

Classic Poetry Series

Fyodor Sologub
- poems -

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Fyodor Sologub(1 March 1863 – 5 December 1927)

Fyodor Sologub was a Russian Symbolist poet, novelist, playwright and essayist. He was the first writer to introduce the morbid, pessimistic elements characteristic of European fin de siècle literature and philosophy into Russian prose.

Early Life

Sologub was born in St. Petersburg into the family of a poor tailor, Kuzma Afanasyevich Teternikov, who had been a serf in Poltava guberniya, the illegitimate son of a local landowner. His father died of tuberculosis in 1867, and his illiterate mother was forced to become a servant in the home of the aristocratic Agapov family, where Sologub and his younger sister Olga grew up. Seeing how difficult his mother's life was, Sologub was determined to rescue her from it, and after graduating from the St. Petersburg Teachers' Institute in 1882 he took his mother and sister with him to his first teaching post in Kresttsy, where he began his literary career with the 1884 publication in a children's magazine of his poem "The Fox and the Hedgehog" under the name Te-rnikov.

Sologub continued writing as he relocated to new jobs in Velikiye Luki (1885) and Vytegra (1889), but felt that he was completely isolated from the literary world and longed to be able to live in the capital again; nevertheless, his decade-long experience with the "frightful world" of backwoods provincial life served him well when he came to write *The Petty Demon*. (He said later that in writing the novel he had softened the facts: "things happened that no one would believe if I were to describe them.") He felt sympathetic with the writers associated with the journal *Severnyi vestnik* (Northern Herald), including Nikolai Minsky, Zinaida Gippius, and Dmitry Merezhkovsky, who were beginning to create what would be known as the Symbolist movement, and in 1891 he visited Petersburg hoping to see Minsky and Merezhkovsky, but met only the first.

Early Literary Career

In 1892 he was finally able to relocate to the capital, where he got a job teaching mathematics, started writing what would become his most famous novel, *The Petty Demon*, and began frequenting the offices of *Severny Vestnik*, which published much of his writing during the next five years. There, in 1893, Minsky, who thought Teternikov was an unpoetic name, suggested that he use a pseudonym, and the aristocratic name Sollogub was decided on, but one of the ls was omitted as an attempt (unavailing, as it turned out) to avoid confusion with

Count Vladimir Sollogub. In 1894 his first short story, "Ninotchka's Mistake" (Ninotchka's Mistake), was published in *Illustrirovanny Mir*, and in the autumn of that year his mother died. In 1896 he published his first three books: a book of poems, a collection of short stories, and his first novel, *Tyazhelye sny* (Bad Dreams), which he had begun in 1883 and which is considered one of the first decadent Russian novels.

In April 1897 he ended his association with *Severny Vestnik* and, along with Merezhkovsky and Gippius, began writing for the journal *Sever* (North). The next year his first series of fairy tales was published. In 1899 he was appointed principal of the Andreevskoe municipal school and relocated to their premises on Vasilievsky Island; he also became a member of the St. Petersburg District School Council. He continued to publish books of poetry, and in 1902 he finished *The Petty Demon*, which was published partially in serial form in 1905 (in *Voprosy zhizni*, which was terminated before the final installments). At this time his "Sundays," a literary group that met at his home, attracted poets, artists, and actors, including Alexander Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Alexei Remizov, Sergei Gorodetsky, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Leon Bakst, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and Sergei Auslender. Teffi wrote of him at this period:

His face was pale, long, without eyebrows; by his nose was a large wart; a thin reddish beard seemed to pull away from his thin cheeks; dull, half-closed eyes. His face was always tired, always bored... Sometimes when he was a guest at someone's table he would close his eyes and remain like that for several minutes, as if he had forgotten to open them. He never laughed... Sologub lived on Vasilievsky Island in the small official apartment of a municipal school where he was a teacher and inspector. He lived with his sister, a flat-chested, consumptive old maid. She was quiet and shy; she adored her brother and was a little afraid of him, and spoke of him only in a whisper. He said in a poem: "We were holiday children, My sister and I"; they were very poor, those holiday children, dreaming that someone would give them "even motley-colored shells from a brook." Sadly and dully they dragged out the difficult days of their youth. The consumptive sister, not having received her share of motley shells, was already burning out. He himself was exhausted by his boring teaching job; he wrote in snatches by night, always tired from the boyish noise of his students...

