau, he sought proximity to nature and natural elements, including the peasantry, with whom he scythed, shared meals, and worked in tandem. In this period, Tolstoy’s diary entries are bright and replete with romantic descriptions of nature: “A lovely day; the grass is pushing through and the last snow is melting...An owl flew by, flapping its wings, once or twice, then more and more often before it came to rest.”⁹ He also notices the peasants and especially the peasant women: “A wonderful day. Peasant women in the garden and by the well. I’m like a man possessed.”¹⁰ “Drooping bird-cherry in the workers’ calloused hands.” And finally he sees and conquers Aksinya. From the description, we can garner that Aksinya had been pointed out to him (similar to the plot line in “the Devil”) and that initially he pursued her for sexual gratification. “Caught a glimpse of Aksinya. She’s very pretty. I’ve been waiting for her these last few days in vain. Today in the big old wood; the daughter in law; I’m a fool. A beast. Her neck is red from the sun...I’m in love as never before in my life. I’ve no other thoughts. I’m tormented.”¹¹ He doesn’t write to his diary for a whole month, during which time he has been busy with “running about....”. Tolstoy begins to live more like a peasant, spends more and more time on the estate, in the midst of nature: “All day in the fields. A wonderful night. A dewy white mist trees in the mist. The moon behind the birch trees and a corncake; no more nightingales.”¹²

8 After Russia’s defeat in the Crimean War, Tsar Alexander II had announced to the Moscow Marshals of the Nobility that, “It is better to abolish serfdom from above, rather than wait for it to abolish itself from below.” Tolstoy was involved in the first meetings of the nobility of Tula province, where his estate was located. The nobles were to assist in the planning of the details of emancipation. The emancipation manifesto went into effect on February 19, 1861 (old style). In the post-emancipation era, Tolstoy briefly served as an “arbiter of the peace,” but found himself at odds with other landlords and was accused of “going over to the peasants.” According to his biographer, Aylmer Maude, Tolstoy, unlike some more progressive landlords, had not emancipated his serfs prior to the emancipation decree, although he had arranged for a more liberal payment of their dues in monetary (*obrok*) form rather than as corvée (*barshchina*). At the time of the emancipation Tolstoy arranged for a more generous settlement with the peasants of his estate. See Aylmer Maude, *Life of Tolstoy*, (New York, 1910), pp. 224-225.

9 Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, vol. 1, edited and translated by R.F. Christian, (New York, 1985), p. 150.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 151. ‘Daughter-in-law,’ refers to Aksinya, who like Malanya was living with her in-laws, her husband being away. Accounts are contradictory as to whether Aksinya’s husband Ermil, was away in town working on *obrok*, or whether he had been conscripted into the army. Tolstoy’s short stories suggest the former.

12 *Ibid.*

While carrying on his relations with Aksinya, Tolstoy was also attempting to improve conditions for peasants on his estate and invariably came upon resistance from the local peasant commune or *mir*. His frustration with the obstinacy of the peasants seems to have impacted his relations with Aksinya as well. He begins to waver between wanting her and regrets. “Health seems better. Had Aksinya...: but I’m repelled by her.”¹³

Tolstoy tries to cure himself of his obsession with Aksinya. He courts society women and even considers marriage to Valeriya Arseneva, a young orphan woman on a neighboring estate, on whose character the novella *Family Happiness* is based. Valeriya passes from his life, but Aksinya remains. Tolstoy is between writing projects and restless. He turns to Aksinya once more. Only this time, a year after they have first met, the connection seems much deeper. He actually relates to her as a person and it is evident that they engage in conversations other than those centering on their relationship. Spirituality even? “I had my hair cut yesterday,” he writes, “and even that seems a token of rebirth. I’m not pleased with myself. The routine of my life has been disrupted. Aksinya has been to the Troitsa Monastery. I’ve just seen her. She has been here once..”¹⁴ In Tolstoy’s diaries, the phrase “I am not pleased with myself,” usually referred to his having given in to sexuality.

He remained riveted to the estate for six months- not leaving so as to be close to Aksinya. He reports, “continue to see Aksinya *exclusively*.” He is no longer seriously searching for a society match. Could it have been Aksinya’s influence that led him that same autumn to open a school for the peasant children on his estate?

