

The death of ivan illych by leo tolstoy

Literature



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The Death of Ivan Illych by Leo Tolstoy

On my first reading of *The Death of Ivan Illych*, by Leo Tolstoy, I wondered why Tolstoy took such a circuitous route towards giving an account of the protagonist's death. On further study, I realized that the story is as much a commentary on life as it is on death. Ivan Illych's superficial, egoistical attitude towards life is mirrored in the attitude of his family and friends towards his death and it is only when he accepts the falsity of his own attitude that he is able to come to terms with his death.

Ivan Illych's attitude towards life is to make sure that it is "Easy, agreeable, gay and always decorous" (Chapter 2, para 17). There is no room for emotion, no reaching out to anyone on a personal level, no spontaneity. His sterile life is all form and no substance. He takes pride in "excluding his personal opinion and observing every prescribed formality" (Chapter 2, para 10) in his work. The power and trappings of his office, stripped of any human dealings, is what matters most to him in life. The same attitude is seen in his personal life. He marries Praskovya Fedorovna, not for love, but because it seemed the "correct" thing to do. He has absolutely no empathy towards her needs during her pregnancy or for the role of fatherhood later. All he requires from their marriage is domestic comfort and "the propriety of external forms required by public opinion" (C 2, p 23). He selfishly confines himself within his "separate, fenced-off world of official duties" (C 2, p 23). He strives to achieve an aloofness from his wife, which permits him to go his own selfish way. The meanness of his life is revealed by his pleasures: ambition, vanity and bridge!

Ivan Illych's attitude towards life is reflected in the attitude of others towards his approaching death. His colleagues are only concerned about the

consequences of his death on their careers and promotion. Peter Ivanovich, like Ivan Illych himself, is governed by propriety and pays his condolence call only to satisfy social decorum. Schwartz's jovial attitude towards Ivan Illych's illness is reminiscent of Ivan's attitude in the past. Ivan Illych's wife continues to maintain the aloofness which he imposed on their marriage, by adhering to a facade of normality and superficial cheer. Likewise, his daughter is wrapped in her own selfish world of courtship. Even the Doctor deals with Ivan Illych in the same way that Ivan had dealt with men on trial – an attitude which Ivan had formerly considered brilliant, but now terms indifferent. On his deathbed, Ivan Illych is tormented by his family's lack of sympathy and the indifference of a world which "was going on as usual" (C 4, p 17). He craves understanding and pity and longs "to be petted and comforted" (C 7, p 33). He is defeated "by that very decorum which he had served all his life long" (C 7, p 32). That same decorum is now the medium of others' interaction with him.

It is when Ivan Illych is swamped by loneliness in his battle against pain, although surrounded by family and acquaintances, that he wonders: "What if my whole life has been wrong?" (C 11, p 11). As he screened himself from the reality of life with his official duties and social vanities, he attempts to screen himself from death. When he is forced to confront his approaching death, he is tormented by the falseness of everyone's attitude towards him. Then comes the momentous realization: "In them he saw himself" (C 12, p 14). They are but a part of the deception he himself used to hide from life and death. It is only Gerasim who touches him with a simple acceptance of his dying. Ultimately his son's kiss and tears of genuine sorrow open the floodgates of truth. Ivan Illych realizes that the "right thing" (C 12, p 5) is

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love. It is this love which enables him to forgive himself and his family and in so doing, to come to terms with, and conquer, death.