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Awakening Hatred and Maturity

The selected passage from Tolstoy's *Boyhood* captures intense emotions of a pivotal moment in the narrator's childhood. In the events leading up to and throughout this passage, the narrator, Nikolai, behaves immaturely. Fitting for a child awaiting punishment, he displays undeserved pride, excessive self-pity, and childish exaggeration. Yet after the hysterical outburst, he is not punished and the family is sympathetic towards him. In the end, Nikolai exhibits a new-found calm, revealing mental growth. Along with this growth comes the emergence of hatred, leading to a loss of innocence.

Nikolai's troubles began on Lyuba's birthday. Despite the threat of harsh punishment from St- Jérôme if he continued to get poor marks, Nikolai slips out of his history lesson while Volodya was being questioned. Being caught by Mimi, he returns to his lesson only to fail to adequately answer his master's questions, receiving another poor mark. He then proceeds to compound his error by lying to St-Jérôme about his score. Later in the party, while retrieving some cigars for papa from the study, Nikolai's curiosity prompts him to look through his father's private portfolio. In his haste to return to the party undiscovered, he breaks the key of the portfolio in the keyhole, sealing his fate. When confronted by St-Jérôme for his misdeeds, Nikolai resists and strikes him. After being isolated for a day, he is brought before grandmamma to apologize to St- Jérôme, but he cannot bring himself to do so, greatly upsetting his grandmamma. While trying to escape the house, Nikolai is caught and punished by his father. The selected passage captures the exchange between Nikolai and his father.

A key feature of the passage is Nikolai's developing pride. Though he struck his tutor, his childish arrogance prevents him from apologizing to St- Jérôme, whom he holds in contempt.

Nikolai sees St- Jérôme as a “bully...my tormentor” and his attempts to discipline Nikolai as purposeful humiliation (Tolstoy 150). Fed up with St- Jérôme’s orders, Nikolai gives this father an ultimatum: “Protect me or turn me out of the house. I cannot live with him” (150). Showing pride in his perceived maturity, he proclaims to his father, “I am not a little boy, I won’t endure it [St- Jérôme’s humiliation]” (151). He seems to hold this belief adamantly, even threatening “I shall die, I shall kill myself” (151). While Nikolai holds himself in high regard, his exaggerated threats to commit suicide are characteristic of a child. Another immature behavior is Nikolai’s deflection of responsibility. Nikolai tries to direct the blame for his poor behavior on St- Jérôme. While talking to his father, Nikolai uses the words “he” and “him” seven times, referring to St- Jérôme (150). Too proud to take full responsibility for his actions, he says that “*He* told grandmamma that I was good-for-nothing, and now she is ill, she will die because of me” (151). Though he does say “she will die because of me,” Nikolai is first emphasizes that it was St- Jérôme who informed grandmamma and made her sick. In Nikolai’s childish mind, St- Jérôme’s humiliation is the cause of his unruly behavior.

Although Nikolai does not take full responsibility, he does view himself as sinful and being wrong. While walking to his grandmamma, he considers himself as a sinner and imagines that Katya, Lyuba, and Volodya “looked at me [...] in exactly the same way as we looked at the convicts who were led past our windows on Mondays” (148). After making his grandmamma cry, he understands his misdeeds, lamenting “O God, what have I done! How terribly wicked I am!”(150). When his father punishes him for looking through his portfolio, Nikolai is glad to be punished, remarking that “Although my ear hurt very badly I did not cry but experienced an agreeable feeling of moral relief” (150). In fact, he begs for more physical punishment, pleading his father to “Hurt me again, [...] do it harder, make it hurt more, I am a good-for-nothing horrid

miserable wretch!” (150). The physical pain he experiences lightens the emotional guilt he feels on account of the sins he committed.

Although he feels guilty, Nikolai is influenced more by his self-pity. Wallowing in self-pity, he tells his father that “Everybody hates me, I know they do,” “Nobody loves me!”, and asks “why do they tor...tor...torture me?” (150-151). Using the words “everybody,” “nobody,” and “they,” Nikolai represents himself as standing alone against the world (151). These childish absolutes and exaggerations further show Nikolai’s immature character. The supposed hatred against him causes him to breakdown, “sobbing so that it seemed to me that I should die that very minute” (151). The image of his possible death seems to represent a loss of innocence, the death of his childhood, from the realization that people might actually hate him. Nikolai actually does fall into convulsions and falls asleep.

When he wakes up, it is late at night. A solitary candle is burning by his bedside while Mimi, Lyuba, and his family doctor surround the bed. This scene calls to mind a deathbed, continuing the idea of the death of part of his childhood. Nikolai, however, feels “so well and my heart felt so light after my twelve hours’ sleep that I could have sprung out of bed directly, had I not disliked the idea of upsetting their conviction that I was very ill” (151). This happiness contrasts with his misery previous in the passage, and it seems to imply a rebirth. It is interesting to note that Nikolai is not punished by his family. Rather, they feel sympathetic towards him. Caring for his son, “Papa took me in his arms and carried me to my bedroom” (151). Looking at Mimi, Lyuba, and his family doctor, Nikolai observed “from their faces that they were alarmed by my condition” (151). From these signs, Nikolai now understands that his family and friends do care about him, staying and worrying about him in his room. Also, he is no longer panicking childishly; rather, his awareness of his power in this situation reveals a new sense of mature complexity and wisdom. He understands that they are worrying about him and he enjoys letting

them worry. This manipulation shows a degree of maturity he did not display in his tearful ranting.

