

The Death of Ivan Ilych: A Poignant Story of Psychological and Social Reality

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ABSTRACT

Set against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Russia, the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* delves into the life and ultimate demise of the protagonist, Ivan Ilych. Leo Tolstoy skillfully presents the psychological aspects of Ivan Ilych's existence with his intricate narrative style, thoughtful analysis, and true-to-life characterization. This paper attempts to find how Tolstoy explores the universal human struggle between external societal expectations and the internal desires of the individual through the protagonist of the novella. As the story progresses, we see how Ivan's life, initially driven by social ambition and conformity, gradually erodes as he confronts the harsh reality of his forthcoming death. Besides, Tolstoy also exposes the hypocritical nature of societal norms and conventions, unmasking the shallowness and moral emptiness that underlie its seemingly respectable camouflage. For this research, the analytical research method has been followed. For materials, primary and secondary sources have been used. The findings of the paper indicate the existential crisis and the spiritual renewal of the title character. This is the first time attempt has been made by the author to find the social and psychological reality that dominated 19th-century Russian society. This paper has not been published in conference or seminar proceedings and journals.

Index Terms: Mortality, Suffering, Death, Hypocrisy, Compassion

INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy wrote one of the most famous novellas of his life, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, from his personal experience placing Ivan Ilych as the central character who is a middle-aged prosecutor in 19th-century St. Petersburg who spends an increasing amount of time climbing the social ladder to the detriment of his already poor relationships with his wife and children. He develops a protracted, painful condition, the diagnosis of which eludes his physicians. When the doctors and others around him ultimately realize the severity of his condition, they lie to him about its terminal nature. A spiritually empty man, Ivan Ilych's lingering demise forces him to confront the meaning of his inevitable death. Medicine offers no consolation, and he rejects the help of his physician: 'You know perfectly well you can do nothing to help me, so leave me alone.' (Micco, et al., 2009)

With the life of Ivan Ilych, the hero of the story, the author wants to make us understand the harsh reality of life. He wants to show how capitalism destroys the human soul and turns people into mere money-making machines, but money cannot save them from destruction since human power is limited. No matter how great a person is, one day or the other, he has to face the ultimate reality of life: death. Typically, society wants to show us how worthwhile the life we call success is, the life in which we forsake our typical human virtues, the life of the person who lives it ends up being, and what kind of life we should live. A similar context is seen in Mark Freeman's (1997) finding- "Only in the face of death could Ivan Ilych gain the requisite distance to behold the true meaning of his dismal life and only upon beholding this meaning could he see the contours of the life well-lived, that is, the life possessed of narrative integrity."

The notion of mortality has been a significant preoccupation with Tolstoy, and this novella shows the

futility of success with a successful man's tragic death. The novella seeks to show the degenerate humanity of most people. Also, it implies that while succeeding in life, people become unloving, unsympathetic, uncompassionate, and hardened. Instead of taking the path of salvation, they consider earthly life as the best, which is not the determinant of right living, and therefore his doom is inevitable. By the time he realizes this, it is too late. We can hear Ivan saying, "And what if my whole life, my conscious life, has indeed been "not right"?" (Tolstoy 88).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Neimneh et al. (2016), Tolstoy offers many sociocultural commentaries on an incurable disease resulting in the protagonist's death. Tolstoy shows how wrong living destroys a man morally as well as physically. Mark Freeman (1997), in a study, suggests that the story represents "the grave consequences of a life lived moment to moment, without any sense of the whole." Ivan Ilych spends the majority of his life chasing false hope. The story revolves around the truth and denial that Ivan experiences in the last stages of his life. Tolstoy, getting disgusted by the lifestyle of the Russian upper-class society, shows the reality of materialism emphasizing spiritual and religious values. According to Velichka Ivanova (2011), "*The Death of Ivan Ilych* is an account of a life wrongly lived and a moral lesson on good life."

