

Fyodor Sologub

1863-1927

(Born Fyodor Kuzmich Teternikov; also transliterated as Fedor or Feodor) Russian novelist, poet, short story writer, playwright, and fairy tale writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Sologub's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 9.

INTRODUCTION

Fyodor Sologub is regarded as one of the major authors of the Russian Silver Age, a period spanning the first two decades of the twentieth century that saw the birth of a number of new artistic movements and poetic styles. Sologub produced plays, essays, short stories, and fairy tales, and was the first Russian Symbolist poet to receive wide recognition, although he is best known for his controversial novel, *Melkii bes* (1907; *The Petty Demon*). In this and other writings, the author introduced decadent European theories of art, beauty, death, and reality to Russian literature and offered his bleak and cynical vision of human existence, in which death and dreams provide the only escape from the corruption, pettiness, and immorality of the modern world. Throughout his career, Sologub explored themes related to innocence and sexuality, the limitations of human morality, violence, and the power of the creative imagination to transform reality. After decades of critical neglect, he has been increasingly regarded as a significant figure in Russian literary history, appreciated for his mastery of poetic form and his innovations in drama, verse, and fiction. Murl G. Barker asserted that "as more critical attention is focused on the Silver Age in Russian literature," Sologub will "undoubtedly emerge as a more important writer than the modest dimensions of the critical literature devoted to his work might suggest."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Sologub was born Fyodor Kuzmich Teternikov on February 17, 1863, in St. Petersburg, Russia, to parents who were both former serfs. When Sologub's father died of tuberculosis in 1867, his mother accepted a position as the only servant in the household of the Agapovs, a middle-class family living in St. Petersburg. While Sologub was exposed to the theater, opera, and

literature as a result of the Agapov's patronage, he was also never allowed to forget his position as the servant's son. In 1882, Sologub graduated from the St. Petersburg Teachers' Institute and accepted a position in Kretsky. His mother and sister accompanied him on his move, and over the next ten years, he and his family relocated to several other provincial cities, including Velikie Luki and Vytegra, which were featured in his later writings. In 1892, Sologub accepted a teaching position in St. Petersburg, became affiliated with the Russian Symbolist movement, and established a relationship with *Severnyi vestnik*, a literary journal that promoted the emergent modernist movement. His first major novel, *Tyazhelye sny* (1896; *Bad Dreams*), was among the important early works published in the journal. During this period, the author was also encouraged to adopt the pseudonym Sologub, which he used throughout his career. By the turn of the century, Sologub was well known in Russian literary circles and considered a major symbolist poet, although he still depended on teaching for most of his income. He continued to write over the next few years, producing essays, poetry, and fiction, including his next major novel, *The Petty Demon*, which was initially serialized in *Voprosy zhizhi*, and which brought the author widespread recognition.

During the revolutionary years of the early 1900s, Sologub promoted the idea that art could bridge the divide between the intelligentsia and the people, and he increasingly turned to the medium of theater as a means to achieve this goal. He produced several landmark symbolist plays, including *Pobeda smerti* (1907; *The Triumph of Death*), *Vanka klyuchnik i pazh Zhean* (1908), and *Nochnyi plyaski* (1909). With the success of *The Petty Demon*, Sologub was able to retire from teaching in 1907. Shortly thereafter, the author met Anastasiia Nikolaevna Chebotarevskaja, a literary translator, whom he married in 1908. According to the author's contemporaries, the marriage precipitated a significant change, not only in his lifestyle, which had always been reserved, but also in his ideas. After 1910, he became increasingly involved with various other activities, including lecture tours, the establishment of a new journal, the effort to raise awareness of anti-Semitism in Russia, and the promotion of Russia's involvement in World War I. Sologub did not support the Bolshevik Revolution, however, and he participated in groups seeking to preserve the autonomy of the artistic community. In 1919, the author and his wife applied for permission to emigrate but were denied several

times before their request was finally approved. The stress of the situation drove Chebotarevskaia to commit suicide; in September 1921, she left home and threw herself in the Zhdanovka River, although her body was not found until the following May. After his wife's death, Sologub struggled with his life but continued to write, producing poetry that explored themes of death and Soviet Russia's political situation. He was unable to publish in his native country, however, and supported himself as a translator. The author died on December 5, 1927, and was buried, with honors, in St. Petersburg.

