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HOW MUCH LAND DOES A MAN NEED?

- thomas sachen

Leo Tolstoy's 1886 story *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* is a key example of Tolstoy's shift away from literature as a predominantly aesthetic pursuit in favor of literature as a means to disseminate his ideology. The late 1880s was a key transition period in Tolstoy's career; while all of his writings during this time demonstrated his trademark ability to integrate literary brilliance and acute social commentary, there was a clear divide between those works that more neatly befit Tolstoy's reputation as a great literary figure (examples include "The Death of Ivan Ilych" [1886] and "The Kreutzer Sonata" [1889]) and more straightforward, parable-like works that prioritized meaning over form ("Where Love Is, God Is" [1885] and "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" are prototypical).

Indeed, Tolstoy's exposure to Schopenhauer's philosophy in the 1870s [1] led to a spiritual reawakening following the publication of his 1878 masterwork *Anna Karenina*, culminating in his most personal work yet, *Confession* in 1882, wherein he lays out his views on mortality and man's relationship with God. This marked the birth of "Tolstoyanism," the anti-institutional religious and social anarchic movement that marked the last quarter-century of Tolstoy's life. These late writings were illustrations of Tolstoy's iconoclastic gospel, taking aim at some of the most well-established Russian proprieties – "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" and "Kholstomer" (1886), for example, were incisive criticisms of the greed and pride of ownership stemming from the hierarchical structure of contemporary Russian society. Stories of this period were rich with such subtext, addressing central tenets of Tolstoy's folk philosophy like compassion ("What Men Live By" [1886] and "Master and Man" [1895]), humility ("Alyosha the Pot" [1910]), and nonviolence ("After the Ball" [1903]). Tolstoy's technique of sharing short stories

illustrating concrete instantiations of the values of Tolstoyanism rather than relying solely on abstract pseudo-religious dictums was consistent with his disillusionment with the theological dogma present in the Russian Orthodox church, which he felt placed too strong an emphasis on faith and the afterlife without enough focus on religion in practice and treatment of one's fellow man.

While Tolstoy always espoused these and other values – 1859's *Three Deaths* was an early exploration of the themes of humility and simplicity in living – not until this late period was there an explicit moral and religious backdrop against which to hold his writings.

"How Much Land Does a Man Need?" is an important harbinger of this shift in the motivation behind Tolstoy's work. It is a modest tale that has been told many times: the Brothers' Grimm folktale "The Fisherman and His Wife", for example, is nearly identical in moral and structure. However, the techniques used in "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" are unmistakably Tolstoyan, with a certain grave intensity rumbling beneath its simple exterior. The absolutist denunciation of Pahom's greed and the wicked irony found in the defamiliarization of Pahom's death and too-late revelation are devices undoubtedly characteristic of Tolstoy's hand. Motifs present throughout a lifetime of his work appear: enigmatic and foreboding dreams, vivid natural symbolism, long symbolic journeys, and detailed descriptions of the process of dying.

The tale begins with a discussion between two sisters on whether urban or rural life is preferable. The elder sister is relatively wealthy, married to a tradesman with whom she lives in some luxury in the town. She pities the younger sister, who is married to a peasant with whom she lives quite a humble life in the country. The younger sister insists that their humble life is preferable, saying "We may live roughly, but at least we are free from anxiety… [w]e shall never grow rich, but we shall always have enough to eat." The anxiety she speaks of is a recurring theme in Tolstoy's work of this period; in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Ivan Ilych is plagued by this anxiety in the face of death. One can equate this existential anxiety with despair rooted in hedonism and the meaninglessness resulting from a lack of fulfillment with one's own means. Modesty and self-satisfaction were core values of Tolstoy's throughout his life – as early as 1855 he wrote in a diary entry that one must "be modest, so that the pleasure of being satisfied with [oneself] should not turn into the pleasure of exciting praise or surprise from others." [2]

This is precisely the principle underscored by "How Much Land Does a Man Need?". Pahom, though ostensibly well-meaning, is perpetually unsatisfied with his lot. Misinterpreting the words of his wife, he boasts "Our only trouble is that we haven't land enough. If I had plenty of land, I shouldn't fear the Devil himself!" Unbeknownst to Pahom, the Devil himself hears these words and sets about to punish Pahom for his greed.