DISCUSSION

The novella starts with the death news of the protagonist Ivan Ilych, where Ivan's ex-colleague Pyotr Ivanovich informs others about Ivan's death in the newspaper. Everyone present was feeling relieved, thinking "that it was he who was dead and not I" (Tolstoy 40). Through this incident, the writer shows that people are very self-centered and that death is the most crucial truth of life. One has to die, but how easily do people forget about death, dwell on all the idle things of the world, and completely deny the righteous life and death? Ivan Ilych lives by the standards of such a class, never questioning its "correct" behavior or simply not thinking about what he deems improper" (Neimneh et al., 2016).

Ivan has studied law since childhood to fulfill society's aspirations and achieves his goal of becoming an Examining Magistrate. After passing through various stages, at one point, he becomes a Public Prosecutor, which was his childhood dream and starts to think that this life is the best. After he becomes a magistrate, his position in society gets strengthened, people respect him, everyone around him admires him, obeys his word, and Ivan's behavior towards them changes day by day. Ivan starts to feel that he is their master; he no longer has to be flexible with them, and his status is much higher, so he does not need to answer many questions. By remaining silent and with a mock seriousness on his face, he tries to assert his position "Ivan Ilych made new acquaintances and connections, behaved in a new way, and adopted a somewhat different tone" (Tolstoy 50).

This quote shows that as Ivan Ilych moves up, he sheds personal feelings and wants to develop formal relationships with everyone to maintain the feigning seriousness he adopted. The main concern of this novella is to show the futility of the then-Russian bourgeoisie people who do not even bother about the inevitability of death. Neimneh and others assert, "To be sure, Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) is a late 19th-century meditation on the meaning of life and the inevitability of death after chronic illness" (2016).

All the people Ivan Ilych came in contact with throughout his life, whether it was his wife, daughter, friends, or colleagues. Everyone was with Ivan only for his money and social status, which was meaningful to him. After hearing the news of Ivan's death, "there was a discussion among his colleagues on hearing of Ivan Ilych's death, the first thought of each of the gentlemen assembled in the office was of what this death might mean in terms of transfers or promotions of the members themselves or of their acquaintances"

(Tolstoy 41).

Again, his colleagues show disinterest in attending the funeral to pay their last respects to him on his death. Pyotr Ivanovich, Ivan's childhood friend and later his colleague, is one example who thinks about his benefit even after the death of Ivan; as we can see, "Now I must apply for my brother-in-law's transfer from Kaluga," thought Pyotr Ivanovich. "My wife will be very glad, and then she will not be able to say that I never do anything for her relations" (Tolstoy 41). Again, another colleague of Ivan says, "Now I'll probably get Shtabel's or Vinnikov's post," thought Fyodor Vassilievich. "It was promised to me long ago, and the promotion means a raise of eight hundred roubles, plus office expenses" (Tolstoy 41). These lines show the value of money in the then-bourgeoisie people and the falseness, hypocrisy, artificiality, and superficiality of the people around Ivan Ilych. It also proves that Ivan himself was one of them, a man living a false life among false people with no one to mourn for his death. At the last stage of his life, when he wrestled with death, he realized that all these were fakes and that whatever life he wanted or did live was the ultimate lie. "Regardless of the exact nature of Ivan Ilych's illness, however, the story suggests that Ivan lived the "wrong" kind of life despite his self-deception and the lives of those around him" (Neimneh et al., 2016). The hypocrisy is seen everywhere in the book.

Another example is shown when Ivan is counting the last days of his life and one of his colleagues visits him- "and then comes his colleague, the judge Shebek, and instead of weeping and caressing, Ivan Ilyich makes a serious, stern, profoundly thoughtful face and, by inertia, gives his opinion on the significance of a decision of the appeals court and stubbornly insists on it. This lies around and within him poisoned most of all the last days of Ivan Ilyich's life" (Tolstoy 76). Talking about worldly affairs without asking each other's good and bad news at that time proves how much Ivan's life was full of hypocrisy.

