

# The death of ivan ilyich essay

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



It is obvious through his previous publications that Tolstoy has always harbored a somewhat pessimistic outlook on the idea as a whole, and he continues to stress this point by describing the life and hardships of one Ivan Ilyich. The famous quote from his previous novel, *Anna Karenina*, gives us an insight into Leo Tolstoy's overall outlook on what it is to be a family. He doesn't seem to understand the merit of a traditional familial system as he regards all healthy familial relationships as boring or similar. Through the quote, he attempts to instill in his readers a sense of intrigue and understanding when it comes to unhealthy, dysfunctional families. Tolstoy generally makes his view of family very clear through his writing, leading me to believe that he is trying to pass some sort of message or teaching on the subject to his readers. This message, encapsulated in a majority of Tolstoy's writings, is that family is imperfect and dysfunction is inevitable. Though it is fairly obvious that Leo Tolstoy uses the dramatic life of Ivan Ilyich to show his opinion of dysfunction, in a sense he also shows his readers the importance of family to one's happiness. Ivan Ilyich was always a working man, often choosing his profession over his family.

He would “distance himself... While cultivating the best circles among the Judiciary and wealthy gentry of the town”(Tolstoy 169).

Tolstoy explains how Ivan's incessant pursuit of success eventually leads him down a road of misery and loneliness. At first Ivan's motive was to earn money in order to live a comfortable, happy life with his family, but this changed when his quest for power overtook him. He completely shut out his family and focused solely on advancing in his profession. Ivan Ilyich simply traded one family for another. His love for his actual family had faded and

was reincarnated into a love for success. By showing the grim result of Van's choices, Tolstoy gives his readers a good idea of what can happen if they were to follow the same path.

Towards the end of Van's life, Tolstoy gives him a revelation that really speaks to readers. Dying, Ivan only "wanted to be kissed and cuddled and have a few tears shed over him" (Tolstoy 200). He had realized that in the end family is everything one has, and at this point he had nothing. Due to his constant disregard for his family they had moved on emotionally, leaving Ivan with only a servant to show him any compassion.

Tolstoy uses Van's realization of his failure as a warning to readers that financial success doesn't always equate to one's success in life. Though these motives seem decent, Tolstoy also instills in his readers a sense of doubtfulness towards the institution of family. He almost makes it too clear that dysfunction and disaster can strike down any family at a moment's notice. His pessimistic attitude is very apparent when Ivan becomes a burden on his emotionally indifferent family.

Even when his wife asks how he is feeling, Ivan knows "she [is] asking for the sake of asking rather than to find out" (Tolstoy 205). Van's family has given up on him and Tolstoy uses this to represent the imminent dysfunction in any family. Through this novel, describing the life and hardships of Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy makes his feelings towards family fairly clear. He believes that a healthy family does have the potential to give someone a happy existence, however he is skeptical when it comes to someone actually achieving an

ideal family. He stresses that family is inherently flawed and that, at least in most cases, the idyllic family is impossible to achieve.

Ivan realizes that after the dissolution of his happy family “ all of the pleasures that had seemed so real melted away... And turned into something trivial and often disgusting”(Tolstoy 209). In some sense Tolstoy is warning his readers of the importance of family to one’s happiness.

In addition, the fact that Ivan is crushed under the weight of his own depression following the failure of his family sends Tolstoy main message; one must be wary over trusting their entire happiness to a family that will most likely end in disaster. Tolstoy is naturally inclined to believe in both the happiness a family can bring and the disappointment that can result. He personally had this exact experience, paralleling the novel almost exactly, in which he was happily married with children before his success began to strain the seemingly perfect relationship he had with his wife. He projects his own feelings of marriage onto Ivan who, in the end, views marriage as “ an accident and a disappointment”(Tolstoy 209). Tolstoy has come to understand that a failed marriage is one of the worst things that can happen to an individual. It is physically overwhelming and emotionally disheartening. He believes that a happy few years of marriage is almost not worth the inevitable pain and anguish it will cause. Leo Tolstoy was once a believer in the happy family dynamic, but he has since regressed into a state of cynical dissent.