In his diaries, Tolstoy devotes only a few lines to his love for the intriguing Aksinya, and there are no records of Aksinya’s experience, since she was most likely illiterate. However, the strength of the connection was evident and a far cry from the typical Russian landowner’s assertion of seigniorial rights over his female serfs. Tolstoy’s desire for Aksinya was such that at times he felt not in control of himself. He continuously sought her out. “I am afraid when I see how attached I am,” he wrote in his diaries. He decided to leave his estate, Yasnaya Polyana, and let distance cure him of his love which could not be openly acknowledged, first since she was not of his social class and second since she was already married

13 *Ibid.* This passage is also reflected in “*The Devil*,” where the main character/Tolstoy initially sought out Aksinya/Stepanida for “health” reasons, and tried not to return to her, only to find himself more and more drawn to her-, while emotionally swinging between extremes of love and disgust at his powerlessness.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

(although at times he had contemplated arranging for her divorce and himself marrying her).¹⁵ But there may have been yet another reason. Aksinya was possibly pregnant and Tolstoy may have not been able to cope.¹⁶ On the morning of his departure, he frantically sought her out at 5am, “She was nowhere about. I looked for her. It is no longer the feeling of a stag, but of a husband for a wife.”¹⁷ He went to Europe once more to learn about their schools and teaching methods. He still could not forget her or the simple country life. “Dreamed that I was dressed as a peasant and my mother didn’t recognize me.” “It is hard to describe what has taken place in these four months,” he wrote in April of 1861, “Italy, Nice, Florence, ... Attempts to write *Aksinya*, Naples...”¹⁸

Away from Yasnaya Polyana and his peasant mistress Aksinya, Tolstoy felt much nostalgia and spent his time in Europe composing an ode to Russian country life, which was centered around a thinly disguised literary representation of Aksinya. These stories were published posthumously as “An Idyll” and its variant “Tikhon and Malanya.” The stories were an attempt by Tolstoy to see the world through the eyes of the peasantry- a veritable act of love for his peasant mistress.¹⁹ In Europe, Tolstoy yearned for the simple country life of “plowing land, teaching youngsters, being honest...” Reviewing this period, his daughter wrote: “Never before had Tolstoy come so close to peasant life. It may be that his intimacy with Aksinya Bazykina was one of the oblique reasons why he was absorbed by the peasantry, by the half-starved, undernourished little Vasyas, Ignatkas, Danilas in their homespun blouses, their patches, with their hands calloused from work.”²⁰ This was no small influence. The older Tolstoy’s entire philosophy of

15 Edward Crankshaw in *Tolstoy: The Making of a Novelist*, (News York, 1967), p. 169 suggests that Tolstoy had toyed with the idea of having Ermil divorce Aksinya. Ermil who knew about the affair, ‘seems to have accepted the situation philosophically.’ The husband’s resignation is also reflected in *The Devil*, where he insinuates that it is better to have one’s wife be with the master than a lesser man.

16 Russian sources report that Timothy was born in 1861. Tolstoy was in Europe for one year, from May 1860-May 1861. Had Timothy been conceived after his return, the child would have been born in 1862- thus making it very likely that Aksinya was already pregnant when Tolstoy set out for his second European trip. We surmise that Timothy is not Ermil’s child as he was most likely infertile, and Aksinya had no other children.

17 R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, Volume I, (London, 1985), p. 156. The pregnancy would also explain why he now viewed her as a wife.

18 L.N. Tolstoy, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, tom 19, p. 244., also *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, p. 158. The story “Aksinya”, eventually morphs into “Tikhon and Malanya” and “An Idyll.”

19 L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, (Moscow-Leningrad, 1932), p. 351. In August of 1860, after having started writing “Idyll,” Tolstoy remarks: “The form of the story: To see from the perspective of the peasants., to respect the wealth of peasant life, their conservatism, mirth and festivity, not living for themselves but being led by God.”

20 Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy*, p. 116.

“Tolstoyanism” was based on the belief that in Imperial Russia, the peasants were the only group that lived with true faith.