The passage is mostly a dialogue, and the passionate word choice and style make the exchange seem genuine and emotionally charged. For most of the passage, Nikolai is fighting back tears and pleading with his father for help. This emotional pleading is emphasized by Tolstoy's use of italics. The italicized "*please*" adds to the sense of longing, while the italicized "*he*" used amplifies the accusation against St-Jérôme. The repeated use of ellipse conveys the sense of tears and gasps for air in Nikolai's speech. This sense is especially clear in "why do they tor...tor...torture me?" Also, the use of short sentence and sentence fragments invokes the sense of a train of thought, unfiltered rambling of a crying child. The narrator may speak from an older point of view, but the grammatical marks and the syntax of the dialogue express the emotions of a young adolescent aptly. In addition, Nikolai's physical actions are those of a boy pleading to an adult. He "seized [his father's] hand and covered it with tears and kisses," and then "fell with [his] head on [his father's] knees, sobbing" (150-151). Both submissive actions build on the emotional dialogue furthering the image of Nikolai being weak and immature in the beginning.

On his transition from a weak boy to a more mature youth, Nikolai experiences a pivotal point in his boyhood: the manifestation of hate. Notably, there is his hate towards St-Jérôme. The following quote is a thoughtful reflection on his sense of developing hatred:

Yes, it was a real hatred-not the hatred we only read about in novels, which I do not believe in, hatred that is supposed to find satisfaction in doing someone harm- but the hatred that fills you with overpowering aversion for a person who deserves your respect (151).

Previously, Nikolai held occasional dissatisfaction with St- Jérôme's teaching methods. But this event triggers that dissatisfaction to blossom into hatred, the first hatred he experiences in his boyhood. This hatred is a constant hostility and resentment of both St-Jérôme's action and person, and it does not fade for years. Also, there is the perceived hatred of others towards him. Although much of this hatred is Nikolai's childish exaggeration, the idea of being alone in the world and the idea of others hating him seems new to Nikolai, and he seems distraught over the realization.

With his crying anguish and his use of exaggerations and absolutes, Nikolai seems initially to be just going through a typical childhood tantrum. However, unlike a tantrum, Nikolai experiences a lasting mental growth and shift in the way he interacts with others. The experiences with hate stripped away his boyhood innocence. After this incident, Nikolai becomes more self-reflective and withdrawn. As a consequence of this outburst, he "began to feel more and more lonely and [his] chief enjoyment lay in solitary reflection and contemplation" (153). He spends more time in places isolated from the rest of the house, namely the maid's room. His behavior also changes. He begins to describe others from a distance rather than from close interaction. This self-isolation combined with his new reflective state leads him to ponder mature subjects of "questions concerning man's destiny, the future life, the immortality of the soul" (157). These thoughts lead Nikolai to mature considerably. After waking up from his post-trauma sleep, Nikolai exchanges his tantrums and outbursts for a realization of hatred and mental growth. With these traits, he continues to develop into a youth.

Although my ear hurt very badly I did not cry but experienced an agreeable feeling of moral relief. No sooner had papa let go my ear than I seized his hand and covered it with tears and kisses.

‘Hurt me again,’ I said through my tears, ‘do it harder, make it hurt more, I am a good-for-nothing horrid miserable wretch!’

‘What is the matter with you?’ he said, slightly pushing me away.

‘Not, I won’t leave go,’ I said, clutching his coat. ‘Everybody hates me, I know they do, but please, *please* listen to me. Protect me or turn me out of the house. I cannot live with him, *he* is always trying to humiliate me, he makes me go on my knees before him, wants to thrash me. I can’t bear it, I am not a little boy, I won’t endure it- I shall die, I shall kill myself. *He* told grandmamma that I was good-for-nothing, and now she is ill, she will die because of me. I...can’t...with...him...*Please*, you thrash me...why do they tor...tor...torture me?’

Tears were chocking me. I sat down on the sofa and, unable to say any more, fell with my head on his knees, sobbing so that it seemed to me that I should die that very minute.

‘What’s it all about, little one?’ asked papa sympathetically as he bent over me.

‘Him, that bully...my tormentor...I shall die...Nobody loves me!’ I gasped, and fell into convulsions.

Papa took me in his arms and carried me to my bedroom. I fell asleep.

When I awake it was very late. A solitary candle burned by my bedside and our family doctor, Mimi, Lyuba were sitting in the room. It was obvious from their faces that they were alarmed by my condition. But I felt so well and my heart felt so light after my twelve hours’

sleep that I could have sprung out of bed directly, had I not disliked the idea of upsetting their conviction that I was very ill (150-151).¹

¹L.N. Tolstoy, Childhood, Boyhood, Youth. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1964).