



## The Petty Demon

*Fyodor Sologub , Samuel D. Cioran (Translator)*

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The Petty Demon is one of the funniest Russian novels. It is also the most decadent of the great Russian classics, replete with naked boys, sinuous girls, and a strange mixture of beauty and perversity. The main hero, Peredonov, is as comical as he is disgusting. He is at once a victim, a monster, a silly hypocrite, and a sadistic dullard. The plot moves from Peredonov's petty quest for a promotion to arson and murder via one of the most incredible and uproarious scandal scenes in world literature, the masquerade ball, which the boy Sasha attends as a beautiful geisha. Even in its censored form, it is one of the most provocative and sexually open of Russian books. Sologub removed many passages which would have been unacceptable at the time of publication. In this edition these censored sections are appended, and all are keyed so that the reader can place them in the novel as it was written.

## The Petty Demon Details

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Author : Fyodor Sologub , Samuel D. Cioran (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The Petty Demon for online ebook

### Eadweard says

I enjoyed Sologub's combination of realism and symbolism, the way he split the book between Sasha and Lyudmila and their sensual escapades, and Peredonov's descent into madness. I also didn't expect it to be so funny.

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### Edward says

#### *Introduction*

--The Little Demon

#### *Variants*

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### Chris says

This book should be better known in the western world. "The Little Demon" is a tale of madness, frantic affection, and insidious opportunism in a small Russian provincial town shortly after the turn of the 20th century. At its heart is the antihero Peredonov, a petty official whose tyrannizing nature is equal only to his desire for promotion.

Peredonov resents and alienates everyone who he comes into contact with, from his mistress to his friends to his students. He is a teacher of Russian literature in the local high school, but doesn't seem to have a proclivity for books. His capers are at turns ridiculous, frightening, whimsical, and sad, the latter only because you're made aware of their futility from the outset. Peredonov is almost universally disliked. He spends his spare time either talking up local officials with the intention of preventing slander against himself, or inventing calumnious lies against his students. This guy actually goes around to the homes of his students and tries to convince their parents to beat them, with varying degrees of success.

The great hubris of Peredonov is his tendency to make enemies by trying to root out those same enemies. He is paranoid, perpetually mistrustful, and at times openly sadistic. As the story progresses, we're made increasingly aware of Peredonov's hallucinations and declining mental state.

We're given a possible 'explanation' for the character of Peredonov through a subplot focused around Sasha, a young androgynous student of Peredonov's. Sasha is deeply enamoured with Lyudmila Rutilov, a much older woman. Lyudmila returns these feelings. Their affair is tender but deeply disturbing. We can't know what happens to Sasha when the story ends, but he probably ends up with complexes which are tantamount to Peredonov's. We're never given a direct explanation for Peredonov's initial paranoia and mistrust of others, and are left to wonder if perhaps his own childhood was very similar to Sasha's.

Little about Peredonov as Sologub presents him in actuality seems tragic. He's an unmitigated monster who deserves what he has coming to him. But, given the fact that Sasha's experiences seem to mirror Peredonov's own, we're left wondering if there might not be a deeper, more tragic side to Peredonov's character. It's easy to imagine Sasha becoming someone like Peredonov later in life.

"The Little Demon" is a very engaging read reminiscent of Russia's Golden Age. It's a troubling psychological portrait of a petty bureaucrat, but is also a candid expose of the human character which only the best Russian authors seem to be capable of producing. An extraordinary, moving, frenetic, troubling, delightful little book.

## Karenina says

Più che bello, interessante; in una sorta di transizione fra un Dostoevskij annacquato e la follia rutilante di Bulgakov, racconta le vicende di un individuo gretto e crudele nella sua pochezza, ambizioni ed intrighi, maldicenze e frivolezze della Russia di provincia con un tono sempre sopra le righe, a volte fastidioso specie nelle figure femminili piuttosto isteriche (forse bisogna fare un po' di tara per l'inconfondibile "russità").

Stilisticamente imperfetto, mischia i toni della commedia e del tragico, inserendo ammonimenti moraleggianti accanto ad allusioni erotico/sensuali; insomma c'è un po' di tutto, forse troppo.

