

Tolstoy's the death of ivan ilych: a critical analysis essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Write an analytical paper consisting of exegetical and critical analysis of Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich'. Focus on the notion of authenticity in life and in human relationships. What is Tolstoy saying about these matters and what does his commentary have to say about modern culture? Use sources like Nietzsche, etc.

Tolstoy's novel is a realistic representation of the mercenary Russian society. The Hero Ivan Ilych is an ambitious youth caught up in desires and impulses and in the end he struggles for liberation from suffering through introspection. Readers can identify with Ivan, a middle class careerist, in his search for success and his last longing for spiritual enlightenment. His life reveals the moral and ethical concerns which are the hallmarks of Tolstoy. The style attains scriptural solemnity. Ivan pursues the life of comforts and luxury that comes with high income. The novel begins with grim news of Ivan Ilych's death and followed by a naturalistic description of the cynical behavior of his colleagues and his wife. A parallel can be found in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* in which the greed of the characters is unmasked with comic effect. It's only after an accidental injury he becomes introspective and takes stock of his life.

His so-called life of propriety falls to pieces and he becomes obsessed with death. In the final moment of his dissipated life misery and confusion, his soul is awakened by some kind of light and epiphany. The mad pursuit of selfish goals in a nihilistic world and its tragedy only emphasize the need for spiritual values which is essence of Tolstoyism. Tolstoy describes vividly how the enlightenment came to Ivan in the last chapter: 'To him all this happened in a single instant, and the meaning of that instant did not

<https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

change. For those present his agony continued for another two hours. Something rattled in his throat, his emaciated body twitched, then the gasping and rattle became less and less frequent.' It meant the end of his mental agony as well as his physical pain which even the celebrated doctors could not diagnose. He further writes about his final liberation: ' And suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides.

In the aftermath of Ivan's death, mourning is a mere perfunctory ritual. His friends and colleagues of legal profession are more interested in discussing the benefits arising out of the vacancy created by his death. Vested interests of friends and crocodile tears are perceived everywhere. Such cynicism is somewhat neutralized by the presence of the humble peasant Gerasim, his nurse. His wife's calculation of widow pension and his friend Peter's indifference are very realistic presentation of an acquisitive society in the manner of Zola and Strindberg. After the expose of mock-mourning following the death of the protagonist, the ups and downs of Ivan's career and family life are narrated from the second chapter onward. His law college background and the upper class values make Ivan dissatisfied with the present job of an examining judge and covet the post of the presiding judge. But the rat race for career comes at a high cost: the neglect of and the gradual alienation from his wife and children. It is because of the complexity of his situation that Tolstoy comments: ' Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.'

His next blunder is early marriage which leads to financial strain as the wife gets pregnant. As he longs to get a job of 5000 rubles without success his mental state is described: 'Ivan Ilych became irritable, reproached Happe, and quarrelled both him and with his immediate superiors — who became colder to him and again passed him over when other appointments were made.' As he becomes a workaholic to reach his financial goal and marital discord at home, he thinks: 'He alone knew that with the consciousness of the injustices done him, with his wife's incessant nagging, and with the debts he had contracted by living beyond his means, his position was far from normal.' His interest in a hobby like bridge is another effort to escape boredom and he also makes the blunder of taking leave of his present job to settle in the countryside with his brother-in-law. But happiness eludes him: 'In the country, without his work, he experienced ennui for the first time in his life, and not only ennui but intolerable depression, and he decided that it was impossible to go on living like that, and that it was necessary to take energetic measures.'

His single-minded pursuit of money apparently ended in success when with help from his former acquaintance, Ilyn, he lands on the coveted job of the presiding judge. After an accidental injury Ivan develops an incurable disease with excruciating pain: Tolstoy writes: 'Ivan Ilych sometimes said that he had a queer taste in his mouth and felt some discomfort in his left side. But this discomfort increased and, though not exactly painful, grew into a sense of pressure in his side accompanied by ill humor.' His mental and physical suffering are not relieved by the doctors who attend him. On top of it the indifference of the medical fraternity take toll as is evident from the

extract: ' From the doctor's summing up Ivan Ilych concluded that things were bad, but that for the doctor, and perhaps for everybody else, it was a matter of indifference, though for him it was bad. And this conclusion struck him painfully, arousing in him a great feeling of pity for himself and of bitterness towards the doctor's indifference to a matter of such importance.'

