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Taras Bulba

Nikolai Gogol · *1835 (revised 1842) · John Cournos translation (1918)*

Taras Bulba, an old Cossack colonel, brings his two sons home from the academy at Kiev and takes them off to the Zaporozhian Setch, the island camp of the free Cossacks of the Dnieper. The Cossacks war on Poland and the Tatars, and the family is split by love and loyalty. Gogol's historical romance is a hymn to Cossack brotherhood and also a story of terrible violence, with anti-Jewish and anti-Polish prejudice that a modern reader must see.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a father owe to his sons, his friends, and his people, and what happens when those claims collide?

Taras puts the brotherhood of the Cossacks and the Russian faith above everything, even his own son. When Andrii leaves them for a Polish girl and fights against his own people, Taras shoots him. When Ostap is captured and tortured to death, Taras takes a terrible revenge. Gogol praises the courage of the Cossacks and pays for it with a cruelty that the book does not question. A careful reader will admire the writing and see what the book takes for granted.

KEY CHARACTERS

Taras Bulba
An old Cossack colonel, proud and hard.

Ostap
His elder son, brave and loyal.

Andrii
His younger son, who leaves for love.

the Polish lady
The girl Andrii loves.

Yankel
A Jewish merchant, shown in a prejudiced way.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Sons Come Home

CHAPTERS I–III

Taras's sons return from the academy. He is disgusted by their clothes and manners, gets them drunk, and takes them to the Zaporozhian Setch.

- Taras wants real Cossacks, not scholars.
- The Setch is a camp of free fighters.
- The sons are not yet tested.

02

The War and the Siege

CHAPTERS IV–VII

The Cossacks elect a new leader, raid Poland, and besiege the city of Dubno. Andrii, who has loved a Polish girl, slips into the city.

- The Setch is a democracy of fighters.
- Andrii's love is a secret.
- The siege is long and hungry.

03

The Speech and the Shooting

CHAPTERS VIII–IX

The Cossacks split to chase the Tatars. Taras gives his speech on brotherhood. Andrii leads a Polish sortie against his own people, and Taras takes him into the forest and shoots him.

- Taras's speech is the heart of the book's ideals.
- Andrii has changed sides for love.
- The shooting is a father's judgment.

04

The Wound and the Capture

CHAPTER X

Taras is wounded in the next battle and carried off to safety. Ostap is captured and taken to Warsaw.

- Taras recovers in secret.
- Ostap's courage is tested.
- The family's end begins.

05

Ostap's Death and the Revenge

CHAPTERS XI–XII

Ostap dies in the Warsaw square under torture, calling for his father. Taras leads a bloody raid on Poland, is captured, and is burned at the stake.

- Ostap's death is witnessed by Taras in the crowd.
- The raid is revenge without mercy.
- Taras's last words are for his comrades.

Brotherhood | War | Fathers and Sons | Faith and Nation

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The book was written to praise the Cossacks. Notice what it admires.
2. The depiction of Jews and Poles reflects prejudice. Read these passages critically.
3. Taras's judgment of Andrii is the moral center. Ask whether Gogol approves.
4. Look at the way the violence is described.

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