

# Desiderata



With the advent of the Industrial Revolution came new schools of thought that attempted to define the position of the individual within the society. The Romantic Era that dominated the early part of the 19th century tried to establish the individual as a creature of emotion and experience.

Romanticism was eventually succeeded by Realism, which was a movement that strayed from the more figurative, almost idealized, imagery of the previous era to one that focused on the mundane and darker times of men. It was a movement that aimed to represent and recreate everyday life into literature—with all its ebbs and flows. One of the bigger topics of discussion in literary circles in the latter part of the 19th century was that of the correct life, which is very prominent in these two works: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella by Leo Tolstoy, and *Hedda Gabler*, a play by Henrik Ibsen. Both works tell the stories of the lives and deaths of their respective title characters as they deal with the realities of life in the late 19th century. Both authors utilize the motifs of alienation and satisfaction in similar fashion to propagate the dichotomous relationship of the society and the self, however, within that scope, they take opposing stances on the idea of purpose and how it relates to the overall notion of the “correct life”.

With the backdrop of mass urbanization and industrialization brought about by the aforementioned Industrial Revolution there was a newfound ideal for the individual to find a place in society. And, because of mass urbanization causing a sudden increase in population density, it became much easier for one to grow distant from the world around him, thus the topic of alienation became a social issue in the late 19th century. The title character of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* struggles with this problem of loneliness and pushing

people away throughout much of the novella. But Tolstoy's view on this notion goes far beyond saying, "don't alienate people". Ivan is very direct and open about whom he chooses to ignore, Tolstoy observes, "... he tried to ignore his wife's disagreeable moods, continued to live in his usual easy and pleasant way, invited friends to his house for a game of cards, and also tried going out to his club or spending his evenings with friends" (749). He desires to stay away from his family and instead wishes to play bridge with his friends. This is problematic in two ways. Not only is he overlooking some element of love but the people who he associates with ultimately influence his life in negative manner. Ivan never truly lives life for himself; rather, he merely goes through the motions of living a socially acceptable lifestyle. This is reflected in the person he chooses to marry, the schooling and job he undertakes, and even how he spends his money. But things are still more complicated than this. Tolstoy does not simply want to say that one should spend most of the time surrounded by family because that too can be noxious to one's life.

This is especially true in the case of Ivan and his family, who often make life miserable for each other. The narrator notes, "'Is it our fault?' Lisa said to her mother. 'It's as if we were to blame! I am sorry for papa, but why should we be tortured?'" (775). This passage shows how the illness is putting a burden on the family bonds and how the ailment makes it hard for them to be together. They are simply incompatible and maybe distancing themselves from each other is the best course of action. Ultimately, to understand what Tolstoy has to say about alienation we must examine what happens when the eponymous hero is left alone.

It is interesting to note that most of the thematically rich action takes place after Ivan's unfortunate injury and when he is bedridden. In his state he begins to not only attempt to rationalize his existence—when discussing Caius—but also make groundbreaking revelations about life and death. These last few weeks of his existence are probably his most profound and important because thoughts and, on the topic of alienation, they are made when he is alone, in a sense. Ivan is never truly alone in his demise because he conjures himself an alter ego of sorts. He begins talking to his consciousness, which signifies Ivan evaluating his own life compared to the society around him. It also interesting to note that this alter ego also depicts a part of Ivan that is not all bad; it has the moral and social qualities that would allow it to be socially acceptable and a good influence on the reader. Through Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy wants to say something overwhelming, and possibly alien at the time, about this notion of alienation: it is imperative that we do not alienate ourselves, that is, we must find a sense of belonging and individuality that allows the self to conquer the society and stand out.

Henrik Ibsen explores a similar notion in his play Hedda Gabler, albeit from the opposite extreme of the spectrum. Unlike Ivan, the title character of this work is more open about intimately socializing with people. As a matter of fact, the entire focus of this play is on the deep relationships and social interactions between the characters. Hedda herself is a part of multiple love triangles but it is exactly this form of interaction, which poisons her. To elaborate, whenever she is around other people she is forced to abide to the social norms fit for a woman in the 19th century. Similarly to Ivan, the people she associates with are poor influences for her, for example, conversations

with Brack or Eilert put strains on her relationship with George. This is reflected in her behavior around her friends and family. That is to say, Henrik Ibsen uses his heroine to explore the facades that people put on when they are so deeply rooted within social circles. That is, characters such as Hedda act outside their nature to appease social standards. Hedda says, “ [Miss Tesman] put her hat down there on the chair [Looks at him smiling] and I pretended I thought it was the maid’s” (804). This passage recalls a time where Hedda had to act a certain way outside of what she is used to in order to keep up appearances. But once again it goes much deeper than to say that too much interaction can get stressful because of how society wants us to act. And once again, in order to get a clear message about alienation, we must examine what the characters do when they’re alone. Ibsen does not utilize monologues, soliloquies, or asides in order for the audience to get an insight into a character’s psyche; however, this makes the time when they are alone very special. Hedda Gabbler, is left to her own devices at three key points in the play: when she plays with her pistols prior to Brack’s arrival, when she burns Eilert’s manuscript, and finally when she ends her own life. Very crucial moments of the work and they all carry with them significant weight when it comes to the character development of Hedda. The times when the characters are alone show the reader what the characters are really like. Interestingly enough, Hedda too has a double of sorts. She has an alter ego, that, like Ivan’s, would allow her to be more socially acceptable and instill in her characteristics reminiscent of a morally good person: her unborn child. Additionally, these episodes embody the same message Tolstoy was trying to depict: alienation is not inherently a negative trait, at

times it can be imperative to avoid interaction to find some time to think and reflect in silence.

