

Impact of death denial in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*



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Even the title of Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* oozes themes of death and dying, but what makes this piece of writing one of extraordinary kinds, is not simply the descriptive way in which it depicts the process of death and dying for those who are ill, but the novella further creates a space for introspection and philosophizing, where the reader can begin to analyze the underlying themes. One theme in particular, is death, but strongly connected to this central theme, is the further descriptions of denial and how it impacts the way in which Ivan Ilyich and his family live out the final days leading up to his passing. Losing a loved one is never easy - watching them go through the process of death is that much more difficult, and there are many ways in which one can go about confronting the fact of the matter. Some research shows that accepting death and stepping away from the urges to deny the undeniable, may actually be in benefit to not only the family, friends and loved ones of the dying individual, but also it may make the difficult passing of an individual easier for themselves. Perhaps, had Ivan's family been more accepting of his dying process, Ilyich may have felt his final days were of greater meaning, spending these moments connecting deeper with his loved ones, rather than suffering practically alone in pain. Acceptance of death, rather than denying its inevitable forthcoming, could be the answer as to how one can continue to live their lives meaningfully, even down to their very last breaths.

Ivan Ilyich spends his life doing all he can to bring about a good life, the type of existence that society tells him will bring happiness. He gets married because those esteemed figures around him believe it is the right thing to do, even though he grows to detest his wife in the end (Tolstoy 28). He

develops “ an attitude towards married life” that was only there for the domestic conveniences, such as having his dinner made and a housewife to clean up after him (Tolstoy 30). Ivan becomes quite formal towards his family, in order to avoid his wife’s emotions and “ disagreeable moods”, doing so by diving deeper into his official position and work life (Tolstoy 29). Ivan, however, just like all humans, is changing and transforming, but he is still a human. Tolstoy believed, “ Люди как реки: вода во всех одинаковая и везде одна и та же, но каждая река бывает то узкая, то быстрая, то широкая, то тихая, то чистая, то холодная, то мутная, то теплая. Так и люди”, which may have served as the author’s reasoning for including the various glimpses of personality changes that Ivan presents to readers (Tolstoy, Воскресение 175). It is not until his final moments that Ivan begins to recognize how the life he had been living may have all been some type of societal driven show. In some ways, the end of Ivan’s life reveals to him how he had been living an inauthentic life. The existence of this denial theme does not just begin at the moment Ivan becomes ill, throughout his healthy years he also appears to be resistant of actual reality.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is filled with examples of denial, strongly exemplified by the way in which Ivan’s wife and daughter refuse to believe that he is dying, and rather continue to refer to him as sick, assuming he may recover (Tolstoy 82). The narrator expresses, “ What tormented Ivan... the most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill” (Tolstoy 82). In reality, it maybe could have been of benefit to Ivan and his family to deal with the emotions of his impending death in a more accepting manner, for this might have made his

final days that much more comfortable and filled with less internal pain or shame of dying. At one point the narrator even states, " This falsity around him and within him did more than anything else to poison his last days" (Tolstoy 85).

In " Beyond Terror and Denial: The Positive Psychology of Death", Wong and Tomer explain some of the challenges with avoiding to accept death as a reality, stating, " The problem with death denial is that no matter how hard we try to suppress and repress death awareness, anxiety about our demise can still manifest itself in a variety of symptoms...Another problem with death denial is that it is doomed to fail" (100). Furthermore, Wong and Tomer even go as far as to encourage psychologists to place more importance on working through the dying process as one of acceptance, claiming that, " Through an increased understanding of death acceptance we may learn to treat each other with respect and compassion" (101). Boyraz et al. states, " An individual's beliefs and attitudes toward death may also affect the bereavement process. People start to develop beliefs and attitudes toward death starting at an early age and these attitudes and beliefs may affect many areas of their lives, including attitudes toward life" (1). Simply the way in which Ivan claims " death is finished" during his final moments, shows the intensity of his discomfort during the dying process. There is a possibility that, had his family treated him with the same type of care and realness that his caretaker Gerasim did, he may have experienced greater levels of comfort and positive human connection towards the end (Tolstoy 96, 121).