When a small landowner nearby decides to sell small parcels of land, Pahom scrapes up enough money to purchase a 40 acre lot. Though several peasants advocated for the land to be used communally, the Devil intervened and sowed discord, so that the landowner decided to break up the estate and sell parcels to individuals. This emphasis on the good of a community is also key in this story. In Tolstoy's view, the pride and jealousy that accompanies ownership serves only to drive communities apart, which is why the Devil is so eager to cause disagreement and to encourage Pahom's lust for more land.

Pahom's land serves him well, and within a year he's quite a bit better off and he begins to feel happiness and pride in ownership. Nonetheless he is soon distraught: the neighbors that used to be Pahom's friends soon encroach upon his land, letting their cows pasture or stealing his crops, driving a greater wedge between Pahom and the community. Luckily a man visits Pahom and tells him of a commune several hundred miles away, where there is abundant land to be had. Pahom, buzzing with ambition and desire, packs up and travels to the new settlement, where he acquires 125 acres of land, approximately 3 times as much as his previous holding. Though the land served him well and Pahom began to make some money, he was still unsatisfied, as his land was parceled up in several communal fields.

Here again Pahom wrongfully believes that acquiring more land will resolve his discontent: "'If it were my own land', thought Pahom, 'I should be independent, and there would not be all this unpleasantness.'" Desperate to increase his holdings to finally become happy, he is visited by a traveling man who tells Pahom of fertile virgin land inhabited by the nomadic Bashkirs that can be had in large quantities extremely cheaply. Pahom, still under the illusion that his hunger for land is well-founded and just, sets off to the steppeland, bringing gifts in exchange for an audience with the jovial and free-living Bashkirs. They welcome him graciously, and make light of his desire to buy their land. The Bashkirs live communally. There is an

abundance of food and drink, and the people live in a joyful union with each other and the earth. Here is another emergence of Tolstoy's ideology; it's clear from his idyllic portrayal of the Bashkirs, compared to the squabbling peasants, that Tolstoy believes this harmonious mode of living to be preferable to highly stratified and materialistic mainstream Russian society.

The Bashkirs strike Pahom a deal: for 1000 roubles, he is welcome to all the land he can encircle on foot in a day's walk, provided that by sundown he returns to precisely the spot from which he embarks at dawn. That night, Pahom has a nightmare, wherein he sees the men who told him of new prospects of land transforming into the Devil. At the Devil's feet Pahom sees himself, lying dead in only trousers and a shirt. When he awakes, Pahom brushes the dream aside without a thought, his judgment clouded by his single minded desire.

Here the story turns somewhat folklorish, markedly different from the unflinching realism of many of Tolstoy's earlier works. Already the premise of this "deal with the Devil" is mythical in scope, as a hapless man sets out to battle his own blind avarice. The next morning, Pahom sets off into the steppe, with the merry Bashkirs waiting on a hill for his return. He quickly strips off his shoes and coat (until he's dressed just as the version of himself he saw in his dream) and, sidetracked by increasingly tempting patches of land, turns back too late. He runs with utter abandon to return to his starting point before sundown and manages to make it back just as the sun is setting. However, overcome with exhaustion from his journey, Pahom collapses and dies at the feet of his land, just as he saw himself dead at the feet of the Devil. Though Pahom finally secured all the land he desired, it was in vain. The story concludes by finally answering the question posed in its title: a man needs but 6 feet of land, for his grave.