MAJOR WORKS

Sologub's novels are among his most important literary contributions. In his first longer work of fiction, *Bad Dreams*, which is largely acknowledged as the first Russian modernist novel, the author offers a bleak portrait of society and explores themes related to human morality. In this work, the protagonist, Login, is a school teacher in a stifling provincial town, who tests the limits of human morality through violence, sex, and exploration of the demonic but is eventually saved through the efforts of a local woman. Sologub emphasizes the depravity of society in the novel and expresses the need for the individual to rise above the masses to escape corruption and immorality. The author's next major novel, *The Petty Demon*, also takes place in the provinces and has a teacher as the protagonist. In this work, now considered one of the classic texts of twentieth-century Russian literature, Sologub explores themes related to corruption and the innocence of childhood, as well as questions related to human morality. The protagonist of the novel, Peredonov, dreams of being promoted to the position of school inspector but gradually becomes more paranoid, incoherent, and violent after he fails to get the promotion. As he finally descends into madness at the end of the novel, he commits murder and sets fire to a town building. A parallel narrative in the work concerns the evolving relationship between a young woman, Lyudmila Rutilova, and a boy, Sasha. Intrigued by Sasha's innocence, Lyudmila showers him with gifts, dresses him in her clothes, and engages him in sexually suggestive games. As Sasha enters puberty, however, their games become more violent and overtly sexual. The novel suggests that as Sasha leaves childhood, he will more closely resemble the corrupt and immoral adults of Peredonov's circle. Much critical debate has surrounded the subplot of the young lovers, though most commentators maintain that it offers a realm of art, innocence, and beauty in opposition to the violence and corruption of the adult world in the novel, and thus is essential to Sologub's overall design. Published in three volumes, Sologub's next major work of fiction, *Tvorimaja legenda* (1914), combines elements of reality and fantasy to address themes related to sexuality, violence, the creative

imagination, and the dual nature of the world. In this work, the protagonist, Grigorii Trirodov, is a teacher living in a provincial setting, who opens a school and experiments with sex, as well as raising the dead, as a means of escaping his drab reality. Trirodov shares a psychic bond with another character, Queen Ortruda of the United Islands, who uses similar means to transcend reality. When a volcanic eruption kills the Queen, Trirodov applies to take her place and flees his Russian estate, as the townspeople begin attacking his home, aboard an antigravity machine.

In addition to novels, Sologub produced several plays that have drawn critical attention. In his best-known dramas, including *The Triumph of Death* and *Nochnyi plyaski*, the author continued to explore the major thematic preoccupations of his career, including the corruption and chaos of society and the individual's attempt, mostly futile, to transcend reality through the pursuit of beauty and the creative imagination. His plays often feature protagonists who sacrifice their lives in their quest to mitigate the chaos of the world with beauty. Another of Sologub's most respected plays, *Vanka klyuchnik i pazh Zhean*, is based on a popular Russian folk ballad. Featuring a servant, who eventually becomes the lover of a princess, the play satirizes the crude behavior of Russian society and draws parallels between life in Russia and France, emphasizing the universality of social corruption and immorality. Although perhaps better remembered for his fiction and dramatic works, Sologub first garnered attention as a poet. For the entirety of his career, the author produced poems within the symbolist tradition and was the first Russian Symbolist poet to receive wide recognition. Generally considered a master of form, Sologub employed simple and exact rhyme, meter, and vocabulary in volumes such as *Stikhi* (1896), *Sobranie stikhov* (1904), and *Zmii* (1907), eschewing the complex metaphors, structures, and language preferred by his contemporaries. In the poems collected in these volumes, the author explored themes related to fate, the assertion of the creative self, alienation from the beauty of nature, the suffering inherent to human existence, and the individual's struggle with evil forces beyond the natural world.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Sologub launched his literary career during the 1890s with the publication of such volumes as *Stikhi*, *Teni* (1896), and *Bad Dreams*, which reflected his dark, pessimistic vision, as well as his interest in French Symbolism. His reputation grew, and by the end of the decade he was considered a major modernist author and one of the leading voices of the fledgling Russian Symbolist movement. While Sologub received significant critical

