

# Turgenev's fathers and sons essay sample



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It must be said primarily, that in answering the aforementioned question and thus determining whether *Fathers and Sons* provides a truthful representation of the split between the two generations of the Russian intelligentsia it is crucial that we look closely at the interactions and contentions of the two main parties in the novel: Bazarov and Arkady (the 'sons') and Arkady's father and uncle, Nikolai and Pavel (the 'fathers').

It is by comparing the differences between the 'fathers' and 'sons' to the real day differences of the young radical revolutionising intelligentsia and the older conservative reforming members of the intelligentsia at the time of *Father and Sons*' publication, that we can ascertain whether Turgenev has provided a truthful representation of the cleavage within the Russian intelligentsia. Placing the novel in its social and political context gives us great insight into the Russian situation that Turgenev was trying to bring to life.

The Russian public had been stunned and paralysed by the loss of Sevastopol in 1855 and consequent defeat in the Crimean War. After the signing of the Peace of Paris, the surge of patriotism that had pervaded all classes and had sustained the Russian army suddenly collapsed, to be succeeded by a wave of disillusionment and near despair that swept over the country. Much of this disillusionment transformed itself into calls by large parts of the Russian intelligentsia, characterized as 'Slavophiles' or 'Westernisers', for sweeping reforms to eliminate the serfdom based economy and social structure that was prevalent in Russia at the time.

Alexander II, although it must be said was much more reform minded than his predecessor, Nicholas I, still failed to adhere to the more radical requests of the young revolutionaries. These young radicals largely as a result of their education and increasing exposure to intellectuals had recently emerged as large protesters to the conditions of the peasants and promoted the need to alleviate the physical and emotional anguish that the peasantry had been forced to endure because of their economic position.

It was thus a time of increasing political tension and debate amongst the intelligentsia of Russia, centred upon the plight of the Russian social structure. Published in February 1862, following the emancipation of the serfs of February 16, 1861, *Fathers and Sons* opens to "a world on the brink of extreme change" 1 in which Turgenev attempts to capture the important elements of the tensions that existed amongst the intelligentsia. In attempting to draw a distinct link between Turgenev's characters and their real life contemporaries, let us firstly look at the characters presented by Turgenev in his novella *Fathers and Sons*.

As the title suggests the main characters of the novel are separated into two camps: the younger 'nihilist' sons, Arkady and Bazarov and Arkady's father and uncle, Nikolai Petrovich and Pavel Petrovich. It is the vehement arguments that develop between the 'sons' and 'fathers', in particular the outspoken Bazarov and the aristocratic Pavel that form the conflict of the story and help Turgenev promote the split between the younger radical members of the Russian intelligentsia and their reforming elders. It is important for us to look closely at the character of Bazarov, for it is he who serves the purpose of antagonist within the novel.

It is Bazarov and Pavel's differences and contentions that represent most clearly the gulf that had formed between the older and younger generations. Bazarov, in his own words a 'nihilist', which means that he accepts nothing on authority, and subject every proposition to the test of practical reason. In such a capacity he wishes to sweep away the assumptions and non-scientifically proven 'truths' of social, political, emotional and spiritual life in Russia. He begins by rejecting all common assumptions about serfdom, the foundations of Russian social hierarchy and its reform, including all of its social and economic ramifications.

He confronts Pavel and Nikolai about their attitudes towards the peasants, which leads to one of the many heated debates between Pavel and Bazarov: "Ask any of your yokels which of us he'd more readily acknowledge as his fellow countryman, you or I. Why you don't even know how to talk to him." 2 Bazarov considers every human an equal in purely scientific terms- comparing all humans to frogs stating, "you and I are just the same as frogs, except that we walk on two legs." 3.

As a result he discards the traditional assumption about social placement in society, treating peasants and aristocrats alike, with peasants Bazarov converses comfortably but disdainfully: "The servants, too, became attached to him, though he liked to tease them: they felt him to be one of their feather, not of the gentry" 4 He had a special flair for inspiring trust in members of lower class. Then, when describing one of the local landowning aristocrats, Bazarov remarks to Pavel, "A rotter, a wretched aristocrat" 5, a description, which Bazarov later submits in his opinion, applies to all members of the aristocracy.