Incuriosita ho fatto un giro in rete ed ho trovato questa cose interessanti:

“The Petty Demon attempted to create a living portrait of poshlost’, a russian concept that lies somewhere between evil and banality.”

Cos'è un Poshlost?

“Poshlost is an untranslatable Russian word (???????) defined as a kind of “petty evil or self-satisfied vulgarity” (Alexandrov 1991, p. 106). At more length (and with a more scholarly romanization) Boym (1994, p. 41) writes,

Poshlost’ is the Russian version of banality, with a characteristic national flavoring of metaphysics and high morality, and a peculiar conjunction of the sexual and the spiritual. This one word encompasses triviality, vulgarity, sexual promiscuity, and a lack of spirituality. The war against poshlost’ is a cultural obsession of the Russian and Soviet intelligentsia from the 1860s to 1960s.”

Secondo Mirskij, il “Demone meschino” di Sologub era una incarnazione del male senza gioia, della “malvagità scontenta”: il romanzo nasceva come meditazione sulla malvagità dei disegni di Dio. Zamjatin riconosceva una satira e uno stile forgiati nella tempra europea: “Sotto la severa e sostenuta veste europea Sologub ha conservato l’impetuosa anima russa”, scriveva, ammirato.

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## Domenico Fina says

Peredònov è un insegnante che aspira come unica meta alla promozione ad ispettore scolastico, è un uomo gretto, il termine giusto potrebbe essere: pusillanime. Abita in una città dal cielo sempre grigio che sembra aver condizionato nell'animo i suoi cittadini, vive con una donna, Varvàra, che non vuole sposare fino a quando lei non gli avrà fatto ottenere la promozione agognata. Varvàra fingerà d'aver scritto una lettera molto influente e gli farà credere che la promozione non tarderà ad arrivare; ma non arriva. Passa il tempo e Peredònov diventa ancor più diffidente verso tutti; comincia a questo punto un giro di incontri con procuratori, capo di polizia, preside del ginnasio in cui non farà altro che rendersi ancor più ridicolo; questa parte centrale del libro ricorda Le anime morte di Gogol, ma se lì gli uomini erano ridotti ad un "cumulo di riflessi condizionati", qui va ancora peggio, i visi degli uomini sono "paralizzati dall'ebetudine". Non è difficile immaginare come con le sue opinioni sempre sbagliate Peredònov possa farsi del male da solo. Per lui l'uomo deve mangiare prima della donna, la donna mangerà i rimasugli lasciati dall'appetito dell'uomo, l'uomo lo fa esclusivamente per lei, per la donna che deve restare leggera. Vorrebbe introdurre la pena di morte, ma solo per i contadini (ovvio), vorrebbe scrivere una costituzione che non preveda parlamento, i giovani sono solo maleducati, i polacchi sono un popolo di stupidi, dice, ma nel suo studio ha appeso il ritratto del poeta polacco Mickiewicz (ritratto che presto sostituirà con quello del russo Puskin perché il

polacco è un rivoluzionario e non sta bene per un uomo in carriera). È convinto che ognuno debba farsi il segno della croce in chiesa ma soprattutto quando si viene osservati. Tiene certi libri in bella vista per far vedere che è un uomo di libere opinioni, ma non li legge, non ha tempo e non ha nemmeno opinioni, né la voglia di pensare per farsele. Eppure è convinto di non meritare questa città di gente cattiva, invidiosa e vorrebbe andar via. Ricordo un passo del libro in cui si dice che Peredonov non sapeva guardare in alto, non lo aveva mai fatto, non era uno spirituale, ma non sapeva nemmeno guardare in basso, intendendo con questo l'aver i piedi per terra. Era un fantoccio in balia di fregole impazzite. Uno dei personaggi più orribilmente normali della letteratura.

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### **Vit Babenco says**

“Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday,” – *Psalms 91:6*

Petty demon is taken from the Bible and it is the ‘destruction that wasteth at noonday’ or in some other translations ‘the demon of the midday’ – by which sunstroke would seem to be meant.

The novel characters live in the primeval boondocks and they behave as if they were sunstruck – lethargy and melancholia and gloominess prevail. In a one-horse town they just have one-way thoughts and every new day is a little bit madder than the day before.

