

The romanticization of lower class in leo tolstoy's novella the death of ivan ily...

Literature



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Gerasim and the Romanticization of Poverty

In *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Leo Tolstoy recounts Ivan's illness and death as well as his reflections on his life and his interactions with others. Though many people around him seem disgusted by and afraid of his situation, and ill-equipped to help him, Gerasim, a peasant and servant, is portrayed quite differently. He behaves positively and seems genuinely committed to easing Ivan's pain. His simple, hardworking life also stands out as very different from Ivan's life of relative luxury. It is romanticized; that is, his situation is depicted as desirable, and the good (or presumed) good aspects are emphasized while the bad ones are downplayed or ignored. Class is an important issue in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; Tolstoy makes sure readers know that Ivan worries his lifestyle was fruitless, but he goes further and also romanticizes Gerasim's lower class. Despite working hard and long and living in doubtlessly poor conditions, he is healthy and cheerful.

Gerasim is depicted as simple and innocent in comparison to wealthier characters. At the reader's first encounter with him, he tells Peter Ivanovich that Ivan's death is "God's will," and then, "like a man in the thick of urgent work... [he] sprang back to the porch as if in readiness for what he had to do next" (101). Though upon learning the news of their friend's death Peter and the others casually discuss what it means for their careers, and later contemplate the death more gravely, Gerasim accepts it as part of life and moves on with his duties. He is used to menial tasks and physical labor, as well as the unfortunate realities of what it means to be human. He helps Ivan with messier aspects of his illness, and Ivan is embarrassed to be in such a

demeaning state in front of “ a clean, fresh peasant lad, grown stout on town food [who is] always cheerful and bright” (134). Gerasim, one of the few lower-class characters, is presented in contrast to wealthier characters like Ivan and his family. As a peasant, he’s likely had to deal with bodily functions and death, so Ivan’s illness and passing do not faze him. Ivan seems to have an idealized view of Gerasim as an innocent peasant living a simple life untainted by bureaucracy and greed like his own. He can accept death easily because it’s inevitable and natural, and he does not mind helping the ailing and incontinent Ivan because he is used to working.

Tolstoy also seems to glorify work. As Ivan reflects on his life and remembers when he lost his job, he recalls that “ without his work, he experienced... not only ennui but intolerable depression” (111). Working is necessary to lead a fulfilling life. However, Ivan gets sick and cannot continue working, and seems to regret his luxurious lifestyle. Therefore, it follows that the intellectual, bureaucratic work of Ivan and his class is not what’s important. Tolstoy is glorifying the physical labor of servants. During his illness, Ivan is drawn to Gerasim’s physical strength. He often mentions details about him such as his “ strong bare young arms” (135). It is not mentioned that in order to have such strong limbs, Gerasim must perform hard physical labor so that he can make a living. His life is probably rather difficult, but Ivan only focuses on how strong and full of life he is. Ivan, his wife, and his friends all have problems, while Gerasim is only mentioned in the context of cheerfully attending to Ivan. The life of a working peasant might appear to be free of complexities and problems; a steadfast dedication to simple work is the answer. As mentioned before in his interaction with Peter, Gerasim is

constantly acting “ in readiness for what he [has] to do next” (101). He is always ready for whatever Ivan may ask him, and willing no matter what it is. The commitment to his duty and ability to perform any task, no matter how strenuous or unappealing, makes Gerasim attractive to Ivan, or at least admirable.

The realities of Gerasim’s life or those of someone in his class are often ignored. As mentioned, his physical strength is praised without explicit acknowledgement of how he came to be that way. Ivan asks the servant to sit with him for long periods of time, constantly holding his legs up. If Ivan thinks to ask if he has other duties, Gerasim replies “ Don’t trouble with that, sir. There’s always plenty of time” (136). In reality, as the butler’s assistant, Gerasim would be expected to complete many other tasks as well as assisting Ivan, and may face punishment or a harmful pay reduction if he doesn’t complete duties such as “ chopping the logs for tomorrow” (136). Furthermore, he may have more responsibilities at home for his own family. It is not realistic that Gerasim would have the luxury of sitting with Ivan for hours on end. Nonetheless, the novella focuses on the seemingly romantic aspects of Gerasim – his good nature, his dedication to hard work and to Ivan, and his (assumed) simplicity and innocence. Doubting his own choices, Ivan looks at Gerasim’s “ good-natured face” and wonders “ What if my whole life has really been wrong?” (152). Ivan doesn’t consider the hardships of a peasant’s life, only the virtuous qualities of this particular peasant.

In Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Gerasim represents the glorification of work and of the working class. Ivan doubts his more luxurious and

bureaucratic lifestyle, while idolizing Gerasim for the simplicity and goodness he seems to embody. The idea of a simple peasant life is romanticized, and the difficulties that are doubtlessly part of a poor peasant's life are unmentioned. He isn't deeply characterized; rather, he offers a continual positive and down-to-earth presence in contrast to the worrying, nagging, greedy characters that make up the novella. He and his lifestyle are held up as the ideal, the opposite and therefore the answer to Ivan's fruitless pursuits of wealth and recognition.