The novella clarifies that the so-called wealthy bourgeoisie was highly self-absorbed, greedy, ambitious, and loveless. This is an acceptable criticism of the bourgeoisie class, the same as Karl Marx's (1848) point of view, "In bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality." The novella teaches us that no matter how big, educated, wealthy, or high-class a person is, happiness in personal life is different, and this happiness is far beyond mere materialistic things like social status, money, a successful career, or a beautiful wife with no mutual love or respect for each other. Death teaches us that however much the bourgeoisie may fly to each other's side like doves of happiness in times of happiness, they are not to be found at the moment of life's greatest crisis, their false facades fall off, and their ugly faces are exposed. Only a life with compassion, love, and sympathy pays off.

After receiving the magistracy, Ivan started attending the high-class parties of the city's famous people, where the officials of various big offices came with their wives and children, played cards, danced, sang, drank, and chatted a lot. At one of these parties, Ivan met Praskovya Fyodorovna, whom Ivan later married. After marriage, their relationship was good for a few days, but family turmoil started when his wife became pregnant. His wife becomes impatient and restless, which poisons Ivan's daily life. It happened because there was no love between the two of them. Ivan married Praskovya because-

she was a sweet, pretty, and perfectly respectable woman. To say that Ivan Ilyich married because he loved his bride and found her sympathetic to his view of life would be as incorrect as to say that he married because people of his society approved of this match. Ivan Ilyich married out of both considerations: he did something pleasant for himself in acquiring such a wife, and at the same time, he did what highly placed people considered right. (Tolstoy 51)

Beauty and social status could not ever make their life a happy one. Ivan's marriage is a prime example of society's approval not always bringing happiness into one's life.

In this situation, Ivan turned away from his wife and family and focused more on work, thinking that work is life. Nevertheless, he forgets that “a quiet and modest life brings more joy than a pursuit of success bound with constant unrest” (Albert Einstein). For this reason, Ivan was extremely unhappy in his personal life. There was a time when Ivan used to dance very often, but after becoming an examining magistrate, he almost gave up dancing because he felt that high-ranking people like him would lighten the standard of rank by doing so. As mentioned in the text I’van Ilyich, when an official on special missions, had generally danced; now, being an examining magistrate, he danced only as an exception”. (Tolstoy 50)

Self-conceit and egotism made Ivan morally a vain man. Considering whether the rights will be established in society, whether society will accept them, and whether the position will be guaranteed, Ivan did not think twice about giving away his likings.

After seventeen years of marriage, Ivan decided to earn more money and get a higher position. He thought he would climb the ladder of success as he did earlier, but “a certain unpleasant circumstance unexpectedly occurred, which all but disrupted the tranquility of his life. Ivan Ilyich was expecting the post of the presiding judge in a university town, but Hoppe somehow beat him out and got the post. Ivan Ilyich became irritated, reproached, and quarreled with him and his immediate superior; he was treated with coldness, and at the next promotions, he was again passed over” (Tolstoy 54). Ivan was intensely dissatisfied in his personal and professional life. He considered the high position the most outstanding achievement of his life but did not try to find the meaning of life. He used to lead a meaningless life that could not give him peace. From his early childhood, Ivan was highly moved by the rich lifestyle of the aristocrats of the society. He dreamed of becoming highly professional and living an aristocratic life, and he did not think about living a moral, meaningful life.

This was the biggest mistake of Ivan’s life, living life without any meaning. He thought that if he lived like this, he would become a successful person in the eyes of society, but he forgot that this life is not a meaningful life where there is no one to give true good wishes, even if it seems to be well-wishers. All his so-called friends or office colleagues were pigeons of happiness, all flocking to his side when they thought it would be profitable for them to be close to Ivan Ilyich. After “this death called up in each of them about the transfers and possible changes at work that might result from it, the very fact of the death of a close acquaintance called up in all those who heard of it, as always, a feeling of joy that it was he who was dead and not them! ‘You see, he’s dead, and I’m not’” (Tolstoy 40); each thought or felt.