Upon his return to Russia and Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy continues to be interested in the peasantry. He writes *Polikushka*, one of his rare works with a peasant hero (and also a character with the name of Aksinya), prepares syllabi and lectures for his peasant school and works on carrying out the emancipation statutes on his estate.²¹ We have no news of Aksinya, but she seems not to have made herself visible after his return. Perhaps she had given up on Tolstoy. Perhaps he had searched for her in vain. There is an oblique reference in his diary: “*She is probably in the place where I’m not.*”²² Had he been waiting for her in their usual meeting place? Had she snubbed him in anger of having been abandoned? Did Tolstoy quickly marry after his return in order to put an end to the question of what to do with his love for Aksinya? Was he too committed to the Russian aristocracy to opt for an “irregular life with the girl he was actually in love with, Aksinya?”²³

Thirty years later, still pondering the connection, Tolstoy was to immortalize his love and lust for his peasant mistress in the story “The Devil (1889).” According to his daughter, the novella was hidden from his wife, “knowing that it would evoke a storm of jealousy over his past love affair with Aksinya.”²⁴ As Tolstoy’s own daughter also surmises, perhaps his love of the peasantry and defense of their interests was much more personal than theoretical.²⁵ Furthermore, his interest in educating peasant children may have been connected with a desire to educate his own peasant son, who possibly partook in the classes as well. The guilt of having sired a peasant child, who had been cheated of the privileged childhood of

21 See the biography of Tolstoy in the appendix for more on Tolstoy and the Emancipation of peasants.

22 *Tolstoy’s Diaries*, Vol 1, ., p. 162.

23 A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy*, (New York, London, 1988), p. 187. Wilson suggests that Tolstoy’s wavering between which of the Behrs daughters to choose for his spouse was an indication that he sought family happiness in the abstract. His marriage to Sonia, according to Wilson was an “impulsive action.” Ernest Simmons, in his book *Leo Tolstoy*, (Boston, 1946), p. 227, suggests that Tolstoy had difficulty finding a mate after he had met Aksinya, since he demanded perfection from the ladies to compensate for a lack of love. ‘The passionate experience with his peasant Aksinya Bazykina, who seemed so much like a wife to him, had failed to teach him that there was no substitute for love.’

24 Alexandra Tolstoy, *Tolstoy*, p. 305. Sonia did not find and read the novel until 1909 (*Polnoe Sobranie*, vol 7, p. 355).

25 Although Serfdom was officially abolished in Russia in 1861, some landlords, including Tolstoy, who were proponents of land reform had offered land to their peasants on more advantageous terms. Tolstoy had also willed that the peasants of Yasnaya Polyana receive all of the land eventually. His benevolent treatment of the estate’s peasants so won their favor, that after the Russian Revolution, they prevented Tolstoy’s home from being ransacked by outside peasants.

Tolstoy's legitimate children, followed the writer to the grave. Half a century later and close to his own death, feeling ill and debilitated, and thinking of his "sins" Tolstoy remembered his peasant family: "I looked at my bare feet, and I remembered Aksinya. She is still alive. They say that Timothy is my son, and I have never asked his pardon, I have not repented, I am not repenting every hour of the day, and I set myself up to criticize others!"²⁶

And yet, in the Russian tradition of the landed nobility, having a few illegitimate peasant children roaming your estate, was quite the norm, a sign of the master's virility and something that Tolstoy's own father and grandfather had also experienced. In fact, in certain regions of the empire, tradition held that the master must himself deflower the virgin peasant bride on the night before her betrothal.²⁷ Tolstoy's relationship with Aksinya, had for the most part taken place when Askinya had been a serf on his estate, and legally his private property. Interestingly the young Tolstoy was considerably at ease with the reality of serfdom, although in theory he was a proponent of emancipation. However Tolstoy felt great guilt towards the end of his life, judging himself by higher standards than those practiced in his times. "Real debauchery lies precisely in freeing oneself from moral relations with a woman with whom you have physical intimacy," he wrote in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It was through publicly confessing his "sins" in his works of fiction and airing them for all to see that Tolstoy came to terms with his past.

