

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Turgenev

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.

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.

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.

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?