Jealousy as the cause of internal self-destruction

In “Kreutzer Sonata” by Leo Tolstoy

***“Jealousy is a fear of someone else’s superiority.”***

# Alexander Dumas

The grand collection of the world literature grows faint from the vast abundance of numerous approaches to the issue of jealousy and adultery that have been accumulated throughout centuries by different authors. This particular topic was used in Greek comedies, Roman tragedies, in writings of later Romanticists and Realists. However, only in the nineteenth century when psychology, developed within, the subject of jealousy in literature that exaggerated love tales turned to deep psychological dramas with characters soul-searching within the meticulous analysis of events. One of the most prominent giants in literature Leo Tolstoy was famous for combining detailed physical description with perceptive psychological insight. He conveys to a reader the bare human intimacy of gestures, deeds and thoughts of the jealous psychic soul. His story Kreutzer Sonata examines the basic drives, emotions and motives of ordinary people searching for answers to the questions of life. One of them is that **jealousy causes internal self-destruction.**

Prior to an analysis of the narrative of the story, where a jealous husband is presented, the nature of jealousy needs to be illuminated for the audience. After hearing the various theories on love by his fellow passengers on a train, an insanely jealous man named Pozdnyshev blurts out that he killed his wife, whom he suspected of carrying on an affair with a violinist. Then he reveals the story of how he came to such an extreme action.

What turned his life into a misery full of disappointment, anger and itchy craving that ruined his life as well as someone else’s life? Jealousy. This emotion made his gut ache, his blood boil and his logic disappear along with common sense. Pozdnyshev took jealousy and cast it into self-doubt, insecurity and desperation. “During the whole of my married life I never ceased to be tormented by jealousy,” reveals his confession. (Tolstoy, p.189)

As Webster’s Dictionary defines it, the word jealous means “suspiciously watchful; distrustful, or faithless; envious; anxiously solicitous.”(Outcry magazine, “Making the Most of Jealousy”) All of these qualities drove the main character to the murder and absolute self-desecration. His life is wretched, he has no motivating objectives left, no aspirations to follow, no goals to accomplish. His children are taken away from him by his sister-in-law, and he is abandoned by the entire world. In essence “The Kreutzer Sonata” presents a distorted view of love, especially of sexual experience. Pozdnyshev’s nightmarish, feverish narrative of his marriage in its later stages intensifies in rage and intelligence vanishes as a ravaging emotion of jealousy captures the utmost attention.

Beethoven’s “Kreutzer Sonata” thrusts Pozdnyshev into ultimate degree of jealousy that drives him to imminent self-destruction and to the villain murder. Music is the most perfect form of art to grasp jealousy over the mind. It is detached from the hierarchy of all other arts by not dwelling above them but by creating its own unique world. Music does not reflect either ugliness of life or sufferings generated by it. Music, through the fact of its existence drives off everything that is anxious and annoying. Music is the rhythm of life, a tender, caring rhythm that banishes any torment. Indeed, it is not overly complicated to draw a parallel between music and human emotions in general. Yet, music was the catalyst that accelerated the breakdown of Pozdnyshev’s marriage. The musical relationship between Trukhachevskiy and Pozdnyshev’s wife is itself a sensual, sexual one. The intercourse between piano and violin in Beethoven’s sonata is suggestive of this – and although there is no notion of any explicitly physical contact between the two, the contact between violin and piano, as it is described makes Pozdnyshev’s jealousy look well-founded.

Pozdnyshev claims that it was just one part of Beethoven’s masterpiece that propels his suspicion to grow into a firm belief in his wife infidelity. Psychologists suggest that men react to jealousy with anger towards their sexual partner and the third party and are more miserable by sexual impropriety than by mental perfidiousness. Sexual jealousy is the threat or perceived threat to a relationship between two individuals who are physically or sexually involved. (Final Exam: Sociobiological Aspects of Sexual Jealousy) Jealousy and murder grow out of and are really at one with, the sexual attraction, which brought Pozdnyshev and his wife together in the first place, and which held their marriage together.

Pozdnyshev accentuates that specifically the first presto of the “Kreutzer Sonata” is the “exquisite voluptuousness of the senses” and “the link between them.” (Tolstoy, p. 218) He is not particularly impressed with the “common and unoriginal andante’ and “the very weak finale.” However, the first allegro turns out to be an allegation of his wife’s adultery. What animated slide show is running in Pozdnyshev’s inflamed imagination when he listens to the piece so masterfully performed by his wife and Trukhachevsky?

“Kreutzer Sonata” is a very solid, yet unobtrusive piece of music. It is flowing into the mood, brightens it up and softens down. The first presto is not long, yet it reflects a sinful abundance of passion. Indeed, the dialogue of the violin and the piano amazes with its vivacity and glorification of feelings. It overwhelms and subdues emotions from the very first loud piano’s accords and violin singing its second part to piano on the contrary in a tender, twittering tone. Then piano is flying into crescendo and as if waiting for the imminent amalgamation of two hearts into sweet harmony of an increasing rhythm, it decides to cease to a voluptuous retreat. But prior to the immediate withdrawal it sends sensuous hints of the near victory to the violin. And if though the violin senses this hesitation it falls into flirting, mischievous playfulness. The next swift turns into calamity, sweet exhaustion of piano and violin, when a dialogue of two is almost sound. They are questioning, comforting each other, and perhaps seeking an answer to “maybe not?” But it does not last long, because the next accords of piano are assertive and irresistibly inviting. There is a notion of violin speculations and balance upon a thin line while making the right decision, but the crowning part of the allegro is the triumph over obstacles, doubts and moral norms. It is a celebration of feelings, glory of eroticism and delight of lust.

This professedly was the Pozdnyshev’s vision of the Kreutzer Sonata and his interpretation of the performance. Was it correct? Tolstoy never gives any explicit and clear depiction of the alleged affair. However, very animating and present in Pozdnyshev’s mind, this rendition of music generated into unrestrained beast of jealousy that drove him gradually yet inevitably to self-destruction and a murder as a consequence of own moral degradation.