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Childhood, Boyhood, Youth

Leo Tolstoy · *1852–1857 · C. J. Hogarth translation (1913)*

Tolstoy's first great work is a fictional autobiography of a Russian nobleman's son, Nicolas Irtenieff, told from the quiet standpoint of later years. The three books follow him from the country house of his early years through Moscow and a grandmother's house to the university. It made Tolstoy's name before he was thirty.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a child become a person, and what does he lose and gain as he learns to see himself as others see him?

Tolstoy answers through small memories. Nicolas's early world is warm, with the tutor Karl Ivanitch, the nurse Natalia Savishna, and his mother. As he grows, he becomes self-conscious, vain, and ashamed, and he learns that life is not what he had imagined. The three books follow the loss of the first innocence and the growth of a young man's ambition and moral sense.

KEY CHARACTERS

Nicolas (Nicolenka) Irtenieff
The narrator, a nobleman's son.

Karl Ivanitch
His German tutor, gentle and comic.

Mamma
His mother, whose death ends childhood.

Natalia Savishna
The old nurse, honored for her long service.

Grisha
A holy fool who prays at night.

Dimitri Nechludoff
His friend with ideals.

Woloda
His elder brother.

Grades 9–12

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01

The Country House

CHILDHOOD, FIRST PART

Nicolas wakes under the eye of his tutor, hears his father's strict voice, goes hunting, and overhears the holy fool Grisha at night prayers. The boys are taken to their grandmother in Moscow.

- Karl Ivanitch is a gentle, comic figure.
- Grisha's prayers make a lasting impression.
- A first taste of love and society comes in Moscow.

02

The Death of Mamma

CHILDHOOD, LATER CHAPTERS

A letter calls the boys home. His mother's last letter, with its calm Christian view of death, is followed by her death. The boy keeps a frightened vigil by the coffin.

- The mother's death is the end of childhood.
- Natalia Savishna's long service is honored.
- Nicolas's grief is mixed with self-observation.

03

Boyhood in Moscow

BOYHOOD

The children travel to Moscow to their grandmother. Nicolas begins to see himself as others see him, measures himself against his elder brother, breaks his father's key, quarrels with the old tutor, and learns that the world is not what he imagined.

- Vanity and shame are new feelings.
- The quarrel with Karl Ivanitch is painful.
- He learns the limits of his own judgment.

04

Rules and Confession

YOUTH, FIRST PART

At sixteen he draws up rules of life and goes to confession, stumbles at once, and begins the friendship with Dimitri Nechludoff that is to shape the next years.

- The rules of life are a young man's program.
- Confession is both sincere and a performance.
- Nechludoff is a friend with high ideals.

05

The University and the Fall

YOUTH, LATER CHAPTERS

He enters the university, mixes with a more worldly set, drifts, and fails his first examination. The book ends with a moment of shame and a new resolve.

- His new friends are fashionable and unserious.
- The failed examination is a blow.
- The ending is a promise of more to come.

Growing Up | Memory | Vanity and Shame | Family

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice how Tolstoy looks back with an adult's understanding.
2. Watch how Nicolas's view of himself changes in each book.
3. The nurse and the tutor are portraits of servants as persons. See how Tolstoy draws them.
4. The death of the mother is the center of the first book. Ask how it is told.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the C. J. Hogarth translation (1913) (Project Gutenberg #2142 (Childhood), #2450 (Boyhood), #2637 (Youth)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/childhood-boyhood-youth/.