The novel couldn’t find a publisher for a long while but when *Petty Demon* was at last published it had the effect of an explosion and it had become one of the most influential books of the time. And to this day it remains one of the most original books in the world literature.

True, people love to be loved. They like to have the lofty and noble aspects of their souls depicted. Even in malefactors they like to see glimmerings of goodness, of the ‘divine spark,’ as it was expressed in olden times. Therefore they cannot believe it when they are faced with a depiction that is faithful, precise, gloomy and wicked. They want to say: ‘He’s writing about himself.’

No, my dear contemporaries, it is about you that I have written my novel.

The process of reading *Petty Demon* is a slow descent into the abysmal twilight...

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### **Meri says**

"Peredonov glared angrily at the salt"

If you can get your hands on this one, read it! One of the funniest novels ever written.

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## Kevin Tole says

A fantastic book by another Russian I had yet to read. This book gradually gets madder and madder.

Not contemporary and pre-Stalin, Sologub was born just after the emancipation of the serfs and basically invented himself as a writer, indeed a writer thought by others (particularly Blok) to be immensely important. This, his most recognisable and available work, shows how good a writer he was. There is not one really likeable character. They are all mad in their own way.

The book charts the descent into craziness of a provincial school teacher. Along the way it portrays provincial pre-revolution life. No real attempt is given to flesh out any of these characters except for the mad Peredonov. Peredonov is as crazy as Gogol's Chichikov but far less calculating probably because he is a provincial. In fact it is the whole thing of provinciality that bleeds through this book, like Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* throughout the period when they arrive back at the family home. Is there that great a difference (in any country) between provinciality now as there was then? Probably the differences were accentuated for Sologub. Now, we can travel easily to the capital. Then it was a matter of engineering an escape from the sheer monotony. And this is why Peredonov becomes obsessed with his putative inspectorate which leads him into marriage with the long term shack-up he's clearly been with for ages and everybody knows about but are willing to turn a blind eye. And this in turn leads him on the steady slope to bad craziness.

This book is a real gem - full of good quality writing. The introduction in the Penguin Classic edition, by Pamela Davidson, makes some excellent points and comparisons.

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## Connor says

Glorious book. Madness, crossdressing, violence. I've read reviews on here which describe it as "slavish adherence to realism", which seems like people haven't actually read the book. Peredonov's hallucinations and insanity are the best part of the book, he gradually becomes completely disconnected from reality. Nature becomes perverse and haunting, the walls speak to him, and he eventually goes completely insane.

The other plot running through this is more difficult to parse, the story of Sasha crossdressing and eventually starting a riot with his beauty. I think that it's more of a sick counterpart to the story of Peredonov rather than its redemption, as some of the early critics seemed to think. The whole pivot of the thing is that Peredonov's completely baseless accusation against Sasha turns out to be correct in a sick foreshadowing, that Sasha is in fact a boy dressing up as a girl instead of vice versa. I'm still processing how the plots interweave, but overall I loved the book.

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## El says

I'm sorry to say I hadn't heard of this book before; or if I had, I didn't recognize it when I saw it on a friend's bookshelf after a few hours of drinking wine. "Wass dat -hiccup- book?" So in the charming way I have, I of course asked to borrow it. That was a few months ago. It took me a while to clear time in my reading schedule for this one, and then I started thinking I'd breeze through it, but found very early on this was not going to be a quick read.

This is supposedly the funniest Russian novel. Ever. I'm always intrigued by comments like that, but at the

end of the day I totally suck at reading books called the "funniest". I'm so busy looking for the humor that sometimes when I'm disappointed when the humor happens. It's almost anticlimactic.

But I'm also a fan of Russian novels, semi-obscure the better. So I trudged on.

In this novel we have Peredonov, a truly messed up human being of a schoolteacher. He is a nasty, nasty guy, which of course makes him delicious to read. A GR friend's review mentioned similarities to Ignatius K. Reilly from *A Confederacy of Dunces* which probably would have been a kiss of death for me had I read that before I started this book. I don't care for novels that make me want to laugh at the awful things the character has to endure, it just feels mean-spirited. The difference here, I felt, was that Peredonov is also certifiable, which actually made his actions somewhat interesting to me, instead of just being a caricature of himself. He's an actual antihero instead of just a literary whipping post.

