

With clean hands, in  
clean linen: a  
reflection of  
nineteenth-century  
russian soci...



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In his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Count Leo Tolstoy offers readers a glimpse into the life and death of a socially ambitious Russian gentleman, Ivan Ilych. During the story, Ivan's character is revealed in several different ways: firstly, oddly enough, at his funeral, where the actions of his friends serve to portray Russian society as a whole. Tolstoy then uses flashback technique to recount Ivan's life and his attitudes toward his family, his job, and his friends. Ivan's lifestyle only solidifies Tolstoy's perception of 1880s Russian society. From observing Ivan's thoughts and actions, it becomes obvious that he wants nothing more in life than to be approved of by others, and to do everything properly. Through Ivan Ilych's life and death, Tolstoy criticizes the society around him – a society overly concerned with propriety, conformity, and social approval. Tolstoy immediately begins his attack on Russian society at Ivan's funeral, through the actions of his "friends"; more specifically, he focuses on their preoccupation with seemly behavior and job promotions rather than genuine mourning. The assorted gentlemen actually show their selfish tendencies even before the funeral – as soon as they hear of Ivan's death, "the first thought of each of the gentlemen...was of the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances" (96). They then acknowledge the extent to which Ivan's death has burdened them when they realize that "they would now have to fulfill the very tiresome demands of propriety by attending the funeral service and paying a visit of condolence to the widow" (97). During the actual funeral, Peter Ivanovich – one of Ivan's closest so-called friends – is consumed with doubt as to whether he should cross himself, when he should bow to the widow, and how he should offer his condolences (97-98). His focus on these petty social niceties – and the similar attitudes of the others

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at the funeral – underscores Tolstoy's criticism of propriety and superficiality in Russian culture. After the funeral scene, Tolstoy flashes back to the life of Ivan Ilych, revealing that Ivan was just as much of a conformist as his friends are. Ivan was unconcerned with whether or not his behavior was morally right; he simply wanted to ensure that whatever he did was done “ with clean hands, in clean linen...and above all among people of the best society and consequently with the approval of people of rank” (106). Falling into this category were courtship and marriage, which was “ considered the right thing by the most highly placed of his associates” (109), as well as his behavior at work towards said associates, whom he treated in a cordial yet patronizing manner (107). Ivan was similarly preoccupied with appearances; he bedecked his house with “ antiques which he considered particularly *comme il faut*” (115). In fact, this obsession with the appearance of his house would later contribute significantly to his emotional and physical downfall. Unfortunately, Ivan was so preoccupied with gaining social approval that he ultimately sacrificed his life in an attempt to climb the social ladder. This reality is vividly illustrated during an episode in which Ivan is busily decorating his new house in St. Petersburg. He climbs on a stepladder to hang some drapes and suddenly slips off the ladder; however, he manages to break his fall and only knocks his side against the window knob (116). The trauma to his side never completely heals, though, and the internal damage it causes eventually leads to Ivan's final suffering and death. This is a striking parallel to the circumstances in Ivan's personal life. Ivan had been attempting to scale the social ladder, winning approval of high-ranking individuals, yet in doing so he had been unwittingly sacrificing both his family life and his emotional health. Tolstoy uses both this unfortunate

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emotional deficiency and its physical symbol to expose the many moral sicknesses afflicting the Russian culture of his day. Through Ivan's seemingly futile existence as a would-be socialite, Tolstoy implores his contemporaries to evaluate their priorities in life. Ivan fails to comprehend the emptiness and uselessness of his life until he is literally on his deathbed, but his story may prompt others living the same type of lifestyle to reflect and make some much-needed changes within themselves. Tolstoy's tale also serves to demonstrate that the corrupt society in which he lived – late nineteenth-century Russia – is actually quite similar to today's culture, and that the themes presented in the novella are applicable to nearly every society. Either way, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is a sad testament to the perils of living a life based entirely on appearances and pretenses.