The idyllic picture of country-living which Tolstoy portrays in these early stories of love, reflects his Rousseauesque idealization of rural life. Here, unlike scenes from the earlier story, *A Landlord's Morning* (1852), we do not encounter the squalor and poverty of the life of the serfs. Rather, we see idealized, clean, bright peasants, singing along, jesting, having a pleasant time. Tolstoy's words draw the picture of a Renaissance village, with buccaneering peasants: "Haying season, a jolly time; even now it is merry but in the olden time it was still better. The woman dressed up in their best, went to work with songs, came home again with songs. Then again the nights were short; plenty of wine; they reveled all night long." The urban reader is almost envious of the simple and happy life of the Russian peasant.. The reality, however must have been far from that. Are we reading about the nefarious institution of Russian serfdom? Or perhaps Tolstoy is suggesting that the world of the peasants itself was not to blame and that harm came upon this idyllic world from without. In *An Idyll*, Aksinya's literary double, Malanya, comes to

26 Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy*, p. 623.

27 I. I. Ignatovich, *Pomeshchichi Krest'iane Nakanune Osvobozhdeniia*, (Leningrad, 1925), pp. 253-254.

harm by a merchant, a representative of the city. She suffers from her husband's absence in the city. The city is the center from which cruelty and corruption emanates. The violence of the peasant world, on the other hand, such as the beatings that men inflicted on women and children, are depicted in a matter-of-fact way, as if part of an accepted social norm in the village.

Influenced by love's magical transformation of the beloved into all beautiful, *An Idyll*, which was written while Tolstoy was in Europe, away from his beloved Aksinya, is marked by nostalgia for the Russian countryside. It is devoid of that mocking scrutiny that Tolstoy reserves for his most scathing realist fiction. *An Idyll* is earnest to a fault. Forgiving Aksinya's alter-ego, Malanya, for her final act of adultery, Tolstoy shows her in fact as an unwilling victim of male predatory sexuality. Malanya is playful, yes, but sinned against not sinful. The opening epigram of the story, "Do not play with fire-you'll get burnt," could equally apply to Malanya herself paying for her flirtations, as it could to those duped by her. Malanya is in fact portrayed as charitable in her old age, drawn to the Psalm readers, and loved by all. "Everybody, young and old, in the village has the highest respect for Malanya not because of her son but because of her goodness," Tolstoy wrote. Apparently the real-life Aksinya was also religious. In his diaries of 1859, Tolstoy casually notes that "Aksinya has been to the Troitsa Monastery."²⁸

Some thirty years later, while reliving the passion of his youth in his literary mind, Tolstoy distorts his memories of Aksinya as an innocent woman. Influenced by his new ideas of sexual abstinence and chastity, Aksinya's image is transformed into that of a temptress, nay, nothing short of the devil itself. She prays on the hearts of innocent men and destroying their resistance, wrecks their lives and forces them to commit murder in self defense. He almost comes to despise the influence that she has had upon him. It is clear that Tolstoy's mind has not been free of Aksinya all these years.

In Tolstoy's mind, the image of the carefree barefooted woman in a red kerchief was closely associated with Aksinya Bazykina. In old age, when looking at his feet he remembered her and the guilt that he felt in having seduced her and abandoned her with child. In his youth, he had etched her image indelibly: "Malanka took off her shoes and stockings, folded up her lined skirt over her head and walked along with her white shapely legs, her rosy face: well, if ever there was a beauty there was a beauty!" Malanya is the image of strength, health, comfortable in her own skin and with her own sexuality. More importantly, she represents carefree

28 R.F. Christian, *Tolstoy's Diaries*, Volume 1 (1847-1894), London, 1985, p. 154.

happiness. “The birds were singling but she sang louder than they. She strode along in her red kerchief and embroidered smock, barefooted, carrying her shoes on a string- how her white legs gleamed and her shoulders shook!” She draws, almost “bewitches” men effortlessly, yet does not abuse her powers and uses them instead in self defense. She is playful, yes, but a reluctant femme fatale. We revisit the literary portrait of Aksinya in “the Devil.” The image of the barefoot , red-kerchiefed woman with skirt raised to reveal strong legs is intact thirty years later: “He was vexed that he had noticed her and yet he could not take his eyes from her strong body, swayed by her agile strides, from her bare feet, or from her arms and shoulders, and the pleasing folds of her shirt and the handsome skirt tucked up high above her white calves.” If anything, Malanya had grown more handsome in her transformation into the temptress Stepanida. And the red kerchief is transformed from a happy symbol to a signifier alerting that the temptress is nearby. When he first spots Stepanida, the protagonist sees her in her familiar markings: “She stood there in a white embroidered apron, a red-brown shirt, and a bright red kerchief, barefoot, fresh, firm, and handsome, and smiling shyly.” In the story, the recurrent image of the red kerchief is a red flag denoting the imminent danger facing our narrator, who is about to once again fall under the spell of Stepanida, his carefree mistress with the laughing eyes.