Prima facie, Tolstoy's depiction of Pahom's death is uncharacteristically brief and cold, given the author's usual propensity for brutally detailed portrayals of the last moments of life (see, for example, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" or Prince Andrey's death in *War and Peace*). Though the actual moment of death is brief, several key features of a Tolstoyan death appear during Pahom's day-long journey through the steppe, which might itself be viewed as the process of dying. Pahom helplessly watches the sun draw closer to the horizon, but only after mistakenly believing his time is up (the sun was blocked by a nearby hill) does he have his revelation that his vain quest for land came at the cost of his life. This

revelation comes far too late, as Pahom is at that point beyond saving. The motif of a too-late revelation is central in this period of Tolstoy's work, when, for example, Ivan Ilych finally understands the shallowness of his life only moments before his death. More explicitly, the surname **Позднышев** of the irredeemable antagonist of "The Kreutzer Sonata," shares a root with the Russian word **поздно**, literally "late." This motif accords with Tolstoy's reformulation of Christianity, wherein meaning is found by living one's earthly life ethically (foregoing the emphasis on the afterlife omnipresent in

conventional Christian doctrine). To Tolstoy, repentance at the time of death is insufficient for a well-lived life.

Another typical technique employed at this point is the defamiliarization of Pahom's burial, which is the final instance of Tolstoy's scathing irony. Though death and burial carried very grave connotations in Russian society (particularly those entangled with Orthodox Christianity: compare for example the highly ritualistic funerals of Ivan Ilych in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" or Count Kirill Bezukhov in *War and Peace*), Pahom's burial is succinctly depicted as follows: "His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahom to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed." By momentarily stripping away the usual spiritual and philosophical implications of death, Tolstoy views the burial literally as an allotment of a six foot parcel of land for Pahom's grave to gain a new perspective on the insignificance of possessions, as compared to a well-lived and fulfilling life.

The expansive steppe is depicted with surrealist imagery of the "virgin soil, as flat as the palm of your hand, as black as the seed of a poppy, and in the hollows different kinds of grasses...breast high." The vast expanse of the steppeland is a typical Tolstoyan symbol: it calls to mind the scene in *War and Peace* where Prince Andrey lies wounded in the field staring into the infinite nothingness of the blue sky, or the impenetrable blizzard in "Master and Man" – these vast expanses of nature reflect one's inner self, as a manifestation of God's will. Another key example of this device is the transformation of the oak tree Prince Andrey passes before and after meeting Natasha Rostova in *War and Peace*, which is at first moribund and stoic but later blossoming and prosperous. In this sense the infinite reach of the Bashkir steppe reflects Pahom's infinite desire (*i.e.* his inability to be satisfied with his lot) and the delectable temptation that drives

Pahom and gives his life "meaning."

Tolstoy paints the deathly sun red, remarking at dawn that "the morning red was beginning to kindle," marking the birth of a new day and at sundown that the sun was "red as blood," now with a decidedly more sinister tone. The sun's redness represents the Devil himself, who has orchestrated Pahom's demise. Physical manifestations of death and the Devil are also common in this period. Two years earlier, in "Memoirs of a Madman" (1884), Tolstoy depicts death itself as a horror "red, white, and square," during the infamous "Arzamas event." Similar imagery is at work in "How Much Land Does a Man Need?": the contrasting red and white light of the sun color the steppeland, and Tolstoy notes that the plot Pahom marks out is a lopsided square. The artificiality of the shape of this square plot is in direct opposition to the rest of the steppe, which is otherwise populated by gentle hollows and natural hillocks. In this sense Pahom tries to impose his individual will on nature, which Tolstoyanists might view as a manifestation of God Himself, and he is punished accordingly. More precisely, Tolstoy's conception of God is as a living truth who embodies love, accordance, and nonviolence, commonly symbolized by nature and rural living. This sheds new light on the dichotomy posed in the beginning of the story, between the sisters' conceptions of urban and rural life, which may now clearly be viewed as the divide between the immoral and the pious.

Thus "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" signifies a major shift in the purpose and form of Tolstoy's work. Tolstoy uses the same devices that made his early work so emotionally and intellectually impactful to disseminate his newfound anarchist ideology. This story is a particularly strong example of this shift in format, often favoring (seemingly) simple folktales that have unambiguous and unflinching moral standing. The stories of this period are remarkably consistent, underscoring among others the core principles of humility, love, tolerance, freedom from lust and desire, and rebellion against religious and social institutions.