

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## FATHERS AND SONS

Ivan Turgenev

**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.

### Story

*Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862, was and remains a defining text for Russian literary and historical self-awareness. In this book Turgenev tackles central social issues—generational conflict, the value-conflict between secular and religious, the question of nihilism as a world view, the serfs and the issues around servitude—issues which remain of constant interest in today's Russia. Conservatives and Liberals still fight it out in Russia, over the same issues.

As the novel opens, Arkady has returned home, bringing with him his friend Bazarov, to his Father's modest estate in a province far from the capital, St. Petersburg, where his son has been studying, absorbing who knows what new values. Back together into this patriarchal world come these two university students, Arkady and Bazarov, the former to revisit his conservative paternal home, the latter, somewhat older and more sophisticated than Arkady, to meet his younger friend's world. The intersection of these students, with the conservative culture of the land and its people, gives Turgenev ample opportunity to characterize the cultural tensions dominating the new Russia.

Bazarov, as it turns out, is too intellectual and innovative for Arkady's family to tolerate, with his talk about experimental medicine, new social perspectives like nihilism, and the great thinkers 'of the west'; while Arkady, torn between the fashionable new world and the beloved world of his past, is a poster child for the pains of cultural transition, neither fully here nor fully there. It turns out that Arkady's Father, from his own standpoint, is embarrassed by his own old-fashioned action—taking a serf mistress, and fathering another child—and for the time being is glad to see the visiting boys go.

After a brief stay at Marino, the father's estate, Arkady and Bazarov take off to visit various local gentry, including Madame Odintsova, an independent and elegant lady who invites them to stay for a few days at her estate. During the stay, both men fall for ladies at the estate, and are loathe to continue on to Bazarov's home, to which they finally proceed.

Arkady and Bazarov, all the time rethinking their own motherland, return soon to Marino, from which Arkady returns to Mme. Odintsova's estate, while Bazarov remains at Arkady's dad's estate, to do some scientific experiments. While doing so he takes time off to make a pass at Fenichka, the mistress of Arkady's dad, and is spotted by Pavel, Arkady's uncle, who—on behalf of his offended brother—challenges Bazarov to a duel. The uncle is slightly wounded in the duel, but it is no longer possible for Bazarov to remain at Marino, and he returns to his own home, en route checking on Arkady's love life. Having learned that Arkady has fallen in love with Katya, and is engaged to her, Bazarov returns home again, confused about his own immediate future. But by this time he has lost his sense of direction, and while performing an autopsy, in his local morgue,

Bazarov makes a fatal move and contracts typhus. On his deathbed he sends for Mme. Odintsova, and tells her how much he loves her.

In the end, Arkady marries Katya, and assumes the management of his father's estate. His father marries Fenichka, and is overjoyed to have his son with him, while Arkady's uncle, Pavel, leaves to spend the rest of his life in Germany, presenting himself as a 'noble.'

### Themes

**The main theme** is the clash between generations, which accompanies the wider value-clashes which mark the development of any society. The theme is made vivid by the confrontation between the nihilist, Bazarov, and the conservative, time-bound family of Arkady. The novel remains open and artistic, consciously avoiding a position on the conflict posed by the theme.

**A secondary theme** is the enduring mutual understanding between generations of the same society, in spite of their inevitable passages through growing apart. Turgenev is successful in depicting the genuine happiness felt by Arkady and his father, after Arkady has assumed the management of his paternal estate.

### Characters

**Bazarov** 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.

**Arkady** Arkady is Bazarov's junior in the academic world, having just graduated from university in Petersburg. Arkady has been exposed to 'modern western thought,' especially to scientific thinking, but is still basically a child of the old Russia, happy in the end to be once again part of the pre-enancipation world his Father belongs so.

**BAZAROV** (Disagreeable)

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**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?