So Sologub lived in his little official apartment with little icon lamps, serving his guests mint cakes, ruddy rolls, pastila [fruit candy], and honey cakes, for which his sister went across the river somewhere on a horsecar. She told us privately, "I'd love to ride on the outside of the horsecar sometime, but my brother won't let me. He says it's unseemly for a lady."... Those evenings in the little apartment, when his close literary friends gathered, were very interesting. *</i>*

Fame and Marriage

At the time of the 1905 Revolution his politically critical skazochki ("little tales") were very popular and were collected into a book, *Politicheskie skazochki* (1906). *The Petty Demon* was published in a standalone edition in 1907 and quickly became popular, having ten printings during the author's lifetime. Sologub's next major prose work, *A Created Legend* (1905–1913) (literally "the legend in the making," a trilogy consisting of *Drops of Blood*, *Queen Ortruda*, and *Smoke and Ash*), had many of the same characteristics but presented a considerably more positive and hopeful description of the world. "It begins with the famous declaration that although life is 'vulgar . . . stagnant in darkness, dull and ordinary,' the poet 'creates from it a sweet legend . . . my legend of the enchanting and beautiful.'"

His increasing literary success was tempered for him by his sister's tuberculosis; in 1906 he traveled with her to Ufa Guberniya for treatment, and in June 1907 he took her to Finland, where she died on June 28. The next month he returned to St. Petersburg and retired after 25 years of teaching. In the autumn of 1908 he married the translator Anastasia Chebotarevskaya (born in 1876), whom he had met at Vyacheslav Ivanov's apartment three years before. Teffi wrote that she "reshaped his daily life in a new and unnecessary way. A big new apartment was rented, small gilt chairs were bought. The walls of the large cold office for some reason were decorated with paintings of Leda by various painters... The quiet talks were replaced by noisy gatherings with dances and masks. Sologub shaved his mustache and beard, and everyone started to say that he resembled a Roman of the period of decline." He continued publishing poems, plays, and translations; the next year he traveled abroad for the first time, visiting France with his wife, and in September the dramatized version of *The Petty Demon* was published.

Between 1909 and 1911 *The Complete Works of Fyodor Sologub* were published in 12 volumes, and in 1911 a collection of critical works appeared, containing over 30 critical essays, notes, and reviews by famous writers. In 1913 he presented a lecture, "The Art Of These Days," that was so successful in St. Petersburg he took it on tour all over Russia. In 1914 he started a magazine, *Dnevnik pisatelei* (Writers' Journals), and went abroad with his wife, but the outbreak of World War I put an end to the magazine. In 1915 two collections of his stories and tales were published in English, and in 1916 *The Petty Demon*, all translated by John Cournos.

Sologub continued touring and giving lectures, and in 1917 he welcomed the

February Revolution. During the summer he headed the Soyuz Deyatelei Iskusstva (Union of Artists) and wrote articles with a strong anti-Bolshevik attitude. He was opposed to the October Revolution but remained in Petrograd and contributed to independent newspapers until they were terminated. In 1918 he spoke on behalf of the Union Of Artists; published *Slepaia babochka* (The Blind Butterfly), a collection of new short stories; had a play produced in Yalta; and joined the Petersburg Union of Journalists. But by the end of the year, because of Bolshevik control of publishing and bookselling, he did not have any outlets for his writing. Lev Kleinbort wrote of that period: "Sologub did not give lectures, but lived by selling his things."

Even though he was in principle opposed to emigration, the desperate condition in which he and his wife found himself caused him to apply in December 1919 for permission to leave the country; he did not receive any response. Half a year later he wrote to Lenin personally, again without result. In mid-July 1921 he finally received a letter from Trotsky authorizing his departure, and he made plans to leave for Reval on September 25. But on the evening of September 23 his wife, weakened by privation and driven to despair by the long torment of uncertainty, threw herself off the Tuchkov Bridge and drowned. His wife's death grieved Sologub for the rest of his life, and he referenced it often in his subsequent writing. (A poem dated November 28, 1921, begins "You took away my soul/ To the bottom of the river./ I will defy your wishes/ And follow you.") He gave up any thought of leaving Russia and relocated into an apartment on the banks of the Zhdanovka River, in which his wife had drowned.