And it is while contemplating his lack of freedom and compulsion to see Stepanida that the narrator and in fact Tolstoy himself admits to the elevated place that this simple peasant woman occupied in his life. As in his diary of thirty years past, Tolstoy admits that his relations with Aksinya were much more than simply sexual. He had actually loved her as a wife. He is free to admit, while thinly disguised as Eugene Irtenev: “I thought I had taken her, but it was she who took me; took me and does not let me go. Why, I thought I was free, but I was not free and was deceiving myself when I married. It was all nonsense- fraud. From the time I had her I experienced a new feeling, the real feeling of a husband. Yes, I ought to have lived with her.” And this is the step that Tolstoy had been too indecisive to take, which his brothers had both dared to attempt (they both lived with woman from the lower social classes). In his old age, Tolstoy was reviewing the romantic decisions of this younger years and wishing that he had had the courage to be happy with his peasant mistress.

What was it about Malanya/Aksinya that was so irresistibly drawing to Leo Tolstoy? Surely it was not only a physical attraction, although Tolstoy goes to great lengths describing her strong gleaming body, her shoulders, her legs. Aksinya’s physical charm is also symbolic of her mental health and stamina, her ability to maintain joy and even mirth regardless of her conditions. She almost

always is portrayed with laughing eyes, singing, embracing life and radiating a mad passion for living. She brings to life anyone lucky enough to be in her proximity. She is shown as being a playful innocent figure in “Idyll,” almost as a part of nature. Even her sexuality is shown as being inoffensive and natural, except when she is violated and corrupted by the urban merchant.

Tikhon and Malanya as well the *Devil* are both partly autobiographical- they explain the birth and circumstances of Tolstoy’s peasant son Timothy. In *Tikhon and Malanya*, Tolstoy implies that the child was the split image of the merchant/Tolstoy, even though he is accepted and raised by Tikhon as his own. We know that Aksinya’s husband, like Tikhon was aware of the affair and chose to raise the master’s son as his own. Most likely, similar to Malanya after the discovery of her affair, Aksinya too was corporally punished by her husband, who according to old peasant tradition was behaving in a socially accepted manner.²⁹ The events in the *Devil*, which are much closer to Tolstoy and Sonia’s diaries are so thinly disguised that certain scenes have hardly been altered from the remembrances. Beyond doubt, as Sonia also mentions in her diaries, shortly after she arrived on the estate as a young eighteen year old bride, she one day encountered Aksinya/Stepanida in her own house scrubbing floors, on her hands and knees, with Tolstoy’s illegitimate son by her side. The boy was the split image of Tolstoy/Irtenev. Surely the scene was more than Sonia could take. Having read Tolstoy’s diaries (in his earnest and perhaps naïve attempt to have no secrets after the betrothal), she was faced with the flesh and blood mistress. She would never recover from the shock of encountering Tolstoy’s haunting past. With a quick glance she took in the strength of her rival (physical and emotional) and was so shaken by jealousy that she had disturbing murderous dreams afterwards. Years later, having had several children of her own, she still suspected Tolstoy of arranging secret trysts with Aksinya, whenever he was cold towards her. Sonia even went so far as disguising herself as a peasant woman and wondering the woods to see if Tolstoy would be attracted. Aksinya never truly left the Tolstoy marriage and the love triangle persisted at least in Sonia’s mind- the matter remaining open since Aksinia continued to live in the neighboring village for the remainder of her life.