The motif of alienation lends itself to another, larger notion of satisfaction, which dictates both Ivan's and Hedda's lives very profoundly. But it is too easy to say that the two characters suffer because they are unhappy. The issue is more complicated because the two almost refuse to believe that they are dissatisfied. For example, Ivan rationalizes saying that because he got a better job and earns a little more money he is somehow better off and happy because he can fill his home with ornaments and things. Similarly, Hedda attempts to convince herself that she is content by filling her home with material possessions. Their flaw lies in their endeavor to appease the social standard of luxury and possession. To that effect they are both in a sense wearing false smiles when around others all the while bottling up more and more depression, which turns out to be fatal for Hedda. Their major flaw lies in the fact that both characters assign deep meanings to objects that inherently do not have one: money, curtains, and manuscripts. Furthermore, they avoid or ignore the simplicity of happiness. Truthfully, it does seem difficult to attribute the era of Realism to joy, as the former was intent on fleshing out the brutalities of the world. It is not entirely the fault of Ivan or Hedda for being unhappy but the authors do agree that an attempt—to smile, to laugh, to enjoy one's self— at least has to be made in order for the individual to find some sense of satisfaction within a society that has given up on the idea.

The relationship between the self and the society, especially in the context of the “ correct life”, comes down to the idea of purpose and fulfillment. And

it is on this issue that Tolstoy and Ibsen disagree. The best way to examine the difference of opinion is to consider the physical aspect of death within both works. The Death of Ivan Ilyich is aptly named because of the immense focus on the actual process of death. Within the novella, the period of injury, illness, and suffering is very drawn out to the point where it dominates a majority of the work. Death is very significant to Ivan because gives him the opportunity to reflect on his life to see what went wrong. It is also very important for Tolstoy because it allows him to explore the theme of fulfillment. To elaborate, the author believes that a person cannot be truly meaningful in life and that it is through death that we find a purpose. This is why he puts a lot of emphasis on Ivan's suffering and not on the fatal blow. He notes, "...that drawing-room where he had fallen and for the sake of which (how bitterly ridiculous it seemed) he had sacrificed his life..." (764). Ivan himself finds humor in his predicament because of how ironic and pedestrian his death really is. His passing is truly a far cry from the protagonists of the past but Tolstoy does not describe it as flawed. The title character's only fault seems to be that he has no desire to seek meaning or purpose and at first that is why Ivan believes he has not lived society's idea of the "correct life", but considering this is also a mistake. Near the end of the novella Ilyich redeems himself, after his aporia and catharsis he has an epiphany about fulfillment, which is reflected in the final meeting between him and his son. He thinks to himself, "'Yes, I am making them wretched,' he thought. ' They are sorry, but it will be better for them when I die'" (777). Although it is a grim realization to make, Ivan becomes aware through this exchange that the only way he can rectify his mistakes with his family is to die and put them at peace. Another way to interpret this final moment is that

in a way Ivan passes down some form of knowledge to his son about how to carry one's self and how to live correctly. And that, according to Tolstoy, is the true purpose of life; it is not about desiring fulfillment or freedom but making the lives of others easier.

In contrast, Ibsen believes that one's purpose can only be achieved in life. This is why he chooses to introduce death multiple times, in a less conservative way than Tolstoy. After all, three characters die within the span of 36 hours. But in doing so, and ignoring what suffering may come from a prolonged death, Ibsen turns the focus to the actual instant of death. That is to say, the deaths in *Hedda Gabler* are more vivid than the one in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Unlike in the novella, the play does not leave much room to ponder what happens after the heroine dies and instead the emphasis is put on her life, and what a life it is! The purpose of Hedda's actions is brutally clear: she desires freedom from the social mores and the minutia of her life. And she attempts everything, regardless of how immoral it is. But in the pursuit of her purpose it is revealed how strong a character she really is and how admirable her struggle is. She tries to break the mold of the 19th century woman by bidding to become the author of her own life, which is why she puts so much emphasis on beauty. When speaking to Brack she says, " All I know is that Eilert Løvborg had the courage to live life his own way, and now—his last great act—bathed in beauty" (834). To her, and to Ibsen this idea of beauty or a beautiful death is important, because after all, that's all there is. But, whether Hedda is crazy or not and why she chose to commit suicide is up for question. To answer it would be to grasp what Ibsen says about purpose. Once again, it is very sad to imagine it this way, but the

only way Hedda can achieve her goals is through life—after all she wants personal freedoms. Once she cannot get them, suicide becomes the only option because according to Ibsen there is no opportunity to achieve her goals after death like there is in the novella. The message remains that in order for the self to conquer the society the individual must live with purpose and with reckless abandon of the social norms.

Overall, this question of the correct life really comes down to the individual level and how the self can exist within the society. It is easy to examine themes or motifs such as alienation, satisfaction, or purpose but in the end even those do not paint the full picture. If we consider only those aspects or if we examine them in a particular light then we don't do justice to the lives of the characters we want to explore. It seems easy to describe Ivan Ilyich or Hedda Gabler as bad characters simply because they don't fit a very arbitrary blueprint of the perfect life but it would be wrong to do so. Within their settings the two respective title characters exhibit specific idiosyncrasies, which allow them to break anonymity and become known to the world. And in that sense, even with their flaws, they become examples of how to live to become relevant and fulfilled.

—References—

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