In 1921 the New Economic Policy was begun, and from the end of the year his books (which had been published abroad with increasing frequency, notably in Germany and Estonia) began to appear in Soviet Russia. In December *Fimiamy* (Incense), a collection of poems, was published; the next two years more poetry collections and translations were published (Balzac's *Contes drolatiques*, Paul Verlaine, Heinrich von Kleist, Frédéric Mistral), and in 1924 the fortieth anniversary of Sologub's literary activities was celebrated at the Alexandrinsky Theater in Petersburg, with speeches by Yevgeny Zamyatin, Mikhail Kuzmin, Andrei Bely, and Osip Mandelstam, among others. In April of that year he was elected the honorary chairman of the Division of Translators in the Petersburg Union Of Writers, and two years later he became the chairman of the board of the Union. He had literary gatherings in his apartment, attended by such writers as [Anna Akhmatova](http://www.poemhunter.com/anna-akhmatova/) and Korney Chukovsky. His new poems, which had a classic simplicity, were appreciated by those to whom he read them, but they were not printed anymore.

Death and Legacy

In May 1927 Sologub became seriously ill, and by summer he could leave his bed only rarely; his last poem was dated October 1. After a long struggle, he died on December 5. Two days later he was buried next to his wife in Smolensk Cemetery.

While Sologub's novels have become his best-known works, he has always been respected by scholars and fellow authors for his poetry. The Symbolist poet Valery Bryusov admired the deceptive simplicity of Sologub's poetry and described it as possessing a Pushkinian perfection of form. Innokenty Annensky another poet and contemporary of Sologub, wrote that the most original aspect of Sologub's poetry was its author's unwillingness to separate himself from his literature.

The Petty Demon

The Petty Demon attempted to create a description of 'poshlost', a Russian concept that has characteristics of both evil and banality. The antihero is a provincial schoolteacher, Peredonov, notable for his complete lack of redeeming human qualities. The novel recounts the story of the morally corrupt Peredonov going insane and paranoid in an unnamed Russian provincial town, parallel with his struggle to be promoted to governmental inspector of his province. The omniscient third-person narrative allowed Sologub to combine his Symbolist tendencies and the tradition of Russian Realism in which he engaged throughout his earlier novels, a style similar to Maupassant's fantastic realism.

Realistic elements of The Petty Demon include a vivid description of 19th-century rural everyday life, while a fantastic element is the presentation of Peredonov's hallucinations on equal terms with external events. While the book was received as an indictment of Russian society, it is a very metaphysical novel and one of the major prose works of the Russian Symbolist movement. James H. Billington said of it:

The book puts on display a Freudian treasure chest of perversions with subtlety and credibility. The name of the novel's hero, Peredonov, became a symbol of calculating concupiscence for an entire generation... He torments his students, derives erotic satisfaction from watching them kneel to pray, and systematically befouls his apartment before leaving it as part of his generalized spite against

the universe.

A Son Was Born To A Poor Peasant

A son was born to a poor peasant.
A foul old woman stepped inside
The hut, with trembling bony fingers
Clawing her tangled locks aside.

And when the midwife wasn't looking,
Across towards that babe she reached.
And with her gnarled, misshapen fingers
His cheek she very lightly touched.

Mumbling weird words and slowly tapping
Her crooked stick, she went away.
Nobody knew what charm she'd woven,
And so the years went duly by -

The secret spell came to fulfilment:
In life, much sorrow came to him
But happiness, and joy, and true love
Fled the dark sign upon the skin.

Fyodor Sologub

All The World's Ruled By A Dragon

All the world's ruled by the Dragon -
Fiery, mad, wicked, perverse.
Let me praise him with a humble,
Daring and ironic curse:

You, destruction-bringer, ordered
The damp swamps to show your power;
You brought forth the trees and grasses
Growing into leaves and flowers.

All things flying, all things crawling
You made - though their time is brief.
Those aware and those ambitious
You doomed to the harshest life.

You moved and clouds started floating . . .
You chased winds along the land,
So your kisses, deadly scorching,
Would not sear before you planned.

And your orders can't be cancelled;
You have no mercy to bring.
You rule and don't hear our begging.
You don't love. You kill each thing.

Fyodor Sologub

Devil's Swing

Over the rushing river
Where shaggy fir-trees stand,
The devil himself is pushing
My swing with furry hand.

Pushing, he laughs away,
 And up I go,
 And down I go,
The seat creaks ominously,
The rope begins to fray,
Rubbing against a bough.

Prolonged the seat-board's creaking,
As up and down it glides.
With wheezy laughter shaking,
The devil holds his sides.

I hang on, swinging, gliding,
 As up I go,
 And down I go,
Slithering, slipping, sliding,
My dizzy gaze avoiding
The devil down below.