It can be seen that the work-life gradually pulls Ivan away from his personal life. He starts thinking of work as the supreme phenomenon, finding the meaning of life in work, which causes a prominent intersection in his personal life along the way with his wife, son, and daughter. As Ivan struggles with death in his final days, his wife and daughter go shopping and go to the theater to find relief from the sickening environment that tears Ivan apart. We can see it in the novella- “After dinner, at seven o’clock, Praskovya Fyodorovna came into his room dressed for the evening, with fat, tight-laced breasts, and traces of powder on her face. She had already reminded him in the morning that they were going to the theater” (Tolstoy 81). His wife and daughter were not seen to show special affection for him. Egocentrism made Ivan’s life truly unloving and unsympathetic. Throughout his life, Ivan has earned some money and social respectability that has not paid off for him in his sick bed. He was all alone in his last days with none of his family members or friends that showed genuine compassion “but what came about was that his wife, daughter, son, servants, acquaintances, and the doctors, and, above all, he himself- knew that for others the genuine interest in him consisted only in how soon he would finally vacate this place, free the living from the constraint caused by his presence, and be freed himself from his sufferings” (Tolstoy 73).

Even the doctors did not show much sincerity in Ivan’s sickness. Ivan consulted many doctors, but nobody gave him the exact answer to whether he would live. They did not bother to even listen to what he said. This

attitude of the doctors was not alien to Ivan. He used to hold such an attitude toward his clients.

The reality of Ivan Ilych's life is pathetic. In this life, he got much disappointment in the name of success, which is why he suffered miserably at the end of his life. Tolstoy has given the message in his book that if you want the love, affection, compassion, and care of your loved ones when you are sick, then take care of your loved ones when you are healthy. Otherwise, that relationship will be considered unnecessary for your needs, which is an infallible law of nature.

After receiving a new position in St. Petersburg, Ivan finds a large, expensive apartment. He spends most of his time decorating and thinking about decorating his new home there. He gets fascinated by this work apart from his own office work. One day a worker was hanging curtains in his new home, but he wanted more from his work. So he climbs a ladder to show the person how the curtains should look; he slips and falls against a knob on the window frame and thus bumps his side. Initially, there was pain on his side, but later, it became fatal. He started to have a "loathsome taste in his mouth." During illness, Ivan Ilyich realizes that he has foolishly spent his life worrying about insignificant things. He understands that all these were useless, just like trying to hang the curtains in a way he wanted to, and screams that he "lost life" over a sheer curtain.

Among the others, Ivan's nurse, the butler's assistant, is the only person who shows genuine sympathy and compassion towards Ivan Ilych. Getting good care from him and observing the love and affection that Gerasim shows to Ivan on Ivan's deathbed makes Ivan realize that Gerasim's life has the true meaning of life. As his own years of seemingly successful life unravel, Ivan becomes restless and remembers how he has lived the life he should have lived. In this context, Neimneh and others say-

Compared with the decay of his master's body, Gerasim stands for force and vitality. His presence in the novella is not simply significant because he gives a counterpart to an artificial life; instead, he helps us establish the symbolic nature of Ivan Ilych's illness. The contrast between the lifestyles led by Gerasim and Ivan Ilych highlights the social ramifications of the novella, whereby a lifestyle can blight members of a certain class. (2016)

Gerasim was the beacon of truth amidst all the falsehood. Gerasim was like a gentle rain that cooled the soul on a hot afternoon. He was divine even though he was not a relative. Seeing Gerasim, Ivan realized what life could indeed mean. What kind of life he should have lived, and so his life seemed meaningless to him. Gerasim's life had no success in the ordinary sense we call success. However, Ivan sees that Gerasim, a poor farmer's son, has a heart full of love; he sees life differently. He does not mind staying up all night next to the sick Ivan, lifting Ivan's legs up on his shoulders all night so that Ivan can get some comfort. As mentioned in the book- "Gerasim did it easily, willingly, simply, and with a kindness that moved Ivan Ilyich. Health, strength, vigor of life in all other people offended Ivan Ilyich; only Gerasim's strength and vigor of life did not distress but soothed him" (Tolstoy 75). These little things of daily life that Ivan had never given importance to became the most important on his deathbed. As he realized these things, he became restless and disgusted with life.