There's a lot going on behind scenes, of course, because this is a Russian novel and that's what Russian novels are all about. Aside from Peredonov's antics, there's also Sasha and Lyudmila, and their strange and strained relationship. However, maybe I'm being too sensitive, but I feel that the reader is meant to laugh at Sasha specifically, an androgynous young man who ultimately wears dresses, and that made me feel sad. But then again, I'm always the first to say that humor doesn't always translate well for me on the page, so I have no qualms assuming that I just read more into it than I should have. Me and my overthinking!

I'm not unhappy I read this at all, I'm glad to have stumbled upon an unfamiliar title and to be able to add it to my Russian bookshelf. But above all I'm happiest that I can finally return this book to its rightful home, and hopefully more wine will be involved in order to do it.

I should also note that this book was highly censored back in the day, being all sexual and about cross-dressing and stuff (the horror!); this edition included all the previously removed passages (which the back of the book tells me was a whopping 15% of the original text) - I recommend reading those sections too, even though it adds significantly to one's reading time.

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## **Bettie? says**

**Produced by Annemie Arnst, Dagny & Marc D'Hooghe at <http://www.freeliterature.org> (Images generously made available by the Internet Archive.)**

Description: *A dark classic of Russia's silver age, this blackly funny novel recounts a schoolteacher's descent into sadism, arson and murder.*

*Mad, lascivious, sadistic and ridiculous, the provincial schoolteacher Peredonov torments his students and has hallucinatory fantasies about acts of savagery and degradation, yet to everyone else he is an upstanding member of society. As he pursues the idea of marrying to gain promotion, he descends into paranoia, sexual perversion, arson, torture and murder. Sologub's anti-hero is one of the great comic monsters of twentieth-century fiction, subsequently lending his name to the brand of sado-masochism known as Peredonovism. The Little Demon (1907) made an immediate star of its author who, refuting suggestions that the work was autobiographical, stated 'No, my dear contemporaries ... it is about you'. This grotesque mirror of a spiritually bankrupt society is arguably the finest Russian novel to have come out of the Symbolist movement.*

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/48912>

Opening: **After Mass the members of the congregation scattered to their homes. A few stopped to talk**

under the old maples and lindens near the white stone walls, within the enclosure. All were in holiday dress and looked at one another cheerily. It appeared as if the inhabitants of this town lived peacefully and amicably—even happily. But it was only in appearance.

Peredonov, a schoolmaster in the gymnasia, stood among his friends, and as he looked at them gravely out of his small, stealthy eyes, across the golden rims of his spectacles, he remarked:

"Princess Volchanskaya herself made the promise to Vara. 'As soon,' she said, 'as you marry him, I'll hunt up an inspector's job for him.'"

"But how can you think of marrying Varvara Dmitrievna?" asked the red-faced Falastov. "She's your first cousin."

What a jolly cover this is. This part from the description means I will get to this sooner rather than later: 'Mad, lascivious, sadistic and ridiculous'. Although it is stated that Peredonov is a school teacher, he conveys ugly traits synonymous with 'superfluous man':

*Peredonov looked indifferent: he did not take any interest in other people's lives—he did not care for people and he never thought of them except as they might contribute to his own benefit and pleasure.*

Russian decadence drew inspiration from classical Greek antiquity, most particularly in Sologub's *The Petty Demon*, Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility and agriculture. Source

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## Adriana says

Cartea asta e o votc? tare. Dup? primele pahare devii extrem de vesel, jovial, exuberant. Apoi, pe m?sur? ce bei, amu?e?ti, se face din ce în ce mai întuneric, contururile devin alungite, strâmbte, de parc? ai privi totul printr-o lentil? defect?. Apoi ?i se taie filmul ?i te treze?ti a doua zi n?uc, mahmur ?i ne?tiind cum ai ajuns acas?...

L-am comparat pe autor cu al nostru Caragiale, dar exist? o mare diferen?? între ei: în timp ce caricaturile caragialiene sunt realizate cu peni?? fin?, mucalit?, Sologub folose?te de-a dreptul bidineaua. Totul e mult mai brutal, mai direct, scos de-a dreptul din întunecimile incon?tientului uman, încât ajungi s? te întrebi cu groaz?: "chiar a?a? chiar ??tia suntem? unde-i binele ?i frumosul care ar trebui s? caracterizeze umanitatea?"... Dar, pân? la urm?, cartea e o satir?, ?i înc? una al dracului de bun?, a?adar e de în?eles de ce valorile umane î?i fac prea pu?in apari?ia aici.