Throughout *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the various family members and Ivan himself experience what some experts would term "suspended open awareness". During this type of awareness, "the patient or family member blocks out the information that has been provided about the terminal condition. It is as if the disclosure never happened. The relative or patient is in a state of disbelief" (Timmermans 330). This definition of this type of coping mechanism is normally used when referring to terminal illness, at the moment it is revealed to a patient or the patient's family, but in the case of Ivan, it is also applicable. Even though he was not necessarily diagnosed terminally, there were many clear signs, especially towards the end of his life, that death was most certainly inevitable. The way in which his pain and suffering continued to return no matter how much he fought off the thought of it meant for certain that the only way he could continue, was into deep decline, especially with the minimal medical technologies and understandings available during this time (Tolstoy 72). Discussing suspended death awareness, in general, is thought by many to be a taboo subject. Timmermans states, "impending death is a taboo subject. It has been broached once, but according to the reaction of the patient, there is an implicit understanding that the subject is not open to discussion" (331). This author further goes on to claim that this type of death awareness can be detrimental to the patient and also to those who are around, for it does not allow assistants or medical staff who are involved in the transitional passing to be as prepared as possible for the impending death. "This awareness context forces secrecy on the interaction between the patient and the medical team", with the term medical team in Ivan's case being his nurse Gerasim, who very much has a discreet and personal connection with Ivan

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that the dying man does not seem to be able to share with his own family (Timmermans 331, 332).

Another method of death awareness, known as "active open awareness", seems to be a sometimes more beneficial direction to take when dealing with death acceptance, but certainly during Ivan's time not many followed this practice, because research on its positives certainly did not exist during the year of Ivan Ilyich's death. In this form of death awareness, "...the patient and family members understand the full implications of the impending death and try in one way or another to come to terms with it. The patient no longer hopes for a recovery" (Timmermans 334). The choice to confront the reality of impending death, rather than ignoring or denying generates a circumstance in which, "patients and family members can find rest in reflecting on their own lives, in optimizing the last days, weeks or months together" (Timmermans 334). Had Ivan been in a 21st century hospital situation, the institution would have likely chosen to implement the practices of active open awareness, because this is commonly the standard in the Western world, due to its recognized benefits, with some psychologists even believing this type of practice is a "better way to die" (Timmermans 335).

"Thinking about death is not pleasant. When given a choice to actively contemplate mortality or to deny death altogether, most individuals would likely choose the latter option. Despite our best efforts to defy the mortal consequences of tomorrow, however, thoughts of death are as inevitable as death itself", states Cozzolino et al. (3). These researchers that published their findings in a Death Studies publication, conducted an experiment to <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-death-denial-in-tolstoys-the-death-of-ivan-ilyich/>

grasp a better understanding on how death denial and avoidance impacts the quality of life an individual can live. A research experiment, conducted upon 185 participants enrolled in introductory psychology courses at California State University, Sacramento, presented a list of measures, in which participants answered questions. These measures involved Death Fear and Denial, Social Desirability, Positive Components of the Self, Self-Concept Clarity, Locus of Control, Self-Esteem, Self-realization, and Existential Well-Being. Their findings showed, "...low levels of death denial and low levels of death fear significantly predicted an enhanced sense of self, at least as assessed via measures of self-esteem, self-concept clarity, locus of control, self-realization, and existential well-being" (Cozzolino et al. 9). These results express, "...the potential for psychological growth and enhanced meaning in life that individuals can find as a result of confronting death", which is congruent with the other evidence mentioned previously, which also supports this notion that the absence of denying death is actually what can allow humans to live their most content lives, albeit an uncomfortable undertaking (Cozzolino et al. 9).

There is nothing comfortable about realizing that every individual will one day pass, but for Ivan Ilyich, the experience of death may have been even more extreme and painful, solely due to how he saw himself, along with the way in which he, as well as his family, repeatedly denied his impending death, even though it stared at them directly. Significant research shows that death awareness and confrontation is the way to go, and although the perspective Tolstoy takes in *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, that which could be defined as suspended open awareness, provides the reader with the full spectrum of

human emotions, it may not have been the healthiest choice in actuality. This well-rounded perspective does offer a glimpse into a tragic chain of events, which is no surprise for a piece of literature produced by a well-recognized Russian writer, (many Russian writers wrote about more tragic subject matter). Seeing Ivan's gruesome perspective and deep denial is, certainly, educational, but it still leaves the question of what if Ivan, along with his family, had chosen to confront death in healthier ways - what if the knowledge that Western medicine and psychology now has today was recognized back then? Research seems to point at the idea that, had Ivan Ilyich had the information, or the wherewithal to choose the path of active open awareness, he may have found his process of passing to be much more tolerable, and ultimately this death acceptance could have led to happier moments and a greater sense of ease throughout his final days, instead of the deep suffering, pain, and regret that he ended up facing, until he met his inevitable fate.

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