

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

BAZAROV*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Bazarov** (in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*) **Disagreeable**

Overview Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) was born in Moscow, son of a reasonably prosperous landowner, who was at the same time a serious philanderer, and of a mother who, left alone without spousal support, became increasingly abusive. It is no surprise that Ivan was especially drawn to living and studying in Western Europe, which was the source of fashionable ideas in Russia, and where his intellectual heroes, like Flaubert and Hegel, came from. Turgenev excelled in the novel, short story, and in drama; *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is a rich expression of his fascination with new and progressive 'scientific' attitudes.

Character The character of Bazarov is rich and evolving, and can be read either with admiration or with pity. This young man enters the text as a model of the nihilist, the all-questioning, anti-social sardonic 'scientist' of the European 19th century; a bit of a curiosity in the Russia of the time, which is still locked in religious and tsaristical traditions. As he ages before us, and takes his knocks, Bazarov grows in humaneness, and comes before us, again, by the time of his deathbed, as that super intelligent ambitious young man who wishes he had had more to contribute to time than criticism. His anti-social stance has moderated, though it remains a component of his personality.

Parallels One might compare Bazarov with Andrew Aguecheek, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601), if Sir Andrew was a little less 'a fool,' and Bazarov just a more supercilious. As it is, both guys wear their superiority and privileged knowledge on their sleeves. Bazarov's confidence in the new science and in western learning suggest almost a Nietzschean attitude toward the path of the future for mankind, a path enlightened by positive knowledge and contempt for religious values. The Bazarovian perspective repeats itself throughout the thinking and criticism of H.L. Mencken. For Mencken's blend of scientism and cynicism cf. his *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908). Contempt for democracy, faith in science, and insistence on making a new future for mankind: all these perspectives bind Bazarov to Mencken and Nietzsche—and to nnumerable others. Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) is a furious rebuttal of traditional religion and history-based society, and would have suited Bazarov.

Illustrative moments

Supercilious Arkady, just graduated from University, returns to his family home, taking with him, on a visit, his friend Bazarov. Not surprisingly, given the somewhat provincial mode of family life in Arkady's world, Bazarov is ironic and superior toward his hosts. 'Your uncle's a queer fish,' Bazarov said to Arkady, as he sat in his dressing-gown by his bedside, smoking a short pipe, 'only fancy such style in the country. His nails—his nails—one could send them to an exhibition! His chin's simply shaved to perfection. Isn't this ridiculous?'

Experimental As a guest at Arkady's modest land-hold, Bazarov is aggressively independent. After breakfast he makes his way promptly out into the grounds of the 'estate,' and quite naturally falls into conversation with a couple of farm-boys whom he takes along with him to investigate a nearby swamp, where they can look for frogs. (Bazarov, the doctor and experimental scientist, is forever probing the natural environment.) He explains to the young guys that he wants to know what's going on inside the frogs, so he will know whether he can use them for medicinal purposes, to help folks like these guys.

Empirical Pavel Petrovitch, Arkady's uncle, brings out Bazarov's fascination for German science and philosophical thought; it is the uncle's view that the Teutons—he rejects the word 'Germans'—are crude thinkers and social beings, but Bazarov is too pro-European to listen to

him. He particularly resents Pavel's assumption that the greatness of German culture ended with Goethe and Schiller. 'A good chemist is twenty times as useful as any poet,' broke in Bazarov. When asked what he thinks of art, Bazarov replies: "What is more important, the art of making money or the art of 'shrinking hemorrhoids'?"

Superior Bazarov insults both Arkady and Pavel, by suggesting that the uncle is hopelessly out of date, and considers himself 'modern' simply because 'once a month he saves a peasant from flogging.' Furthermore, adds Bazarov, the old guy is hopelessly 'romantic,' and cannot be pardoned simply because he gives in to the prejudices of the age in which he was educated. Every man, Bazarov insists, 'must educate himself...and as for the age, why should I depend on it? Let it rather depend on me.' Bazarov goes on to ridicule the miserable if trendy journal *Galignani*, which was a popular digest of contemporary British literature.

Discussion questions

Bazarov is harsh toward Arkady's dad, and by extension toward the Russian provincial classes, which he sees as mired in ignorance. What experiences of the modern west have led Bazarov to adopt this attitude?

What is Turgenev's own attitude toward Bazarov? Is the author critical or even mocking toward Bazarov?

Why does Bazarov feel particular scorn for Romanticism? Does he view Romantic love as pure biology?