

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

## IVAN TURGENEV

(1818-1883)

### Work (selected major works)

#### Novels

*Home of the Gentry*, 1859

*On the Eve*, 1860

*Fathers and Sons*, 1862

*Smoke*, 1867

*Virgin Soil*, 1877

#### Plays

*A Conversation on the Highway*, 1850

*A Provincial Lady*, 1851

*A Month in the Country*, 1855/1872

#### Short Fiction and Sketches

'A Sportsman's Sketches,' 1852

*First Love*, 1860

*King Lear of the Steppes*, 1870

*The Song of Triumphant Love*, 1881

*The Mysterious Tales*, 1883

### Biography

Ivan Turgenev was of an old Russian noble family. He was born in Orel, one hundred miles south of Moscow, in 1818. He had a privileged background, educated at home by tutors, and went on to the best of University educations—Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin. The influence of German philosophers, like Hegel, marked him strongly, and he soon returned to Russia, eager to share his knowledge of Hegel with Russian students. In 1841 he returned to Russia, where he found himself increasingly swept up into literary circles. Despite intense opposition from within his family, especially from his mother, Turgenev persisted in devoting himself to his writing.

Turgenev's first literary successes were his 'Sportsman's Sketches,' in which he made successful literature out of his love of hunting. For several years he lived and worked in Paris, until returning to a Russia which was not especially congenial to him. Significant literary figures, like Dostoyevsky, were in exile, and he himself was kept under close police surveillance.

As his reputation grew, and his desire to travel out of his oppressive country intensified, Turgenev returned to Europe, in search both of spiritual alliances, and of relief, at a variety of spas, from what he was convinced was his increasingly bad health. When his earlier protector, Mme. Viardot, took up residence at Baden Baden—the scene at which much of Turgenev's novel *Smoke* transpires—he built a cottage for himself on the same location. At the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) the two of them moved to Paris, where they bought a villa at Bougival, and where Turgenev was to spend the rest of his life.

Turgenev died in 1883, due to suffering from cancer of the spinal cord.

## Achievements

**Propaganda.** During his many adult years in Europe, Turgenev became both a spokesperson for the Russian movement in literature, and for his own work, which caught the enthusiastic fancy of such Western novelists as Conrad and James. Gustave Flaubert, author of *Mme. Bovary*, became Turgenev's best literary friend.

**Philosophy.** Turgenev, like his friend Flaubert, was an objective aesthete, convinced that beauty and art will bring truth with them, and must be followed where they go. The love of Conrad and Henry James, mentioned above, is their expression of a shared feeling for Turgenev's art philosophy. On this banner, Turgenev becomes the most outstanding representative, for much of Western creative culture, of the world level of Russian literature; an artist above all, rather than a religious sensibility like Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy.

**Nature.** Beginning with his 'Sportsman's Sketches' (1852) Turgenev imported a new nature sensitivity into Russian literature, and he sustains that sensitivity throughout his major works, as we observe in scenes like those of farm and countryside in *Fathers and Sons* and ample glimpses of the Russian countryside as it appears to the protagonist of *Smoke*, upon his return to his homeland after a prolonged stay at the spa in Baden Baden.

**History.** Turgenev is acutely aware of the interrelated reactions of generations, to one another; also of the shock set up against each other by different cultures, an awareness made keen to him by his constant traveling both in old-fashioned Russia, and in the innovative European West of his time. *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev's finest work, essentially concerns the gradual reconciliation between an older serf-holding conservative society, and the new value innovations brought back from University in St. Petersburg. Itself the Russian portal to Western culture.

## Themes

**Conflict.** *Fathers and Sons* concerns conflict between the high culture of St. Petersburg University life and the values of the Russian countryside in the era of serfdom. The sophisticated university student, Bazarov, visits Arkady's home and father, with its old-fashioned ambience. Turgenev masterfully constructs his novel around the gradual reconciliation of the opposed historical forces brought into play here.

**Exile.** *Smoke* is a novel devoted to the world of expatriate Russian intellectuals in Europe, and especially to the mind of the Russian Litvinov, who though engaged falls in love with an old girl friend, and deeply experiences cultural interactions between his homeland, Russia, and the world of Russian exiles in Western Europe. Turgenev himself lived a similar fitful and complex relation to his mother country.

**Love.** The search for romantic fulfillment drives Litvinov in *Smoke*, and drives both Arkady and Bazarov, in *Fathers and Sons*, to complex romantic searches. Turgenev might seem to have written as a Romantic, and yet his 'realistic' side is always lurking in the background, which is where his great admirer, Flaubert, loved to find it.

**Style.** The self-consciously elegant style of Turgenev, which endeared him to James and Flaubert, sharply distinguished itself from the shaggier, rangier, and more compendious styles of Tolstoy and

Dostoyevsky, whose tales themselves were far more implication full than those of Turgenev. It belongs to this contrast, that Turgenev was far closer to European literature and art than were the two giants, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, in whom strains of Old Russia, and the Old Faith, could always be heard.

### Characters

Turgenev probes characters who live the values of their time, while at the same time he evaluates those values. One work in which he carries out this kind of fiction-history-sociology is *Fathers and Sons*, in which the core issue is social transformation from one generation to another. We are in what is becoming the new Russia, mid-19th century, but we are still in the patriarchal world of Tsars, extremely wealthy landowners, and serfs—whose emancipation was first to be formalized in 1861.

Back together into this patriarchal world come 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 trends, 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.

Turgenev works through this same kind of cultural milieu in his novel *Smoke*, which is seen through the eyes of a Russian intellectual and expatriate, first met at a German spa where Russians are gathered to take the waters. **Litvinov** is the conflicted character who takes us through the annoying encounter with culturally placeless expats, but then, upon his return to Russia, finds himself in an uncomfortable search for identity and direction.

In these three characters, Turgenev speaks to himself about the developmental throes and potentials, of a culture which he himself is trying to sort out. He is caught between the 'aristocratic' and the new 'nationalist' worlds.