

Nihilism in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* has several characters that hold strong views of the world. For example, Pavel believes that Russia needs structure from such things as institution, religion, and class hierarchy. On the other hand, Madame Odintzov views the world as simple so long as she keeps it systematic and free from interference.

This commentary will focus on perhaps the most interesting and complex character in *Fathers and Sons*: Bazarov.

Vladimir Nabakov writes that "Turgenev takes his creature [B] out of a self-imposed pattern and places him in the normal world of chance." By examining Bazarov I will attempt to make sense of this statement. Using nihilism as a starting point I am going to look at Bazarov's views and interpretations of science, government and institution. Next I will turn to the issue relationships and finally I will examine Bazarov's death and the stunning truths it reveals. These issues combined with the theme of nihilism will prove that chance, or fate is a strong force which cannot easily be negated.

Nihilism as a concept is used throughout *Fathers and Sons*. To gain a better understanding of the ideas behind this term let's look at what Bazarov says on the subject.

**"We base our conduct on what we recognize as useful... the most useful thing we can do is to repudiate – and so we repudiate" (123).**

The base concept of nihilism is to deny or negate, and as we learn later in the same paragraph, to negate everything. With this 'destruction' of everything from science to art there is no building for nihilists, as Bazarov says

**"That is not our affair" (126).**

Nihilists view the current structure of society as concerned with such trivialities as 'art' and 'parliament' while ignoring real life issues such as food, freedom, and equality. Nihilists are aware of these social woes and hence mentally deny recognizing any of the present authority or institutions which only serve to perpetuate a myth.

**"... I don't believe in anything: and what is science—science in the abstract? There are sciences as there are trades and professions, but abstract science just doesn't exist" (98).**

For Bazarov anything that is not tangible and concrete doesn't exist. Psychology, quantum mechanics, neurochemistry would be scoffed at by Bazarov. It seems peculiar that Bazarov would say,

**"... nowadays we laugh at medicine in general, and worship no one,"  
(197)**

While at the same time he pursues a career as a doctor. The medicine that Bazarov uses deals in the 'pure sciences' that is his ideas come from practice not theory. By looking

closer at Bazarov we discover that his work confirms his nihilistic ideas. To elaborate on that, one only need look at Bazarov's main focus; the dissection of frogs. Each time he pokes around the anatomy of a frog he notices they all have similar structures (heart, liver, intestine's etc). Humans also share a common internal anatomy. Abstract concepts like authority, religion or science do not naturally exist within people and are only made 'real' by others. Bazarov knows this and his studies confirm his rebellious attitude. Bazarov says,

**"All men are similar, in soul as well as in body ... and the so-called moral qualities are the same in all of us" (160).**

As with general science Bazarov feels nothing towards art.

**"... You assume that I have no feeling for art – and it is true, I haven't" (159).**

Art is trivial to Bazarov and accomplishes nothing, therefore he doesn't recognize it. It is the same with nature,

**"Bazarov was rather indifferent to the beauties of nature" (169).**

There is a saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." What if the beholder has no eye for beauty? Such is the case with Bazarov. The point for Bazarov is that aesthetics in art and nature only serve to divert attention from pressing issues such as corruption in society and structural change. These are what concern nihilists, not the latest prose from Pushkin or painting from Alexander.

Institutions such as education, government and established authority are scorned by Bazarov.

**"Everyone ought to educate himself" (105).**

Since the indoctrination of established society begins with education, a nihilist should view education from behind the barrel of a shotgun.

Logic is of no use Bazarov,

**"You don't need logic, I suppose, to put a piece of bread in your mouth" (123).**

The nihilist agenda, that is, the need for the destruction of structure is beyond logic and is as necessary as eating or breathing. In addition Bazarov believes that what is preached by politicians and so-called leaders is itself without logic.

**"Aristocraticism, liberalism, progress, principles – think of it, what a lot of foreign words ... and useless words!" (123).**

It is easy for Bazarov to give no credence and thus negate the things which government deems important in society. He sees irrelevance in much of what is said and done by leaders and Bazarov believes that real issues are being avoided.