His outspoken nihilism is seen in stark contrast to the more conservative elder members of the story, particularly the more frank Pavel who sees the younger members as mere denunciators who are out of touch with the Russian people. His aristocratic leaning and belief in tradition are exemplified when disputing with Bazarov; he says of the Russian people: " It has a sacred regard for tradition, it is patriarchal, it cannot live without faith.... 6 He considers Bazarov " vainglorious, insolent, cynical and plebeian. " 7 Nikolai Petrovich, Pavel's brother and Bazarov's host throughout part of the novel, has developed an enlightened theory of serfdom- he calls his estate of two thousand dessiatins (about five thousand acres) with two hundred serfs a " farm" 8. He has in essence freed the serfs who were once house servants and provided them with duties that carry no responsibilities.

Nevertheless Nikolai, and more importantly his brother, Pavel, still see themselves as aristocrats amongst peasants: Pavel describes the hired steward derogatorily as " a tall lank man with a sweetish consumptive voice and roguish eyes" 9 and in light of his superiority " tries to make out all peasants to be drunkards and thieves" 10. Neither Nikolai nor Pavel converse with any servant other than on the topic of the estate. Nikolai sees reform as essential however he has no idea how it should be performed and has no interest in Bazarov's radical rhetoric.

Bazarov's immediate Russian roots can be seen in the young revolutionaries of the day - those members of the intelligentsia who had embraced and popularised a concept of negation. Bazarov was the first literary ' nihilist' and much of the philosophical and ideological roots of Bazarov's nihilism can be found in the emerging concepts of political anarchy espoused by Bakunin.

Anarchy was a movement whose growth and following could be found throughout Russia in the form of revolutionaries who saw radical sweeping reforms as the only hope for the backward Russia.

This underground revolution was experienced during the reactionary period of 1848 and following years. Tompkins propounds that: " It is obvious, therefore, that by 1847 the idea had taken root among advanced thinkers in Russia that there was no hope for progress in the slow process of individual improvement.... but the correction of Russia's evils was to be found in the complete destruction of the existing system. " 11 The situation of the new radicals rendered them more rootless, more mobile than their predecessors of the forties.

They detested conventions and hierarchies, the careers and rights of literary men, and all the stuffy pomposity of life. These revolutionaries encouraged a complete overthrow of all social and political structure to allow regeneration from the ground up, ex nihilo, a characteristic Bazarovistic in nature.

Although not openly labelling themselves nihilists, Turgenev's depiction seems apt, for we can see in these young revolutionaries, a regard for everything in a critical manner, representative of " a person who does not look up to any authorities, who does not accept a single principle on faith. 12 Dimitri Pisarev who is generally considered the chief exponent of nihilism, sums up the feeling within the Russian Intelligentsia prior to the Emancipation. Writing somewhat later of his time at the University of Moscow following the Crimean War, he noted that in his day students at the university fell into two groups, the " old" and the " new" students. 13 The " old" students sought solace in learning and were indifferent to the political

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problems of the time. The “ new” students, Pisarev characterises as those who were eager to read *Sovremennik* and took Dobrolyubov for their teacher.

This is a very interesting point, and although Turgenev refutes it, many of Turgenev's contemporaries believed that the original of his principal character Bazarov was in fact Dobrolyubov. Pisarev points to the years 1858-1859, the time in which Turgenev's book was set, that marked the transition, “ which he ascribes to the altered tone of society, now entirely preoccupied with social and political problems of the day, agitated by movements directed to this or that practical purpose of benefiting humanity, and little inclined to listen to the advice of the sages. 14 We can see distinct similarities between Bazarov and the radicals of the day. Like Chernyshevsky, Bazarov was a materialist, and he denies the need to study individuals as distinct from society. Chernyshevsky's quotation “ People are like trees in a wood: no botanist will spend his time studying each individual birch tree” 15 shows striking similarity to Bazarov's frog analogy. Alexander Herzen's reaction to the emergence of these radical minded youngsters goes some way to give a summation of the opinion the ‘ fathers’ had of the younger generation.