As Ivan began to get sicker day by day, he began to wonder what had happened to him. Why did it happen immediately? Religion had no place in Ivan's life as he had succeeded all his life without practicing religion. He did not need God. However, lying on his deathbed, he realizes that there is someone called God who can be blamed, at least for his situation. During his last days, "he wept over his helplessness, over his terrible loneliness, over the cruelty of people, over the cruelty of God, over the absence of God" (Tolstoy 83). He still has much life left; why would he get sick without living that life? Illness, or more specifically, death after illness, Ivan did not accept at the beginning of his illness. Ivan himself makes it clear by saying- "To admit that is quite impossible," he said to himself, his lips smiling, as if someone were to see that smile and be deceived by it. "There's no explanation! Torment, death ... What for?" (Tolstoy 87). In a study,

Mark Freeman (1997) says, “the grave consequences of a life lived moment to moment, without any sense of the whole.”

At one point in his illness, Ivan starts hallucinating. He felt “[people] were pushing him painfully into some narrow and deep black sack, and kept pushing him further, and could not push him through. Moreover, this thing, which is terrible for him, is being accomplished with suffering” (Tolstoy 83). It manifests that he had a hard time accepting his death since, according to him, his life was unfulfilling, but when he accepted it, everything became very clear to him. “Pain, helplessness, despair, and loneliness augment Ivan Ilych’s mental anguish because thoughts of death never leave him as a chronically ill person. The allegorization of Death aligns with our figurative understanding of Ivan Ilych’s illness and private suffering” (Neimneh et al., 2016).

Throughout his life, Ivan only liked the proximity of high-class people, imitating the lifestyle of high-class people, but his illness showed him these trivial mirages. Death closes the gap between high-class and low-class people, and it is then that the class consciousness of society is understood as a false scam created by society. “[T]he “sick” life Ivan Ilych was leading, thus emphasizing the sociocultural significance of illness and the ability of notorious illnesses to condemn social class structures and relations within literary frameworks” (Neimneh et al., 2016).

Tolstoy uses Ivan’s illness to show us his life epiphany. When Ivan suffers, he discovers he does not live as he should have. He thinks, “But what is this? Why? It cannot be. Can it be that life is so meaningless and vile? (Tolstoy 84). And again, why die and die suffering if it is so vile and meaningless? Something is not right. Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done” (Tolstoy 84-85).

Nevertheless, whenever he felt some relief from his pain, he wanted to live more; he wanted to think that he lived his life in the right way. He lived his life in deception and falsehood without concerning suffering, death, and the righteous life. The deception that was going on around him, be it the negligence of his wife and daughter to his sickness or the doctors’ false hope that Ivan would be cured, made Ivan more anguished. To him, it was awful. He deceived himself, and everyone around him deceived him too.

The author explains what or how the concept of right living should be by making an ordinary person live a remarkable ordinary life. It is mentioned in the book as- “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible” (Tolstoy 47).

CONCLUSION

The Death of Ivan Ilych is a timeless literary work that confronts the reader with profound existential questions. Through the character of Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy presents a powerful commentary on the emptiness and superficiality of modern life and shows us the psychological and social reality of an individual grappling with mortality. The novella is also a critique of the social conventions that often prevent people from living authentically. Resonating with themes of existential dread, materialism, and human compassion, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is Tolstoy’s ultimate exploration of life, death, and the connection in between that encourages readers across generations to rethink the significance of self-reflection, supportive relationships, moral values, genuine empathy, and personal growth on the path leading to a meaningful life.

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