

Reflections on Tolstoy

Alex Hughes '25

Should we be basically optimistic or pessimistic? Does duty remain important in the modern world? From where is meaning derived? The late Count Lev Tolstoy's newly published "Alyosha the Pot" poses these necessary questions and lends itself to answering them. His eponymous protagonist is clearly a simple man both in appearance and intellect, motivated primarily by an unstated sense of filial duty. Despite his unsophistication, he shows that there can be honor in accepting our role in the world and filling it well. While today's revolts against hierarchy and external responsibility suggest to the modern reader that Alyosha is happy despite his position, Tolstoy implies the opposite is true. His service is "without the slightest hesitation"; he is "always cheerful." Notably, his sense of duty and faith are mutually reinforcing; he prays even without words because his mother taught him so, and his deathbed prayer glorifies obedience and nonviolence.

His deviation from these norms is equally instructive. The only time Alyosha cries is upon informing his fiancée that his father will not allow their marriage. His father's injunction is the sole time Alyosha's obedience truly makes his life worse. Alyosha's disappointment at being denied marriage and thereby family affirm them as the main sources of meaning outside of piety and work. Importantly, he finds the bright spot even in this in that his untimely death will not widow his beloved. Through Alyosha, Tolstoy provides a poignant example of true generosity of spirit, the only mindset capable of generating internal peace.