A strong supporter of reform, and founder of populism (which eventually took the place of nihilism), who was characteristically more conservative in relation to the new radicals, referred to them as *enfants terribles* and writes “ It is impossible not to realise that tsarist tutelage and the civilisation of our empire has furnished a strange seedbed, in which promising sprouts have grown up into worshippers of the Muravievs<sup>16</sup> and Katkovs on the one hand,

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and on the other into the rowdies of nihilism and desperate gangs of Bazarovs. 17 Herzen's attitude towards these revolutionaries was symbolic of many of the more conservative members of the Russian intelligentsia. Tompkins argues that like Herzen, much of the elder members of the intelligentsia were "inspired by a natural aristocratic prejudice against these young upstarts." 18 Again Pavel's description of Bazarov as plebeian, draws a striking similarity. The younger generation on the other hand were quick to brand Herzen a revolutionary fraud, since he continued to live on a fortune invested in the backs of serfs, and to enjoy all the comforts of the exploiters.

It is interesting to note such opposition as it appears Herzen did in fact make a contribution to nihilism by casting doubts on the validity of the standing social and moral order in Europe during his time: "The truth and justice of old Europe are falsehood and injustice to the Europe that is being born." 19 The contention between Herzen and the young radicals shows resounding similarity to the arguments between Bazarov and Pavel in *Father and Sons*.

Bazarov, refers to Pavel and his brother as "these romantic old fellows" 20 and chastises them for their aristocratic leanings. This is none more evident in one of Pavel and Bazarov's many arguments on the importance of art, which Pavel remarks sarcastically "Ah, well! The young people are cleverer than us, it seems" 21. Following the conversation Bazarov pronounces: "I'll be blowed if I'm going to humour these rustic aristocrats! It's nothing but conceitedness, swell habits foppery." 22

Although through his characters in *Fathers and Sons*, Turgenev paints a strikingly truthful picture of the younger generation that emerged in Russia



during the late 1850s, and the split between their elder more conservative counterparts, Turgenev received a great deal of criticism from all parts of the Russian intelligentsia. The radicals felt Bazarov, the nihilist, was a scathing attack on them, whereas the more conservative members felt Turgenev was too lenient and sympathetic towards Bazarov and therefore the younger generation.

It must be said however that it would have been impossible for Turgenev to please either factions without sacrificing his objective representation. In characterising the younger radicals as nihilists he was admittedly placing a stereotype on the whole generation. It was however a suitable portrayal, as populism was yet to find its strong following, the new radicals were increasingly more constructive than anarchists, and Marxism was yet to be born.

Their theory and ideals, although they professed to have none, were thus nihilistic in nature. Lenin found great insight in Turgenev's writing and portrays Turgenev as "an honest propagator of the ideals of several young generations" 23. It is therefore in Bazarov we can see many similarities to the young upstarts that Herzen alludes to, not only in his emphasis on negation and corrosion, materialistic beliefs, and belief in regeneration from the ground up, but also in his attitude and approach towards his elders.

In branding the younger generation nihilists Turgenev somewhat limits the scope of his representation however through Bazarov, we can see a perfect example of an emerging member of the younger generation, who as a result of education and exposure to intellectuals alludes to a natural estrangement

from that of the fathers. As Desaix writes “ Bazarov was not simply an individual example of revolutionary youth on the eve of Emancipation in Russia, but, in being taken ad absurdum, he also represented the direction materialist thinking could take as it developed over the next few years.

24The ‘ fathers’ lack of desire to understand or take on board these new radical views is somewhat symbolic of many of the more conservative intelligentsia of the time. It is thus in this way that to a large extent Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons portrays the differences between the older more conservative members of the intelligentsia and their younger radical counterparts. Thus, Turgenev represents truthfully the split between the intelligentsia in Russia.