His careerist life has a negative impact on his wife, Praskovya, son Vasya, and daughter Lisa. They turn from indifference to hostility. Doctors can provide no relief: ' His ache, this dull gnawing ache that never ceased for a moment, seemed to have acquired a new and more serious significance from the doctor's dubious remarks. Ivan Ilych now watched it with a new and oppressive feeling.' A sense of imminent death haunts him as his physical and mental conditions deteriorate. His preoccupation with job and neglect of family bring about a vicious circle: neglect leading to hostility among the family members which in turn antagonize him toward them: ' Ivan Ilych was left alone with the consciousness that his life was poisoned and was poisoning the lives of others, and that this poison did not weaken but penetrated more and more deeply into his whole being.'

Ivan begins introspection on his life - an analysis of the justification of his suffering. As he is convinced of the propriety of his life, he can find no reasons. His wife's stiff gesture suggested: " This is wrong, it is not as it should be. All you have lived for and still live for is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you." His only source of consolation in the days of wretchedness is Gerasim whose honest and straightforward approach to life touches him. Having estranged his wife, he turns to his son Vasya for

<https://assignbuster.com/tolstoy-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

sympathy. But gradually from physical sickness and fear of death he descends to a life of hallucinations and nightmares. In Freudian analysis his dream about being forcibly pushed into a black sack is an expression of his unconscious fear and disgust with the conventional straight-jacket which he refuses to fit into. ' It seemed to him that he and his pain were being thrust into a narrow, deep black sack, but though they were pushed further and further in they could not be pushed to the bottom.'

This nightmare torments him more as he fails to grasp its significance. His self-pity finds expression as: ' Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continual despair. In the depth of his heart he knew he was dying, but not only was he not accustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not grasp it.... At certain moments after prolonged suffering he wished most of all (though he would have been ashamed to confess it) for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied.' His suffering finds poetic expression in the hands of Tolstoy: ' Always the same. Now a spark of hope flashes up, then a sea of despair rages, and always pain; always pain, always despair, and always the same.' From self-pity he develops extreme mental anguish. He ponders: ' He struggled as a man condemned to death struggles in the hands of the executioner, knowing that he cannot save himself. And every moment he felt that despite all his efforts he was drawing nearer and nearer to what terrified him. He felt that his agony was due to his being thrust into that black hole and still more to his not being able to get right into it. He was hindered from getting into it by his conviction that his life had been a good one. That very justification of his

life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him most torment of all.'

He gropes in a nihilistic world with no positive values to cling to or depend on. It is void people create when they refuse to believe in any significance or moral values for human life. As a philosophical position, it is often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche who defined it as an alternately lamentable and potentially fruitful condition. As a philosophy it rejects the real world around us and physical existence along with it and results in apathy toward life and a poisoning of the human soul. He describes it as "the will to nothingness" or, more specifically:

A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos—at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, section 585, Walter Kaufmann)

It fosters a very negative view of life as it argues that the world, past and current human existence, is without objective meaning and purpose. According to the Nihilists, there is no reasonable proof of the existence of a higher ruler or creator, a 'true morality' is a questionable proposition; therefore, one course of action in life cannot claim to have more truth or value. It is mostly used in the pejorative sense to denigrate a particular idea, movement, or group, than it is an actual philosophical position.

Bazarov, the protagonist of Turgenev's *Father and Sons*, is a nihilist who acts <https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

for what is beneficial for the present and rejects everything else. Tolstoy here shows the utter emptiness of Ivan's life: 'He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God.'

Self-analysis and keeping diaries were Tolstoy's two fond habits which, he believed, could precipitate moral betterment. From his introspection he comes to the conclusion, like William Wordsworth, that man loses his happiness as he grows up which explains why the childhood is the happiest time. This theory may be fallacious, but he sticks to it: 'And in imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. But strange to say none of those best moments of his pleasant life now seemed at all what they had then seemed — none of them except the first recollections of childhood.' But the childhood memories cannot sustain his happiness; so he continues to suffer as his pain worsens. Next his dream about fitting into the sack develops into a tug-of-war business. 'From the very beginning of his illness, ever since he had first been to see the doctor, Ivan Ilych's life had been divided between two contrary and alternating moods: now it was despair and the expectation of this uncomprehended and terrible death, and now hope and an intently interested observation of the functioning of his organs.'

His goodness prevents him from entering the sack which again implies that his personality is thwarted by his pursuit of an artificial life: 'It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It

occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against
<https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false.' But a mysterious force pushes him through into a luminous presence. It seems that the symptoms of all his mental and physical pain are outward expression of his inner turmoil. At this moment of enlightenment Ivan realizes the vanity of his false life and feels sorry for his alienated wife and children. The ending of the this short fiction in despair, depression and death give the impression of nihilism.

Though Tolstoy has adopted the simple narrative of a fable, he shows considerable insight into the complexity of human relationship. The mock-mourning of Ivan's friends, colleagues and family members only highlights the mercenary attitude that prevails in a consumerist society. Ivan's marriage and subsequent discord with his wife reveal the common weakness for status and luxury. The wife's calculation of pension and colleagues' concern about their benefits - the transfer and promotions - only expose the seamy side of life as is obvious from wife Praskovya's comment: 'I consider it an affectation to say that my grief prevents my attending to practical affairs. On the contrary, if anything can — I won't say console me, but — distract me, it is seeing to everything concerning him..'

His friend Peter's callousness is revealed in his attitude 'as though death was an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself.' Tolstoy's knowledge of human psychology can be guessed the way he has narrated the change in Ivan's behavior after his unhappy marriage: 'As his wife grew more irritable and exacting and Ivan Ilych transferred the center of gravity of his life more and more to his official work, so did he grow to like his work

<https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

better and became more ambitious than before.' Ivan's high ambition is described by the author in appropriate manner. His desire for social climbing has been described as: 'Neither as a boy nor as a man was he a toady, but from early youth was by nature attracted to people of high station as a fly is drawn to the light, assimilating their ways and views of life and establishing friendly relations with them.' Tolstoy knew and wrote about the hostility in marriage. In old age he turned an ascetic and held sexual relationship as a source of suffering. Like the modern John Gray he might have agreed with the view that men are from Mars and women from Venus.

He comments: 'His wife, without any reason — *de gaiete de coeur* as Ivan Ilych expressed it to himself — began to disturb the pleasure and propriety of their life. She began to be jealous without any cause, expected him to devote his whole attention to her, found fault with everything, and made coarse and ill-mannered scenes.' The growing alienation between the husband addicted to work and the wife burdened with child rearing and household work is depicted here: 'More children came. His wife became more and more querulous and ill-tempered, but the attitude Ivan Ilych had adopted towards his home life rendered him almost impervious to her grumbling.' The distance and the marital discord grew to a boiling point: 'She began to wish he would die; yet she did not want him to die because then his salary would cease. And this irritated her against him still more.'

How the couple degenerates into blame game when Ivan's illness is detected and it is narrated: 'Praskovya Fedorovna's attitude to Ivan Ilych's illness, as she expressed it both to others and to him, was that it was his own fault and was another of the annoyances he caused her. Ivan Ilych felt that this <https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

opinion escaped her involuntarily — but that did not make it easier for him.’ In the midst of cynicism the simplicity and honesty of the kind-hearted peasant nurse is touching: ‘ Gerasim alone did not lie; everything showed that he alone understood the facts of the case and did not consider it necessary to disguise them, but simply felt sorry for his emaciated and enfeebled master.’ It is clear that Ivan’s absorption in the office work takes a heavy toll on his marital life which is already on the decline because of the discovery of the incurable disease.

Tolstoy writes: ‘ Her attitude towards him and his diseases is still the same. Just as the doctor had adopted a certain relation to his patient which he could not abandon, so had she formed one towards him...’ The unhappy husband and the sick father naturally turn to his children as his last hopes: ‘ It seemed to Ivan Ilych that Vasya was the only one besides Gerasim who understood and pitied him.’ But like the unfeeling mother the daughter also is indifferent to his father’s suffering and is equally self-centred. As she argues:” 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?” Tolstoy has shown his deep knowledge of human nature and the motivational factors that prompt human action.

Tolstoy disliked the modern culture of sick hurry and divided aims. He also believes that the hero of his tale is truth. At a late stage in his life he gave up fiction writing to devote himself for the moral and ethical uplift of mankind. As a writer he belongs more to the world than to a particular country.

Through the tragedy of Ivan he shows the folly of the rat race and its adverse

effect on the family happiness and also how a conscientious man can redeem himself. His observations on life are of great significance.

He describes how the sad news of Ivan's death was received with indifference: ' So on receiving the news of Ivan Ilych's death the first thought of each of the gentlemen in that private room was of the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances.' It is a blunt and heartless remark of a colleague about Ivan's sad demise: ' The complacent feeling among the colleagues is that, " it is he who is dead and not I.'" Tolstoy exposes the extent of human greed in a lucid prose. He also takes pain to bring home the truth of Ivan upbringing which glorified the climbing up the social ladder. Ivan's life is driven by impulses; therefore he fails to analyze the causes of his misery. It has been clearly shown how his constant search for better social and financial status bring about alienation in his relationship with his wife and children. In his hurry to have a well-decorated house immediately after getting the coveted post, he injures himself and illness soon deteriorates into mental and physical pain.

But Tolstoy does not forget to emphasize Ivan's virtues when he was an examining judge: ' Ivan Ilych never abused his power; he tried on the contrary to soften its expression, but the consciousness of it and the possibility of softening its effect, supplied the chief interest and attraction of his office.' As he is unable to cope with the stress of his office and home life the hero develops hobby to as a fad: ' The pleasures connected with his work were pleasures of ambition; his social pleasures were those of vanity; but Ivan Ilych's greatest pleasure was playing bridge.' The ebb and flow of Ivan's life has been narrated in the first person by himself: ' It is as if I had <https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.'

His days and nights are subjected to bouts of alternating depression and hope. When confined to bed he begins his introspection to find the source of his suffering and is delighted to discover happiness in his childhood days when ambition did not destroy the serenity of his mind. But as he is obsessed with an inexplicable fear of death, various questions haunt his mind: "Then what does it mean? Why? It can't be that life is so senseless and horrible. But if it really has been so horrible and senseless, why must I die and die in agony? There is something wrong!' He continues his self-examination and self-analysis to get to the bottom of the psychosis: 'Why, and for what purpose, is there all this horror? But however much he pondered he found no answer.

And whenever the thought occurred to him, as it often did, that it all resulted from his not having lived as he ought to have done, he at once recalled the correctness of his whole life and dismissed so strange an idea.' The darkness of his dream world is a projection of his inner confusion. Tolstoy comments: "Just as the pain went on getting worse and worse, so my life grew worse and worse," he thought. "There is one bright spot there at the back, at the beginning of life, and afterwards all becomes blacker and blacker and proceeds more and more rapidly — in inverse ratio to the square of the distance from death," thought Ivan Ilych.' The clarity of Tolstoy's style is the clarity of his mind which is not bound by time and space.

<https://assignbuster.com/tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilych-a-critical-analysis-essay-sample/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barzun, Jacques, " Leo Tolstoy" in *European Writers* , Vol. 7., N. York:

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985

Tolstoy, Leo N., *Ivan Ilyitch and Other Stories* ,(Trnsl. Nathan Haskell Dole)

London, Walter Scott, 1887.

Tolstoy, Lev N., *The Death of Ivan Ilych* , (E-Book: Trnsl. Louise and Aylmer

Maude), Tolstoy Library, 1886. All quotations are from this e-text.