Above the shady fir-tree,
A voice laughs from the blue:
"You've landed on the swing, see! -
Swing, and to hell with you!"

And in the shaggy fir-tree,
A raucous hullabaloo:
"You've landed on the swing, see! -
Swing, and to hell with you!"

The devil will not leave it,
The swing will fly apace
Till with a violent buffet
I'm swept clean off my place,

Until the last few strands
Of hemp snap finally,
Until my native land
Comes flying up at me.

I'll soar above that fir-tree
And bang earth with my head.
So swing the swing on, devil,
Higher, higher... Aah!

Fyodor Sologub

Don Quixote

(Fragment)

Through the rusty, ever-grinding clangour
Of the fierce worldly chariot,
Through the curses, whistle, laughter, clamour,
Having lost his horse, lance, shield and sword,

To the fence of lands of Dulcinea,
Don Quixote will drag himself, at last:
Gates are opened, on the sand of alleys
Rouses lay... and every bush is cut!

Forcing back his uninvited tears,
Don Quixote will ask a somber page:
"Why did you kill all these roses here?" -
"Tidings came to us, such outraged,

That the faithful Don Quixote was wounded
By the poisoned arrow to death.
"Dulcinea", said my lady, "would not
Have survived her Don Quixote on earth!"...

And the poor knight will escort the coffin,
Caring not for jeers' and mocking sets:
Dulcinea, the luminous, lofty queen
Of the joyful paradise is dead!

Fyodor Sologub

God Will Doom You

1915

God will doom you, for sure,
Because you - so droll;
You will have to endure
The earthly pain in all.

You will mock, long and bitter,
Your life, lost sunny beams,
And feel yourself as guilty
For your resplendent dreams.

It'll die - your sacred fire -
In deeps, so mute and vague,
But men will not be tired,
To cry, "Hey, an old wag!"

Will mock you, as a clown, -
- You're so funny chap! -
And, o'er your eyes, pull down,
A worn out joker's cap,

Push on a sandy round.
"You have to dance and sing!"
Well, the fool's cap's pulled down,
And bells of clowns ring.

The funny tears are flowed
Through wrinkles of weather'd cheeks,
And all roar around
To each of jumps and kicks.

Fyodor Sologub

His Wines, Feasts And Funs

His wines, feasts and funs are forgotten,
His sword and his armour are left,
He, single, descends into rotten
A dungeon, without a lamp.

With a shrill and continued sound,
The door - all forgot it - is rolled:
Just dampness and darkness around,
And the window's set high and small.

His eyes grow used to the darkness,
And through humid gloom under vaults,
Strange marks dawn on stony vastness,
Of selling, wet floor, and wet walls.

He looks for a long time at networks
Of the marks, such unknown, and waits,
When his eyes, like eyes of all sinners,
Will be well enlightened by death.

Fyodor Sologub

I Composed These Rhythmical Sounds

1893

I composed these rhythmical sounds
To make lesser the thrust of my soul,
And to draw the heart's endless wounds,
In the sea where the silver strings roll,

To make sound, like nightingales' ode,
My poor dream's ever beautiful voice,
And to force the song's smile from lips closed
And blazed on by long sadness and loss.

Fyodor Sologub

I Have Enchanted All Of Nature

I have enchanted all of Nature
And forged each moment's quality.
And what a horrifying freedom
I found in such a sorcery!

My constant guilt - with no beginning
Spread till all limit-zones were passed;
The body far away expanded,
And depths opened that were so vast.

Thell I called out to the Prime-Mover,
My challenge unto Heaven thrown;
The stars and planets gave the answer:
I made Nature myself, alone.

Fyodor Sologub

Some Wizard, Very Bad And Sly

1896

Some wizard, very bad and sly,
Had separated mind my own,
From real nature my -
And that is why I cry and moan.

But if he sometimes fells asleep,
While lost his magic awful,
Great nature is not more joyful,
It doesn't create of me a slip.

Always sincere one and mindful,
She'll quietly approach me.
In her, as bottomless as sea,
I see a grace of all that's marvel.

Fyodor Sologub

The Amphora

In a gay jar upon his shoulder
The slave morosely carries wine.
His road is rough with bog and boulder,
And in the sky no starlights shine.
Into the dark with stabbing glances
He peers, his careful steps are slow,
Lest on his breast as he advances
The staining wine should overflow.

I bear my amphora of sorrow,
Long brimming with the wine it hides;
There poison for each waiting morrow
Ferments within the painted sides.
I follow secret ways and hidden
To guard the evil vessel, lest
A careless hand should pour unbidden
Its bitterness upon my breast.