**"We saw that our clever men, our so-called progressives and reformers never accomplished anything, that we were concerning ourselves with a lot of nonsense, discussing art, unconscious creative work, parliamentarianism, the bar, and the devil knows what, while all the time the real question was getting daily bread to eat ... when our industrial enterprises come to grief solely for want of honest man at the top" (126).**

Bazarov's nihilistic nature is a product of the corruption he sees in the nation. Bazarov could choose to live his life and pretend not to be aware of the evils around him. Instead he chooses to be a destroyer of structure, a nihilist in every sense and every thought. He finds himself in a world which he despises and discovers he must deny everything which results from this world. However, Bazarov's self-imposed nihilism, which gives him the power to negate, is challenged by something we are all subjects to—chance.

When Bazarov meets Madame Odintzov we notice distress within our hero. Up to this point Bazarov has maintained his somewhat icy composure and easily passed the tests of his nihilist convictions. But now, chance deals Bazarov a new hand. By befriending Anna Odintzov, Bazarov comes up against feelings which he tries desperately to defeat. In the early stages he feels inspired and this feeling

**"Tortured and maddened him" (169).**

Later, sometimes unaware, Bazarov has fantasies wherein his lust for Anna is quite clear. Bazarov finds that despite his strength in other matters he is overwhelmed and consumed by these 'shameful' thoughts. Bazarov would

"stamp his feet or grind his teeth and shake his fist at himself" (170).

Even after all his teeth grinding and fist shaking, Bazarov cannot seem to cast off his growing passion.

"He was breathing heavily; his whole body trembled" (182).

It is interesting to watch this fight between Bazarov's deeply held views of nihilism versus (what Bazarov would call) a trivial and ambiguous entity - passionate love. This situation between Bazarov and Anna would have been scoffed at by Bazarov himself, had another been in his place. Eventually the

"passion struggling in him, violent and painful" (182)

is too much for Bazarov to take and he gives into this 'passionate fury'. This proves that even a nihilist, who heeds no authority, institution, or social conventions and follows no rules, cannot negate the power of love. Life is itself without rules. It is the random, somewhat chaotic nature of life which makes convention attractive. Bazarov sees life for what it is and would rather take his chances with the 'chaotic', undefined world than live by rules, norms and standards imposed by others.

Bazarov calls conventional methods of living 'gliding along the rails'. Bazarov lives at the edge of an abyss and he uses no railing for support. For this reason, Bazarov is a stronger man than most, as he has only himself to turn to. He sees corruption and scandal in many of the structures and fights to tear these down. It is hard for Bazarov to do this alone for nihilism is a

**"bitter, harsh, lonely existence" (271).**

What is needed are more strong men like Bazarov to help tear down the institutions. Chance, however finds Bazarov in a time which cannot appreciate his ideas. It is too early and the people have yet to uncover their eyes, and cannot see what is systematically removing their souls. Bazarov's gradual demise is foreshadowed by the peasants when

**"Bazarov the self-confident did not for a moment, suspect that in their eyes he was nothing but a buffoon" (276).**

Bazarov's nihilistic ideas do not seem to reside anywhere but in himself. He seems to realize that Russia is not ready to accept his ideas and meets fate with unusual acceptance.

When Bazarov falls ill he doesn't stamp his feet or grind his teeth, he merely says,

**"It's a fortuitous circumstance, and, to tell you the truth, a very unpleasant one" (281).**

It's of little use for Bazarov to deceive himself into thinking he can negate fate.

**"Yes, just try and set death aside. It sets you aside, and that's the end of it!" (283).**

Bazarov, the great nihilist of Russia encounters the strongest negation of all – death. Nihilism as an idea has the potential to create a lot of change. By relinquishing all forms of authority, institution and convention of value so that subordination, normality, rules and laws no longer exist, would cause a radically different perception of social conduct and responsibility. Bazarov, by being a nihilist, brings this into existence. Negation however does have its limits. As Bazarov discovers, there are some things which defy negation. If by chance one falls in love, the sword of negation meets heavy armour. The strength of a nihilist resides in his or her mind. The action potential is in the strength of conviction to these principles. But the overall power of one's ability to destroy is in no way a match for the supremacy of fate – negation in the form of death.