

Separate and alone:  
alienation as a central  
theme in Tolstoy's  
The Death of Ivan ...



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Like death or abandonment, alienation is one of the deepest-rooted fears experienced by human beings. As social creatures, humans have the need to identify themselves as one of a group, whether that group is a family, a culture, or a religion. The experience of alienation is one of violation of a person's need for acceptance. Both Leo Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Franz Kafka in *Metamorphosis* use alienation as a central theme to comment on the human need to experience love and acceptance. Both Ivan Ilyich and Gregor Samsa experience in their respective tragedies a great deal of alienation, which separates them from the groups to which they have been comfortably attached for most of their lives. Both authors trace the theme of alienation by exposing the displacement experienced emotionally, psychologically, and physically by their central characters. The physical changes that plagued both Ivan Ilyich and Gregor Samsa were the forces that perpetuated further alienation. These physical changes are important to note because not only did they change the appearances of the characters, but they also affected the way those around them viewed them, and deeply influenced the way both men viewed themselves and others. Though the physical changes may seem to be the least tragic part of both stories, by physically distinguishing the men as different from those around them, the authors are better able to comment on the mental isolation which becomes the worst part of both men's misfortunes. The physical alienation felt by both characters is therefore an impetus for the other forms of alienation that later affect Gregor and Ivan. Both men undergo disturbing physical transformations that change their lives. Gregor's physical change is obvious immediately in the first sentence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. As soon as he awakens, Gregor finds " himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous

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insect [. . .] lying on his hard shell-like back and [. . .] he could see his curved brown belly, divided by stiff arching ribs” (Kafka 76). This physical transformation begins a series of events in which Gregor is alienated from his family and acquaintances. Gregor’s transformation is all encompassing; not only does he look completely different, but his voice, his tastes, and his abilities have undergone serious alterations also. This complete physical change is only partially his physical alienation. Gregor is also physically distanced from those around him. He is physically isolated from his family as they lock him in a room and are unable to even look at his monstrous form. Gregor’s adjustment from being a daily traveler with his job to being a literal prisoner in his home is one way in which the reader can identify with the drastic alienation Gregor experiences as a result of his physical transformation. The door to his bedroom becomes a barrier rather than an opening to the world, and the reader witnesses the great difficulty that Gregor has: “ he clenched his jaws desperately on the key” (Kafka 86). Ivan’s physical alienation is less dramatic than Gregor’s, but also begins a series of alienations. Instead of a dramatic alteration of appearance, Ivan’s physical transformation is a slow deterioration of the body, which for most of the story is unnoticeable. Though the sickness causes pain for Ivan, the physical changes do not become apparent until almost two-thirds of the way through the story when his brother-in-law visits. Even Ivan is unaware of his physical transformation, as is shown when his brother-in-law “ opened his mouth to gasp but checked himself,” and Ivan asks, “ What is it I have I changed?” (Tolstoy 85). Ivan, like Gregor, is also physically isolated from his former life. He, too, was confined to his room after his sickness began to hinder his formerly sociable lifestyle, and is subjected to watching his loved ones go

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about “ in a whirl of social activity” (Tolstoy 80). Tolstoy exposes the alienation his character feels through the long and solitary hours in which Ivan constantly questions his misfortunes and rages against death while his family goes about their daily lives. The alienation experienced by both characters is also exposed through psychological methods. Ivan and Gregor both experience changes in how they are able to view themselves and their relationships with others. Though both constantly reach out to lessen the effects of the alienation they are experiencing, neither is able to maintain the psychology they had before misfortune struck. Ivan’s realization of his mortality is an extreme change in his psychology and allows him to deepen his formerly shallow existence. For example, during a game of cards, which he used to enjoy greatly, Ivan watched and “ he saw how upset Mikhail Mikhailovich was while he himself did not care. And it was dreadful to think why he did not care” (Tolstoy 82). This change in Ivan further alienates him from his acquaintances because they have not reached the same level of enlightenment as Ivan. This psychological alienation is yet another reminder of Ivan’s separation from others. He has matured through facing his mortality, and his growth has placed a barrier between him and his friends. Gregor is psychologically alienated because although he is an insect, he still has the thought process of a human being. This dichotomy proves a difficult shift in Gregor’s psychological well-being. He is torn between hopes of returning to his human form, and his comfort as a monstrous insect. One scene that marks his psychological alienation occurs when his sister and mother are attempting to move the furniture out of the room to make Gregor’s movement easier. Despite the advantages of having less furniture to impede his movement, Gregor’s desire to keep his room like it was when <https://assignbuster.com/separate-and-alone-alienation-as-a-central-theme-in-tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilyich-and-kafkas-metamorphosis/>

he was human is overwhelming: “no doubt he would be free to crawl about unimpeded in all directions, but only at the price of rapidly and completely forgetting his human past” (Kafka 103). Another example of psychological alienation occurs at Gregor’s death. At this point in the story, the reader must realize all that has happened to Gregor: not only his physical form has been irrevocably changed, but his place as the caretaker of the household, and his place in society have been altered. Gregor’s last thoughts before his death point to the psychological alienation he feels. He no longer is concerned with his own well-being, but that of his family and “his own opinion that he must disappear was if anything even firmer than his sister’s” (Kafka 122). This psychological alienation forces Gregor to change his ideas of his own importance. Both of the authors reveal their main characters to be emotionally alienated from others also. For example, Ivan’s emotions are most often kept hidden from those around him. Several times in the text, Tolstoy hints to the reader that Ivan desires an emotional connection to those around him, but he is unable to connect because he wishes to keep a strong appearance in front of his colleagues. Even before Ivan learns of his impending death, he is emotionally isolated from others, as is revealed in his relationship with his wife and family. Ivan is emotionally alienated and has “the need to fence off a world for himself outside the family” (Tolstoy 57). After his illness begins, Ivan realizes the dangers in this emotional alienation and tries to reach out, but finds himself unable to do so because of social conventions. Ivan longs for human affection: He knew that he was an important functionary with a graying beard, and so this was impossible; yet all the same he longed for it [ . . . ] Ivan Ilyich wanted to cry, wanted to be caressed and cried over, yet his colleague Shebek, a member of the court,

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would come and instead of crying and getting affection, Ivan Ilyich would assume a serious, stern, profound expression [ . . . ] Nothing did so much poison the last days of Ivan Ilyich's life as this falseness in himself and in those around him. (Tolstoy 105)Gregor also suffers from emotional alienation. As the main source of income for the family, he has an emotional attachment to them as dependents. His love for his family, particularly his mother and sister, is shown through Gregor's thoughts after his transformation. His desire to remain emotionally connected with his family, particularly his younger sister, is presented during the scene in which Gregor listens to his sister playing the violin: " It seemed to him as if the way were opening towards the unknown nourishment he craved" (Kafka 117). Kafka uses this scene to show the effects of the emotional alienation that Gregor experiences, and how he, like Ivan yearns for love and acceptance, despite his monstrous form. Both Tolstoy and Kafka use the theme of alienation to show the deepest emotions of those who have suddenly experienced a great change. Because both Gregor and Ivan experience a life-changing event, they are forced, through alienation, to question their own worth. By analyzing the psychological, emotional and physical aspects of alienation in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Metamorphosis*, the reader sees the similarities in the two characters' positions as they are suddenly forced to reflect on their own importance and question their autonomy.