Fyodor Sologub

The Painful Genius, Great Shakespeare

1913

(Fragment)

The painful genius, great Shakespeare,
You never trusted in deceitful tales -
In all your Hamlets, Calibans, Macbeths,
And lighted inside me the fire, I'm to bear.

And I behave like King Lear of the old:
I will endow, with my 'lands and waters',
Regan and Goneril - my evil daughters,
Scorning true gift, Cornelia had brought.

Inside my body of the working fellow,
Your heroes' crowd is forever locked,
And I'll be duped, ingenuous Othello,
And I'll be pale, revengeful Shylock.

And I'll await my final stroke here -
Over eternal fancies of Shakespeare.

Fyodor Sologub

The Sacred World's Unquestioned

1896

The sacred world's unquestioned Pharaoh -
I filled it with my spirit's breath
And shall not ever have a hero
Nor in the heavens nor on earth.

I'll hold in secret that I breed on
My own sacramental light;
And toil like slave, but for my freedom,
I call for darkness, peace and night.

Fyodor Sologub

We Are All Captured Beasts

We are all captured beasts,
And we howl - as we might.
We can't open the doors,
For the doors are locked tight.

If our hearts can remember tradition,
When our barking brings solace, we bark.
We don't know. Long ago we've forgotten
That it stinks badly in this zoo-park.

For our hearts can accept repetition;
Bored and weary, we cuckoo our song.
For the zoo is impersonal, habitual;
We've not longed to be free for so long.

We are all captured beasts,
And we howl - as we might.
We can't open the doors,
For the doors are locked tight.

Fyodor Sologub

What Are Our Villages

What are our villages, destitute,
Or the whole of time and of space?
Father's mansions exist in a multitude, -
We don't know their name, and their place.

But, while waiting for joys behind earthly skies,
Beside which life is only a dream,
I renounce the sweetness, beguiling us,
I repulse the distress of time streams.

Cruel torments, decline, degradation,
You have brought me a garland of death.
And the promise of our resurrection
Will be never fulfilled on the earth.

Fyodor Sologub

When Heaving On The Stormy Waters

When, heaving on the stormy waters,
I felt my ship beneath to sink,
I prayed, "Oh, Father Satan, save me,
Forgive me at death's utter brink!

"If you will save my soul embittered
From perishing before its hour,
The days to come, the nights that follow
I vow to vice, I pledge to power."

The Devil forthwith snatched and flung me
Into a boat; the sides were frail,
But on the bench the oars were lying
And in the bow an old gray sail.

And landward once again I carried
My outcast soul, bereft of kin,
Upon its sick and vicious sojourn
My body and its gift of sin.

And I am faithful, Father Satan,
Unto my evil hour's vow,
When from my drowning ship you saved me
And when I prayed you guide the prow.

To you descend my praises, Father,
No day from bitter blame exempt.
O'er worlds my blasphemy shall tower;
And I shall tempt -- and I shall tempt.

Fyodor Sologub

When I Sailed In A Sea

1902

When I sailed in a sea of tempests,
And when my ship sunk into sea,
I wildly cried: "My friend, the best one,
My dear Devil, pray, help me!

Don't let my evil, restless soul
Have perished before ordered dates,
I will attend to sins the whole
Black train of all my future days."

And Devil took and threw me, coarse,
Into the boat, old and frail.
I found there the pair of oars,
The little bench and grayish sail.

And I again brought on the ground
Into the large and evil life
My soul, everywhere pushed out,
My body, sunk in sinful strife.

And I am faithful, Devil-father,
To the pledge, in evil time I gave,
When I was in the sea disaster
And such miraculously saved.

I'll make your fame midst earthly nations
To a shame of every day, unjust,
I'll sing praise to the worlds damnation,
And while enticing, I'll entice.

Fyodor Sologub

Wine And Joy

Wine and joy are completely forgotten,
As well as his armor and sword.
Alone he descends in the rotten
Mysterious dungeon. The door
Is squeaking with long drawn sound
For no one has entered inside.
The dark and the damp reign around.
The window is narrow and high.

His eyes grow accustomed to the gloom and
Through the dust and the web he explores
Some strange marks, emerging and looming
On the floor, on the vaults, on the walls.
He gazes at the marks' interlacement
At those incomprehensible signs
And tarries for Death to embrace him
To enlighten his soul and eyes.

Fyodor Sologub