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Personal Response to *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Leo Tolstoy is a novella that depicts the life and death of the protagonist Ivan Ilyich, as he slowly succumbs to his illness. The story digs deep into an individual's purpose in life, how society can influence numerous factors on how a person makes decisions, and how death can change someone's perspective on their outlook on life. Throughout the novella, Tolstoy incorporates the experiences of Ivan Ilyich as he reflects on his life, as well as his relationships with the people around him. The overall analysis of Ilyich is comparable to my own experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this pandemic, many individuals encountered similar thoughts and feelings that Ilyich had as his illness progressed.

For instance, there were moments where Ilyich was seen questioning his fulfillment in life and if there were any regrets he had. Although my experiences were not as consequential as Ilyich's in the long run, my levels of self-reflection were relatable to his, as a result of my time in quarantine. In page 60 of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude, Ilyich becomes concerned about if he has lived his life the way he desired, due to the fact that he spent a majority of his last moments alone with his thoughts. As Tolstoy narrates Ilyich's thoughts, he states, "Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done," it suddenly occurred to him. "But how could that be, when I did everything properly?" (60).

During the pandemic, I questioned whether or not I lived up to my potential when I had the chance to. My time in high school didn't seem fulfilling, in my perspective, and I wished to

have done it differently, rather than living my life on autopilot. Despite the fact that my grades were up to my standards and I did well education-wise, I never took the time to build more meaningful relationships because I was so caught up with this aspect of my life. Like Ilyich, I took my experiences and relationships for granted.

In addition to self-reflection, I found myself reminiscing about times where I didn't have to worry about the pandemic. On page 59, Tolstoy depicts Ilyich reminiscing his childhood and wanting to live as he used to. During this time, I imagined how life would be if the pandemic didn't exist and I wondered if I would be happier. As he explained his feelings, I also pondered about how Ilyich would feel about his life if he never had this illness. I would ask myself if I would continue to live the same way if I had another chance and I resonated with Ilyich in this scene.

While reading the novella, I've also noticed how I tend to question myself in regards to my career. Although Ilyich had a quality job with a high pay, he felt like he had focused too much on his career, which ultimately caused him to regret this decision in the end. Although many can agree that college is already difficult by itself, the pandemic also took a toll in this decision when I had to determine what major I wanted to study. I saw how COVID-19 took the lives of many people and what doctors had to endure while treating their patients. I had to reconsider my choice of being a doctor because I realized that my decisions weren't a result of my own ambitions, but the influence of the people around me. Similar to Ilyich, his career was driven by social status and his salary, but I believe that this life wasn't meant for him since he wasn't content with lifestyle.

Though many individuals can have similar interpretations and connections with COVID-19 and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, people with a different socioeconomic background

might have contrasting thoughts as I do. Although I can only speak for myself, I think that individuals who aren't as fortunate to make their own decisions due to low income may perceive Ivan Ilyich as ungrateful or they might believe that they would've been content if they were in Ilyich's position. Even if Ilyich preferred to live differently, some of the audience who have read this novella might not sympathize with Ilyich the way I do.

All in all, my experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped my interpretations of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and helped me comprehend the feelings of Ilyich. The pandemic can be applied to Tolstoy's novella as the audience reads through the text since COVID-19 has had an effect on individuals around the world. No matter what a person's background may be, unexpected circumstances that have the potential to take an individual's life results in different kinds of self-reflection on personal identity.

Works Cited

Tolstoy, Leo. "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." 1886.

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