În concluzie: pofiti?i de servi?i! Recomand a fi b?ut? repede (scriitura o permite) ?i cu ghea?? pentru pu?in? diluare (altfel va p?rea, poate, prea amar? unora). ?i da, se poate l?sa cu dureri de cap :)

## Czarny Pies says

« Le Maître Démon » (1892) est certain de plaire à ceux qui ont aimé « Les âmes mortes » de Gogol (1841) ou « Le maître et la Marguerite » de Boulgakov (1940). Enfin ce roman semble faire le lien entre ces deux grands romans. Il offre une satire féroce des mœurs provinciales russes semblable à celle des « âmes mortes » et une intrigue fantastique et diabolique qui fait penser au « maître et la Marguerite ».

Il y a des gens qui qualifient ce roman de pessimiste sans doute à cause de la triste fin du protagoniste. À mon sens, c'est plutôt un hymne à l'honneur de la débauche joyeuses. Si le héros finit mal, c'est qu'il est bête, méchant et indiscret. Il y a un autre personnage qui mène une vie de débauche qui est gentil et suffisamment discret pour que les gens peuvent prétendre ne pas s'apercevoir de ses vices. Contrairement au héros désagréable, le viceux souriant finit bien.

Le démon mesquin fait partie du mouvement symboliste russe. Surtout il fait partie du courant qui s'attaquait au « Poshlost », c'est-à-dire ce qui est moralement abjecte, insipide et grossier.

Je ne peux faire mieux que traduire de l'article anglais sur « Poshlost » de Wikipedia on dit : « Le Maître Démon est un traitement littéraire important du Poshlost qui raconte l'histoire d'un professeur de l'école provinciale, Peredonov, remarquable pour son absence totale de qualités humaines, un être tout à fait inapte à la redemption. Le livre met sur l'écran un coffre au trésor freudienne de perversions avec subtilité et crédibilité. Le nom du héros du roman, Peredonov, est devenu un symbole de calcul de la concupiscence pour toute une génération ... [Peredonov] ne cherche pas le monde idéal, mais le monde de la petite et de la vénalité sensualisme, poshlost '. Il tourmente ses élèves, tire satisfaction érotique de regarder mettre à genoux pour prier, et systématiquement souille son appartement avant de le quitter dans le cadre de son dépit généralisée contre l'univers. »

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## Chuck LoPresti says

Symbolism is a word that is so variably applied that it has almost become worthless. There's the academic and IMO masturbatory symbolism of Jarry, the complex transcendent system of metaphysical signification that is present in Scriabin and Bely, the hazy expansive undefined-ness of Maeterlink and so on but Sologub, in this work is none of these. His symbolism instead is something of an aloof determinant that has no saving grace or final answer but it does promote a deep understanding of the terms and conditions that result in human interaction. Nobody calls Knut Hamsun a symbolist in term of decadence - but moreso in his comparison of nature and man in an attempt to posit a phenomenology of experience as being at the same time within and above man.

Sologub's writing works much the same way. He is a brilliant satirist and social critic who's work, IMO bears more in common with Gombrowicz (Ferdynand) and Witkacy (Insatiability) than it does with Gogol or Bely. Social criticism is never too far from the root concern in almost all forms of symbolism. Like Pere Ubu - this work mocks a teacher with amazingly effective results. Although where Jarry elevated Ubu to king status - Sologub repeatedly stomps Peredonov into the muck of the most loathsome failure of an existence. It's also something of a picaresque story in that it features serializes attempts of a man to negotiate society with punishingly similar results. Where Don Quixote teaches the reader to love a fool in the same way Rabelais encouraged readers to love themselves through the acceptance of Gargatua and Pantagruel, Sologub entertains in a different way - much more like Bulghakov and Ensor whos distaste for crowds resulted in humorous observation and scathing rejection.

