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The Death of Ivan Ilyich: Filling In the Gaps

The story of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* begins with a dead man. The reader has no relationship with Ivan, no picture of who he was as a living man, so one just feels the customary, polite feelings of it being unfortunate that one has “passed.” Curiously, Ivan’s own friends seem to feel as indifferent as the reader does. Though no one speaks this aloud, each of his friends feel personally inconvenienced by his death: “...his so-called friends, could not help thinking also that they would now have to fulfill the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and paying a visit of condolence to the widow” (Tolstoy 3). This is an intriguing way to begin a tale as one wonders straightaway what kind of man Ivan Ilyich was, and why those deemed his “friends” could appear so unaffected.

As the story continues, we get to know Ivan...or do we? There seems to be nothing extraordinary about Ivan (11). He had an ordinary childhood that led to a predictable young manhood, eventually maturing into the classic man. Ivan worked hard, pursued his career goals, was pleasant toward his colleagues, and tried not to ruffle the feathers of his wife at home. While he was good at his job, he was also exactly what was required and would be easily replaced by the next ambitious man in line (1). Ivan appears the traditional man the story makes him out to be and many details of his life are quickly passed by. Successes in his professional life and

failings in his home life are touched on, but lack of detail allows readers freedom to fill in the gaps with their own musings.

For instance, one reader might evaluate Ivan's marriage and see his wife as a demanding, ungrateful, whining woman. However, the story tells us that this behavior began during her pregnancy with their first child (16). It also tells us that instead of engaging with his wife and showing sympathy towards her during this time and in the period following the child's birth, that Ivan choose to hide himself away from the "unpleasantness" and bury himself in his work (17). As a woman who has been pregnant seven times, and had morning sickness for the first 10-12 weeks of each those pregnancies, it was easy for me to insert my own experiences here. Having my husband act indifferent toward my suffering and bury himself in his work would have caused me to be demanding, resentful and whining as well. In fact, during one pregnancy in particular, this was certainly the case in our home. Had this become a habitual way of coping, (my complaining and his burying himself in work) as was with Ivan Ilyich and Praskovya, our marital bliss too, would have been detrimentally affected.

When Ivan falls ill and realizes that he will never recover, the reader has many questions. What exactly is wrong with Ivan Ilyich? Why is there no cure? What were the opinions that the doctors he consulted held to that lead to their differing diagnosis? Why didn't Ivan elect to have the surgery offered him before it was too late? His condition offers more questions than answers. These questions lead the reader to invest more deeply in the story, and to join Ivan in first the frustration and finally the agony of "not knowing."

Ultimately one knows that Ivan's story isn't about his illness, but about his death and so

the focus is turned back to that end. It is a heart wrenching struggle as Ivan attempts live in

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denial of the seriousness of his condition, terrifyingly accepts reality, and then moves on to try to delay the inevitable event. As he wrestles against death, longing to continue living, to return to life as it was before his illness, he can't shake the feeling "...that it all resulted from his not having lived as he ought to have done..." (60). But how should Ivan have lived? Living a truthful, honest life is mentioned, living life with the awareness of death being the end is applauded, but for most of the story Ivan still begs the question, "What is the right thing?" (67). It is up to each reader to arrive at their own interpretation of the matter. I like to believe that regret over failing to make the important things important lead to repentance in Ivan, forgiveness from his Creator, and peace for his eternity.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is concluded with Ivan's death. It is with relief that one reads he has died at peace. In the last hours his mental torment passes, "...it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified" (67). The pity is that none of his family members are able to be comforted by realizing his anguish has past. He is so ill in the end that he has no words to express that he is able to embrace death with joy (67-68). In truth, the beginning of the story sums up the end of it with these words, "The expression on the face said that what was necessary had been accomplished, and accomplished rightly" (5).

Work Cited

Tolstoy, Leo, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Translated by Louise and Alymer Maude.

[https:// www.lonestar.edu/departments/english/tolstoy_ivan.pdf](https://www.lonestar.edu/departments/english/tolstoy_ivan.pdf).