From the first days of moving into Yasnaya, Sonia was confronted with her own

29 Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia, in *Village Life in later Tsarist Russia*, ed. David Ransel, (Bloomington, 1993), p. 21, asserts that, “the peasants consider it a man’s duty to beat his wife if she, as they say, “brings home” another man’s baby in the absence of her husband, something that occurs most often in the case of soldiers’ wives.”

obsessive jealousy of Tolstoy's not so distant past. Finding Tolstoy emotionally and sexually distant and absent on the estate most of the time, Sonia, who was pregnant almost immediately following the wedding, battled her own demons. Sonia's diaries provide vivid glimpse into the excruciating world of her mind. A few months after her arrival and having read Tolstoy's pre-marital diaries, she found Aksinya in her own house, scrubbing floors. The shock made her entertain homicidal fantasies:

One of these days I think I shall kill myself with jealousy. 'In love as never before!' he writes. With that fat, pale peasant woman- how frightful! I looked at the dagger and the guns with joy. One blow, I thought, how easy it would be- if only it weren't for the baby. Yet to think she is there, just a few steps away. I feel demented. I shall go for a drive. I may see her. So he really did love her! I should like to burn his diary and his whole past....³⁰

Aksinya's presence continued to haunt the Tolstoys. Several months later, still tormented Sonia had a dream:

Our Yasnaya peasant girls and women were visiting us in some huge garden, all dressed up as ladies, then started going off somewhere, one after the other. A. came last, wearing a black silk dress. I began speaking to her and was seized with such violent rage that I picked up her child from somewhere and began tearing it to pieces. I tore off its head and its legs- I was like a madwoman. Then Lyovochka came up and I told him they would banish me to Siberia, but he picked up the legs and arms and all the other bits and told me it was only a doll. I looked down and saw that it was indeed, with just cloth and stuffing for a body. And that made me furious.³¹

Even away from Yasnaya, Sonia could not forget or forgive Tolstoy's past with Aksinya. "I often torture myself thinking about her, even here in Moscow," she confided to her diary. Years later, she again wrote of this relentless jealousy: As Lyovochka was treating me so coldly and forever going out of the house, I got it into my head that he was going off to see A....It must be said, however, that as long as she and I live in close proximity every bad mood or cold word from Lyova will instantly reduce me to an agony of jealousy. What if he were to suddenly return and tell me....?³²

30 Tolstoy, Sophia, *The Diaries of Sophia Tolstoy*, trans. Cathy Porter, (New York, 1985), p. 9.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Sonia was terrified of the intimacies that Tolstoy and Aksinya had shared. She saw everything in Tolstoy that gravitated towards the peasantry as a reflection of this passionate relationship. She could not forgive Tolstoy for his love of Aksinya especially as she repeatedly suspected him of not harboring any love for her. Even as an old woman, when Tolstoy had only one year to live, the images of Tolstoy and Aksinya would continue to haunt her. While copying out an unfinished story by Tolstoy (*'Kto Ubiitsy?'*), she realized that Tolstoy had named his peasant heroine Aksinya- fifty years later he refused to forget! And perhaps Sonia, with her constant reminders had done much to keep the memory alive. Interestingly, Tolstoy had been reluctant to give her the manuscript, well knowing that he would have to answer. To her diary she once more confided:

And indeed if he had slightly more sensitivity he would not call his peasant heroines Aksinya. He relishes that peasant wench with her strong female body and her sunburnt legs, she allures him just as powerfully now as she did all those years ago: the same Aksinya with the flashing eyes, almost unrecognizable at the age of eighty, has risen from the depths of the memories and sensations of the past. Aksinya was a Yasnaya peasant girl, Lev Nikolaevich's last mistress before his marriage, and she still lives in the village.³³

Sonia has been accused by posterity for poisoning her marriage with jealousy, however, could it be that Sonia actually had reason to despair in those initial months and perhaps years of her marriage? If "*The Devil*" is any indication (as well as hints in Tolstoy's diary), Tolstoy may have in fact from the onset considered continuing his relations with Aksinya. In his "secret diaries" for 1908 he laments that many biographies are being written about him, but not one will make mention of his vices, particularly his spell-bound attraction for Aksinya after his marriage. "And it will be the same up to the time of my liason with the peasant woman Aksinya- she's still alive. Then my marriage in which again, although I have never been unfaithful to my wife, I experienced a loathsome, criminal desire for her. Nothing of this appears or will appear in the biographies."³⁴ A year after his marriage and after the birth of his first child with Sonia, tensions between Tolstoy and Sonia resurface. Tolstoy admits: "I haven't given her my diary to read, but I am not writing everything in it...I'm terribly dissatisfied with myself."³⁵ In fact, parts of *Tikhon and Malanya*, were being written in December

33 Ibid., pp. 494-495.

34 *Tolstoy's Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 597. "Her" of course refers to Aksinya.