Sologub invites readers to gaze upon his creations with understanding at a distance much like a scoutmaster

might govern interactions with wildlife that is most beautiful when viewed with caution and reverence. Many of Sologub's short works are more focus on natural symbolism and operate in a crepuscular haze that recalls Nerval - but the haze clears as the Little Demon unfolds into one of the best social satires I've had the pleasure to experience. Something like Walser's unattached but penetrating observance is present here - but where Walser's themes seem to start at the microscopic level, revealing transcendence as they progress - Sologub's prose works in the opposite direction where the details boiled down from the social interactions operated as conclusion.

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## **Laura says**

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## **Alex says**

Yes ! finally an author with balls, who is describing the human society exactly the way it is. I think a lot of modern authors should read stuff like this, and understand that compared to this novel from Sologub, their work is just dull masturbation.

There is a lot of dialogue, the book has a very rapid pace. However, everything is where it is supposed to be, no piece of dialogue is too much. every phrase has been given a lot of thought.

There is comic, there is laughter but boy, that is actually some sort of sad grin.

Do we feel sorry for Peredonov? Talking from the doctor's point of view, the guy had paranoid schizofrenia which got worse along the book. Sologub presents phantastically the aggravation of the disease. The way Peredonov deals with the playing cards is priceless.

Boy I loved the characters. So human, so raw, most of them so normal in their bitterness/badness/envy/hatred...

This book made me think a lot at Bulgakov's „Master and the Margarete“. The cat is present in both books. Plus a whole system of institutions.

Did you also think at Hieronymus Bosch?

Thank you Adriana for your great recommandation.

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## **Steve says**

*Fyodor Sologub (1863-1927)*

*Smooth is the surface of my mirror and pure its construction. Repeatedly measured and painstakingly checked, it has not a single blemish.*

The watershed between the realist canon of the 19th century Russian novel and the modernist novels of the Russian literary Silver Age was Fyodor Sologub's *The Little Demon* (1907), but this striking novel still has sharp teeth and is of much more than just historical interest. It is inventive, engaging and very aptly expressed; it also offers the reader no hope for the human race.

Born Fyodor Kuzmich Teternikov into the family of a poor tailor who died early of tuberculosis, he somehow managed to graduate from the St. Petersburg Teachers' Institute and begin a career as provincial secondary school teacher. In light of the way he describes provincial life in *The Little Demon*, he must have found that time trying, but in 1892 he wrangled a transfer back to the capital, where he began writing poetry, fiction, plays and criticism seriously. A survivor, he climbed the administrative ladder of the Tsarist education establishment, welcomed the February Revolution and became the head of the Union of Artists, then opposed the October Revolution and nonetheless ended up the head of the Leningrad Union of Writers under the Soviets. From 1892 on he was engaged at the heart of the Petersburg literary scene, interacting with Andrei Bely, Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova, to mention just a few.

But what about that watershed novel?

According to Sologub himself, he began *The Little Demon* in 1892, and a not quite complete version was serialized in 1902. The final version was not published until 1907. Though he wrote a great deal else during that time, it is evident both from the text itself and from Sologub's proud preface (from which the above quote is extracted) that he fashioned and re-fashioned his masterpiece, yes, painstakingly.

The main character, Ardalyon Borisovich Peredonov, is a high school teacher in an unnamed snakepit of a provincial town (just like his creator); he is unspeakably self-centered, monstrously dull-witted, pusillanimous, gluttonous, absent of any scruples, and sliding ever deeper into the madness of paranoia. The townsfolk are hardly any better, both male and female - the words "stupid," "torpid" and "dull" occur again and again in the narrator's description of the characters. Two of the characters are described as "boredom machines." Sure, provincial life had been bitingly portrayed in the 19th century novel and repulsive antiheroes had been employed before. But Sologub was not rehearsing old tricks.

Previously, provincial life had been examined with the purpose of urging improvement, progress and the hope of change; there is no such prospect of change, no such hope in *The Little Demon*, where all that is outside the anonymous town is spectral, unreal. Only the pointless, pathetic goings-on in that Everyplace and Noplace really exist.

And antiheroes had been used to satirize some class, attitude or characteristic with the intent of, once again, urging improvement, progress and the hope of change. Not here.