### ARKADY (Agreeable)

**Character** The character of Arkady, naïve friend, University acquaintance, and host of Bazarov, is a fascinating counterpoint to Bazarov himself. Arkady has only recently left home for higher education, and misses the warm family setting where he lived with his father and their many farm personnel. As the book opens, Arkady totally admires Bazarov, who seems to represent everything Western, 'nihilist,' intellectually sophisticated—all the traits Arkady has imbibed at University. In the course of the book Arkady recovers his old girlfriend, Katya, and

through her and many old acquaintances, poises himself, at least, to recover some of the older values that are central to him.

**Parallels** Arkady feels a hero worship for Bazarov, the trendy modern figure for his world, full of the 'new learning' and progressive views of life. Homer's Telemachus, in the *Odyssey*, is similarly naïve, relying on the (disguised) Athena for advice and directions into the wide world represented by Nestor's palace. Jonathan Swift, the narrator of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), is both naïve and the activator of the only interesting character in the book, Gulliver; Gulliver who, in his naïve discovery of absurdities in strange places manages to satirize a lot in English society of the time. Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) is bathed in the insipid positive thinking of its narrator, Candide himself, who is not only naïve but an embodied joke on the thinking of his own Enlightened moment. A complex modern parallel is the character of Lolita in Nabokov's *Lolita* (1968). She is both a susceptible and fascinated youngster in the hands of a lecherous pedophile, but also (increasingly) a scheming young femme fatale who takes over the reins of the story.

### Illustrative moments

**Proud** Arkady is very proud of Bazarov, whom he has invited home with him from the University, and whom he presents to his own father as 'a man who knows everything.' To clarify, he adds that Bazarov wants to take his M.D. the following year. Then, as he surveys the household awaiting him, he remembers that his Dad has taken a common-law wife, Fenichka; Arkady wonders, anxiously, whether this situation is suitable to bring Bazarov into. On reflection, Arkady concludes, he should tell his Dad that Bazarov is above all that, is a modernist who can tolerate any social arrangement or life-style.

**Uneasy** Arkady is confused and embarrassed at his Father's embarrassment—over Fenichka. Arkady's heart 'was filled with a feeling of indulgent tenderness for his kind, soft-hearted father, mixed with a sense of a certain secret superiority.' The presence of Bazarov, who is in fact curt and rather indifferent toward the family group, makes it difficult for Arkady to find his own old comfort zone in his house. As they approach the family house, and the beauty of spring surges, Bazarov intrudes from the carriage to ask Arkady for a match and to offer him a cigar. Arkady follows suit, blowing forth a huge billow of smoke—which nearly chokes his tobacco-hating father.

**Filial** Underneath Arkady's efforts to conciliate the lifestyles of his Dad and of Bazarov, the son feels a deep affection for his Dad. Near the homestead of Arkady's family, the son is swamped by the beauty of the spring landscape, with its 'soft breath of the warm wind,' with 'the endless trilling music of the larks.' As his Dad effused, over the fine times he and his son will have farming together, 'Arkady flung off his coat and turned to his father, with a face so bright and boyish, that the latter gave him another hug.'

**Compromised** Bazarov heavily influences Arkady's tastes in literature and social thought, and Arkady passes on those new values to his Dad and his uncle, Pavel Petrovich. (Pavel ultimately concludes that Bazarov is a quack, and should be thrown out; but his brother, working closely with his son, cannot see that perspective.) Arkady gathers from Bazarov that an addiction to Pushkin, which Dad was seen reading the day before, 'is entirely useless.' Arkady asks his friend what he should recommend to the homefolks, and is advised to choose *Matter and Force (Stoff und Kraft)*, a current book on physics and energy by Ludwig Buechner.

### Discussion questions

What parallels do you see between Arkady's attitude to Bazarov and that of a susceptible teen ager today toward a trendy figure from the sports or entertainment world? (Give examples!) Has Turgenev put his finger on a universal relationship?

Jonathan Swift (in *Gulliver's Travels*) creates a naïve narrator in order to expound a tale about a naïve person. How does Turgenev deal with his naïve Arkady? Does Turgenev stand objectively outside of this naïve character?

What exactly does Arkady admire about Bazarov? What was it, about the form the Western plus Russian Enlightenment assumed, that made it fascinating to Arkady?

**Reading** <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30723/30723-h/30723-h.htm>