praise during this time, especially for his poetry, he was also severely attacked by some in the literary establishment: he was often equated with his characters, accused of perversion and immorality, and condemned for presenting such a negative picture of Russian provincial life. Conservative critics labeled him decadent, and although the term was used pejoratively, Sologub embraced the designation as a part of his poetic persona, allowing the controversy to fuel his success. Already well known among the literary circles of Moscow and St. Petersburg, the author achieved widespread fame in 1905 with the serialization of *The Petty Demon* in the journal *Voprosy zhizhi*. As before, a number of critics reacted strongly to the work, and Sologub was labeled a pervert, a sadist, and a psychopath. Rather than dissuade readers, the controversy fueled interest in the novel, and when it was published separately in 1907, it became a best-seller. Sologub produced several more works, including the three volumes of *Tvorimaja legenda*, but these efforts were deemed inferior to his earlier achievements. Although he was still one of Russia's best-selling authors, the strength of Sologub's writing declined noticeably after 1910, according to many scholars, in part a result of his involvement with various other social activities. Sologub's reputation also suffered as a result of shifting literary trends and the general waning of the Russian Symbolist movement during the years before and after the Russian Revolution. In the decades that followed, the author's writings were neglected, or deemed "obsolete" and "anti-revolutionary," and his standing was further diminished.

Critical interest in Sologub's oeuvre gradually increased during the latter half of the twentieth century. While most scholars revisited his major novels, others, including Murl G. Barker, Patricia Pollock Brodsky, Pierre R. Hart, Eric Laursen, and Roger John Keys, addressed his lesser known works, particularly his contributions to the short story genre. In his 1972 study, Barker described the story "Stena i teni" as one of Sologub's most accomplished pieces of short fiction and a work that contains many of his principal themes, such as children, death, and the cruelty of the modern world. In a similar vein, Brodsky called the story "Belaja sobaka" "an almost archetypal Sologubian tale" that provides "a catalogue of his most important devices, motifs, and attitudes." Hart emphasized the role of Russian oral culture and folklore in the author's stories, especially with respect to his characteristic dualistic vision, while Laursen and Keys both noted the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's theories of selfhood and reality on Sologub's short prose. The author's poetry, though much less recognized today than during his lifetime, has also received critical attention. Evelyn Bristol emphasized the continuity between Sologub's post-Revolutionary poetry and the verse he wrote earlier in his career, particularly in its treatment of the themes of love, nature, and death. Writing in 1988, Edith W.

Clowes noted the influence of Schopenhauer on Sologub's early decadent poetry. More recently, Ulrich Schmid, like Bristol, stressed the similarities between the author's late poetry, written during the last decade of his life, and his pre-Revolutionary verse. For the most part, however, Sologub's major novels, *The Petty Demon* and *Tvorimaja legenda*, have dominated criticism of his work since the mid-twentieth century. Many commentators, such as Julian W. Connolly, L. Dienes, Stanley J. Rabinowitz, and Peter G. Christensen, have offered thematic studies of one or both of these works and underscored Sologub's dualistic vision of life, as well as his concern for the imagination, the role of children, and utopian ideals. Other scholars, including G. J. Thurston, Judith M. Mills, Diana Greene, and Harriet Hustis, have stressed Sologub's formal contributions to the novel genre. While Greene examined the author's ability to adapt the conventions of the nineteenth-century realistic novel in his fiction, Mills argued that details in the narrative structure of *The Petty Demon*, particularly in the relationship of the novel's two plots, indicate that Sologub was a more modern writer within "the Russian literary tradition" than has been previously recognized. Although critical interest in Sologub's writings has increased in recent years, the author remains relatively obscure outside of Russia. Among his supporters, however, he is regarded as a pivotal figure within twentieth-century Russian literature, who deserves more recognition for his formal innovations, his diverse literary skills, and his visionary themes and aesthetics. Ernest J. Simmons remarked that "one cannot review the bulk of Sologub's writings without observing the sure hand of an unusual literary genius constantly at work," concluding that he "is a writer whom we ought to know better, for in some respects his artistic approach is peculiarly attuned to creative trends today."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Stikhi* (poetry) 1896
- Teni* (short stories and poetry) 1896
- Tyazhelye sny* [*Bad Dreams*] (novel) 1896
- Sobranie stikhov* (poetry) 1904
- Zhalo smerti* (novel) 1904
- Kniga skazok* (fairy tales) 1905
- Političeskie skazčki* (fairy tales) 1906
- Rodine* (poetry) 1906
- Melkii bes* [*The Petty Demon*] (novel) 1907
- Pobeda smerti* [*The Triumph of Death*] (play) 1907
- Zmii* (poetry) 1907
- Plamennyi krug* (poetry) 1908
- Vanka klyuchnik i pazh Zhean* (play) 1908
- Nochnyi plyaski* (play) 1909