In discussions of the role politics play in Turgenev’s fiction, emancipation is usually considered alongside a host of other related political issues. This approach tends to deemphasize the crucial importance emancipation had in Turgenev’s works; he returned repeatedly throughout his career to the idea of emancipation and its meaning, a meaning that, for him, tends to carry not just political but also spiritual and emotional implications.

This paper will concentrate on emancipation in Fathers and Sons, arguing for its importance as both a political and a moral idea in the novel. Fathers and Sons offers two contrasting views of the meaning of emancipation: on the one hand, it can be seen as a precursor to widespread rebellion and destruction, while on the other it can be seen as a step in a gradual, communal political process that helps link each person to everyone else. Thus ultimately emancipation becomes more than a political idea linked to a specific moment in history; it also becomes an expression of the conflict between two opposing ways of approaching the role of humanity in the world.