35 *Tolstoy's Diaries*, vol. 1, p. 180.

of 1862, over three months into his new marriage!³⁶

Tolstoy's memory of Aksinya was greatly distorted with the passage of time. In his youth, when in love with her and nostalgically pining for her from Europe (*Idyll*), he saw her intentions as pure and playful. She was portrayed as the victim of seduction as well. When given a silver ruble by her seducer, she sobs and begs not to be insulted. In "The Devil" however, Tolstoy, to appease his own conscience transforms her into a hired sex worker, (or worse yet, the incarnation of the devil) with whom he is nevertheless infatuated. She readily seeks payment and even wishes to do away with the services of the estate's steward who is the middleman. When the narrator leaves her after his marriage, she reportedly takes up with another. Which account do we believe? More importantly what happened in the interim to so change Aksinya's image in Tolstoy's eyes? Ironically, the image of Aksinya thirty years later is much more sexual and alluring than it had been when Tolstoy wrote in the early 1860s. He still believed in the superior spiritual powers of the peasantry but had begun his battle against sexuality, as evidenced by his later stories "Kreutzer Sonata" and "Father Sergius."

In Tolstoy's new creed, unbridled sexuality was equated with seduction by the devil and could only lead to punishment (a theme he had visited earlier in *Anna Karenina*), and ultimately the death of the seduced/seducer (note the epithet "*Vengeance in Mine*", with which *Anna Karenina* begins). Crimes of passion, suicide due to frustrated passion, murder because of sexual jealousy were all hallmarks of Tolstoy's post-conversion thinking. In *An Idyll*, the youth Andryukha is so frustrated with Malanya's playful seduction that he threatens: "Here I'm killing myself. You're a murderer, that's what you are! A criminal! Yes, I'm going to kill you and make an end of myself." Thirty years later, Tolstoy's protagonist in *The Devil*, Eugene Irtenev reflected on his choices: "Yes, that is how men come to poison or kill their wives or lovers... Kill? Yes. There are only two ways out: to kill my wife or her. For it is impossible to live like this. Impossible!... Yes, or else... Ah, yes, there is a third way: to kill myself." Tolstoy proceeded to write two different endings to that story, killing the protagonist and his lover in turns. *The Kreutzer Sonata* was Tolstoy's most detailed account of domestic murder due to sexual jealousy. Some have suggested that it reflected his very troubled relations with his own wife, whom he suspected of involvement with a musician and family

36 L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 7, (Moscow-Leningrad, 1932), p. 354. *Tikhon and Malanya* was written between November 1860- December 1862. Tolstoy wrote four variants of the story during this period. The editors of Tolstoy's Collected works suggest that Tolstoy was in fact forced to stop work on the stories after the scene (also described in *The Devil*) with his wife, when Aksinya, who along with other peasant women was scrubbing the manor house, was pointed out to her as "that woman".

friend by the name of Sergei Taneyev. As evidenced by his own diaries, the prophet of non-violence was occasionally overcome by rage when confronted with his own difficult married life and more than once had suggested that he and Sofia Behrs were locked in a struggle until the death! How bitter and cynical Tolstoy had become, after having compromised his ideals of love for a lifetime. Romantic love, the topic he had most written about in his famous novels, was what most eluded him as he grew older. It is not by chance that even in the midst of writing "The Devil," he still mused on his choices and questioned whether he had missed the opportunity for happiness and a simple life with his peasant mistress.

In old age, as he condemned his own social class, which he had so masterfully depicted in all of its colorful contradictions, Tolstoy came to identify with the peasants. He even began to dress like a peasant, gave up tobacco, alcohol, meat and elaborate meals, and refused to use servants to administer to him personally. Many gravitated to him as the founder of a new creed, Tolstoyanism. Yet ultimately, he was a lord masquerading as a peasant, and like Constantin Levin, his alter-ego in *Anna Karenina*, while he relished mowing hay side by side with the peasants and exerting himself physically, he could not cut his ties with his social class. Tolstoy however came to see the peasants as representatives of true Russianness and identified them with higher moral qualities. One would like to think that an obscure serf woman had impacted such transformations.