

Research paper on the death of ivan illyich by tolstoy



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The Death of Ivan Ilyich First published in 1886, The Death of Ivan Ilyich is a novella more than a short story but despite its length, it is one of the most famous works produced by Leo Tolstoy after his masterpiece War and Peace (1869) and Anna Karenina (1877) (Wikipedia, 2006). As is obvious from the other works of Tolstoy, he was fascinated with life as well as death but in this particular novella, he explores the idea of death in far greater detail as compared to any of his other writings (Danaher, 2003). Throughout the work, there are visible marks of intellectual and spiritual problems which the characters face in terms of social mobility and materialism which overrides the idea of death.

The inevitability of death is a realization which comes to most of us very late in life if at all. While the characters in the story understand that death is a reality and an event which will occur sooner or later, like Ivan, they choose to ignore it and give thoughts to other more pressing considerations which take up their time (Hustis, 2000). Strangely enough, it takes a writer like Tolstoy to show us that without considering death while we have the time to actively change our lives, our final days may be spent like Ivan who examines his life and finds it lacking. The introspective nature which Ivan develops before his death could have served him well had he thought about life and living before he had to struggle with thoughts of death and dying. At times the reader can associate with Ivan since death is never a pleasant topic to consider, especially one's own death which is seldom given thought in our daily lives (Danaher, 2003). As the novella progresses, the intense internal struggle that Ivan has with his own thoughts magnifies his dread of the approaching eventual end and so overwhelms his thoughts that it becomes impossible to live the life he still has left with him.

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The plot of the book shows how Ivan is a government official serving in the capacity of a high court judge who lives a carefree, happy and more or less content life with his wife and family members. He begins to suffer from a mysterious pain in his stomach once he falls while hanging curtains in his house. With time, the pain becomes worse and he runs from pillar to post while trying to find a cure for his ailment. We find out that his condition is a terminal one and he will be dead soon. Yet at the same time, he does not accept his death. He certainly knows that he will not live for ever since he understands the philosophical concepts of morality and the idea that all men are mortals (Hustis, 2000). However, he does not consider himself to be a part of 'all men', since the idea of morality was never applied nor accepted by him to be meant for him.

When Ivan realizes that he is going to die, he realizes that he is not as special as he led himself to believe and his thoughts, family, emotions are nothing which will prevent death (Hustis, 2000). He understands that he himself (as a person) is not very special either. In fact, he is quite ordinary like the rest of humanity which has lived and will die. His death would not be too terrible for the rest of the world as it would go on doing what it had for centuries. In this process of dying he examines his life and finds it to be worthless. His vision is cleared and he understands how hypocritical he has been as how the people around him have also been hypocrites and liars (Hustis, 2000). Tolstoy also seems to make a point about the simple life being the one which does not give rise to such complications since the dying man is able to be comforted by the simplicity of his servant, Gerasim. Ivan's personal thoughts and ideas evolve slowly and complete their evolution just as death approaches him.

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Perhaps the most important event in the story is the actual death of Ivan and as he dies he gains the realization that the life he lived was his actual death and his real life begins once he has died for the world. As he was dying he lost all fear of death and the despair he felt before his worldly death seems to have passed away. Ending the narrative with the death of the central character also signifies the end of the story which was a common practice in novels on this theme during the times (Hustis, 2000). Of course the readers know this end from the title of the book as well as the opening pages of the story that describe Ivan's obituary. The readers also observe the hollow sorrow which Ivan's friends feel at Ivan's death and while we can condemn the friends for their hypocrisy, in a way the readers themselves act hypocritically since they show far less emotion. Clearly, there is no way that a person can feel much more than curiosity and passing emotions towards a character in a book, but that is exactly what Ivan's friends have for him, i. e. passing emotions and little else (Kamm, 2003).

Works Cited

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