There are no noses walking around of their own volition, no ghosts chasing after overcoats, no one too lazy to get from his bed to his chair in this text: with strict adherence to the rules of descriptive realism, Sologub does not exaggerate for effect, (\*) he just holds up his finely polished mirror:

*No, my dear contemporaries, it is of you that I have written my novel about the little demon, about Ardalyon and Varvara Peredonov, Pavel Volodin, Darya, Lyudmila, and Valeriya Rutilov, Aleksandr Pynnikov and the others. About you.*

If so, then his readers had grounds for taking offense, for in Sologub's mirror everyone crawls on their bellies like snakes.

Along the way Sologub jettisons the basic tenet of 19th century Russian literature that everything can, indeed *must* get better, and he throws in some "perversions" his forebears chose to omit from their works.(\*\*) Of a distinctly curious cast is the secondary plot line that is interwoven with Peredonov's sad epic of ambition, stupidity and madness: Lyudmila's affair with the schoolboy. Instead of clarioning the expected notes of disapproval and outrage, the initially objective narrator becomes a bit flustered as Lyudmila slowly gains influence over the boy and the relationship crosses bounds that may have some readers squirming, while his prose changes in tone and intensity. These passages contain the only real feelings in the text aside from the greed, ambition and envy that otherwise saturate it.

Not surprisingly, a great furor was generated by *The Little Demon*, and apparently no small amount of this furor expressed itself as *ad hominem* attacks on the author. But the book quickly went through several editions. I am most curious to know if it had some direct influence on writers like Andrei Bely and, if so, what was the nature of the influence.

As pessimistic as this text is, the black nihilism of some Soviet works is quite absent; and as hopeless as it may be, the indescribable emotional state of the later Beckett is still far distant. Mankind had yet to plunge into the bottomless depths of the 20th century, which may well have been the worst century in its sad history.

(\*) Well, maybe for humorous effect, because as hopeless as this text is, it is oftentimes downright funny. On the other hand, when reading about an egotistical and limitless windbag like Donald Trump in a novel one might suspect that an exaggeration was being made for laughs; and a leading Republican contender for the Presidency of the United States of America who flatly asserts that the pyramids in Egypt were built as granaries by Joseph could well have been a character in a Vonnegut novel. Reality is still stranger than fiction.

(\*\*) Assuming they had ever even imagined them. Peredonov's particular idiosyncrasy of this type was henceforth referred to in Russia by his name.

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## **Anna Prejanò says**

Grandissimo e tremendo. Il Male è un paese di provincia dove i cani sghignazzano e gli uomini abbaiano, dove umano e animale si confondono non in un'estasi panica, ma, al contrario, in spregio all'armonia del cosmo; dove la Bellezza stessa è insultata nel corpo di una donna che insieme ad attraenti nudità mette in mostra le morsicature delle pulci. È la risposta russa al simbolismo e all'estetismo europei (il romanzo è del 1907).

Poi c'è il Male di Peredonov, uno psicotico afflitto da manie di persecuzione descritte con precisione clinica, come nella scena dell'accecamento delle figure nelle carte da gioco, e forza simbolica (le apparizioni del demone Inafferrabile, la Principessa centenaria, lo spione sotto la carta da parati, i ginnasiali-lupi mannari). Indimenticabile figura dell'abisso, quasi profetica della psicosi collettiva che di lì a poco avrebbe fatto storia.

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## **Andrew says**

Let's talk about decadence.

This is one of the most abused adjectives in the English language. "Sooo decadent," Karen, mother of three moans over a chocolate lava cake at a chain restaurant in a Missouri exurb as she frets about how it will test

the waistline of her Lane Bryant slacks.

Well, let me tell you, Sologub has different ideas.

Like dressing a schoolboy as a geisha and throwing him into a beauty contest for three sisters, or throwing your garbage across the walls of your house just because it vaguely amuses you when you're hammered.

Equal to anything Wilde, Mirbeau, or Huysmans were doing around the same time.

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### **Dagny says**

A great read. Once I got caught up in the story, it just pulled me along. Peredonov is totally insane, but it was such fun reading his rantings and also the things, real and imagined, perpetrated against him. The Sasha/Liudmilla portions were the only ones which didn't engage me as much.

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