

How Much Land Does a Man Need? Summary

Tolstoy's "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" tells the story of a peasant named Pahom.

- Pahom states that if he had enough land, he wouldn't fear the Devil. The Devil overhears this and decides to test him.
- An opportunity for Pahom to acquire land arrives, and he takes it.
- In his quest to attain more and more land, Pahom visits the Bakshirs, whose chief agrees to sell him as much land as he can walk around in one day. The caveat: he must return to the exact point he started, or the sale is off. Pahom dies in the attempt.

Summary

"How Much Land Does a Man Need?" by Leo Tolstoy is a short story about the corrupting power of greed. At the beginning of the story, a woman comes from town to visit her younger sister in the country. They debate whether country life or city life is better; the younger sister says that in the country, there is no chance of husbands being tempted by the devil. Her husband, Pahom, agrees. He reflects that peasants are too busy in their work to be tempted and that their only problem is that they don't have enough land. He thinks that if he only had enough land, he would not fear the Devil: but the Devil, who is in the kitchen with him, hears this and decides to test him.

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Soon, a local landowner decides to sell her land, and Pahom and the other peasants of the Commune attempt to buy it together as

communal land. When the Devil “sow[s] discord among them,” they instead break the land up and buy individual plots. At first, Pahom is delighted with his land, but as he gains more success, he becomes increasingly disgruntled when other peasants trespass on his land and his neighbors’ livestock wander in. Eventually, he begins to fine trespassers and sues a peasant named Simon whom he believes has cut down some of his trees. Simon is acquitted, as there is no evidence against him. The people of the commune greatly resent Pahom for his fines.

Partially due to the trespassing peasants and livestock, Pahom feels that he is still “too cramped.” When a traveling peasant from beyond the Volga River informs Pahom that in that area, land is better and plentiful, Pahom investigates and eventually moves there with his family.

With three times the land he had before, Pahom is initially content. But he does not have the right land to grow wheat, as he had before, and thus has to compete with other farmers and peasants to rent land and must cart the wheat he grows long distances. He begins to desire “freehold land” so that his land will all be together—and all his own.

When Pahom hears that another landowner is in financial difficulty, he begins arrangements to buy his land for too cheap a price. However, before the deal is settled, a stranger comes to him and tells him that the Bashkirs, a group of people in a neighboring country, are selling their excellent land at extremely cheap prices, provided that the purchasers bring gifts. Moved by his greed, Pahom again goes to investigate.

The Bashkir leaders are charmed by Pahom’s gifts to them, and they tell him that they will sell him however much land he wants for a thousand rubles. Pahom is skeptical of this unconventional offer, but the Bashkirs assure him that the deal is sound—however much land he can walk around in one day will be his. If he doesn’t make it back by sundown, however, the land and money will be forfeited.

Pahom believes that he can walk thirty-five miles in a day. He decides he will make a circuit of this area and then can sell or rent some of the land to others and make a profit. While he is sleeping, he dreams that the Chief of the Bashkirs is laughing outside his tent. He moves closer and sees that the laughing man is not the Chief but the peasant who first came and told him of the Bashkirs, and then he sees that it is not the peasant but the Devil himself. Pahom dismisses the dream upon waking up.

Pahom begins his circuit the next morning with the Bashkirs watching. At first it seems that he will be able to make it, but as the day wears on, he becomes less and less sure. At one point, he sees a plot of land that he feels he must have and extends his circuit to include it. Finally, the day is drawing to a close and Pahom knows he will not make it back. Though exhausted, he begins to run, fearing the loss of his money, land, and dignity. There is plenty of land, but Pahom realizes that God may not let him have it.

At the end of his run, as the sun is setting, he sees the Chief of the Bashkirs laughing. Pahom reaches his starting point but falls down and dies. His servant buries him, noting that in the end, the only land Pahom needed was six feet, from head to foot—for his grave.

Summary

An elder sister from the city visits her younger sister, the wife of a peasant farmer in the village. In the midst of their visit, the two of them get into an argument about whether the city or the peasant lifestyle is preferable. The elder sister suggests that city life boasts better clothes, good things to eat and drink, and various entertainments, such as the theater. The younger sister replies that though peasant life may be rough, she and her husband are free, will always have enough to eat, and are not tempted by the devil to indulge in such worldly pursuits.

Pahom, the husband of the younger sister, enters the debate and suggests that the charm of the peasant life is that the peasant has no time to let nonsense settle in his head. The one drawback of peasant life, he declares, is that the peasant does not have

enough land: "If I had plenty of land, I shouldn't fear the Devil himself!" The devil, overhearing this boast, decides to give Pahom his wish, seducing him with the extra land that Pahom thinks will give him security.

Pahom's first opportunity to gain extra land comes when a lady in the village decides to sell her three hundred acres. His fellow peasants try to arrange the purchase for themselves as part of a commune, but the devil sows discord among them and individual peasants begin to buy land. Pahom obtains forty acres of his own. This pleases him initially, but soon neighboring peasants allow their cows to stray into his meadows and their horses among his corn, and he must seek justice from the district court. Not only does he fail to receive recompense for the damages but also he ruins his reputation among his former friends and neighbors; his extra land does not bring him security.

Hearing a rumor about more and better farmland elsewhere, he decides to sell his land and move his family to a new location. There he obtains 125 acres and is ten times better off than he was before, and he is very pleased. However, he soon realizes that he could make a better profit with more land on which to sow wheat. He makes a deal to obtain thirteen hundred acres from a peasant in financial difficulty for one thousand rubles and has all but clinched it when he hears a rumor about the land of the Bashkirs. There, a tradesman tells him, a man can obtain land for less than a penny an acre, simply by making friends with the chiefs.

Fueled by the desire for more, cheaper, and better land, Pahom seeks directions for the land of the Bashkirs and leaves on a journey to obtain the land that he thinks he needs. On arrival, he distributes gifts to the Bashkir leaders and finds them courteous and friendly. He explains his reasons for being there and, after some deliberation, they offer him whatever land he wants for one thousand rubles. Pahom is pleased but concerned; he wants boundaries, deeds, and "official sanction" to give him the assurance he needs that they or their children will never reverse their decision.

The Bashkirs agree to this arrangement, and a deal is struck. Pahom can have all the land that he can walk around in a day for one thousand rubles. The one condition is that if he does not return on the same day to the spot at which he began, the money will be lost. The night before his fateful walk, Pahom plans his strategy; he will try to encircle thirty-five miles of land and then sell the poorer land to peasants at a profit. When he awakes the next day, he is met by the man whom he thought was the chief of the Bashkirs, but whom he recognizes as the peasant who had come to his old home to tell him of lucrative land deals available elsewhere. He looks again, and realizes that he is speaking with the devil himself. He dismisses this meeting as merely a dream and goes about his walk.

Pahom starts well, but he tries to encircle too much land, and by midday he realizes that he has tried to create too big a circuit. Though afraid of death, he knows that his only chance is to complete the circuit. "There is plenty of land," he says to himself, "but will God let me live on it?" As the sun comes down, Pahom runs with all his remaining strength to the spot where he began. Reaching it, he sees the chief laughing and holding his sides; he remembers his dream and breathes his last breath. Pahom's servant picks up the spade with which Pahom had been marking his land and digs a grave in which to bury him: "Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed."