

The death of ivan
ilych: the sad truth
behind the façade of
19th century middle
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The Death of Ivan Ilych is more than a novella about death: it is a text dedicated to life. Leo Tolstoy diligently paints an accurate portrait of the 19th century middle class and everything that is wrong with the philosophy of life of the people during the time. Establishing a rather simple and seemingly mundane plot with not much action, Tolstoy manages to touch a number of sensitive topics and major problems of middle-class society in a very subtle, yet skillful and clever way. The main character in the novella, Ivan Ilych, is the embodiment of the average man who strives to grow and secure his position in the middle class, building his whole life based on illusions, at the cost of his happiness and his family. Ivan's life passes him by while he is too busy living up to society's expectations and chasing after his superficial and preposterous goal, completely oblivious to what the true meaning of life is.

Ivan Ilych dedicates his whole life to please those that are "most highly placed" (Tolstoy 13) and thus to ascend in middle class society. His obsession starts developing during his boyhood and manages to take a toll on his entire life, affecting his philosophy on life, relationships and even his perception of happiness. "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 9). The author makes a very strong point by giving an account of the early development of Ivan's ambition. From his teenage years, Ivan has been subservient to his superficial goal. It is a part of his nature and he cannot help the way he is. Tolstoy, furthermore, makes very clever use of the comparison of Ivan's ambition to the way "a fly

is drawn to the light". He condemns Ivan's aspirations as mindless efforts, which inevitably lead to his doom. Ivan Ilych is willing to do whatever it takes for the sake of reaching his goal, no matter if it is wicked or blameworthy. At school he had done things which had formerly seemed to him very horrid and made him feel disgusted with himself when he did them; but when later on he saw that such actions were done by people of good position and that they did not regard them as wrong, he was able not exactly to regard them as right, but to forget about them entirely or not be at all troubled at remembering them. (Tolstoy 9) Although Ivan instinctively regarded these deeds as wrong and even conflicting with his own understanding of life and appropriateness, the fact that the people amongst whom he aspires to be do not condemn them but, in fact, seem to encourage them, serve to justify the wrong of the situations. Ivan is willing to abandon his morals and turn away from his "good-natured" (Tolstoy 9) character in order to conform with the false imagery of the middle class. He then goes on to arrange his whole life, including his family and house in order to fit in the norm of the middle class. Tolstoy skillfully manages to express the irony and pathetic nature of Ivan's painstaking efforts to fit in middle class society in one sentence about Ivan's dream house. In reality it was just what is usually seen in the houses of people of moderate means who want to appear rich, and therefore succeed only in resembling others like themselves: there are damasks, dark wood, plants, rugs, and dull and polished bronzes - all the things people of a certain class have in order to resemble other people of that class. (Tolstoy 19) Ivan puts so much effort into arranging his house in order to affect middle class society that the house ends up looking like all other middle class houses

without any personal touch. His house is not a home, but simply a reflection of his superficial ambitions.

Ivan's house is not the only thing in his life that was created without any personal touch or feelings. His whole family is created based on what society expects to see. Ivan marries, not out of love, but out of necessity, because he believes that he will be better accepted if he has a family. Tolstoy's explanations of Ivan's preparation for his married life put emphasis on the superficiality with which the whole situation is filled. "... so that Ivan Ilych had begun to think that marriage would not impair the easy, agreeable, gay and always decorous character of his life, approved of by society and regarded by himself as natural, but would even improve it" (Tolstoy 13). The lack of any words of affection regarding Ivan's married life speaks volumes about how shallow this relationship is. He chooses his wife because she was good enough and a "well connected [...] correct young woman" (Tolstoy 13). The author purposefully excludes any adjectives connected with love, but includes the strong presence of society in the private matters of Ivan's "personal" life. In fact, Ivan's personal life can be described with any other word but that one. It is built to bring joy to society, not to himself. It is created to add to the perfect façade, not to bring a sense of completeness or joy. It is meant to be exposed, not private. When his wife gets pregnant, Ivan does not experience any paternal feelings and unfortunately he does not develop them at any point of his life later on. He is only happy because he knows that society will approve of this step in his life. With the birth of their child, the attempts to feed it and the various failures in doing so, and with the real and imaginary illnesses of mother and child, in which Ivan Ilych's

sympathy was demanded but about which he understood nothing, the need of securing for himself an existence outside his family life became still more imperative. (Tolstoy 14) Ivan not only does not develop any sympathy or affection for his wife or children but he seems to be annoyed by the whole situation and their demand his for attention. He seeks refuge again in the layers of society. He has nothing in common with his children or with his wife. The only thing that brings the couple together is the arrangement of their home. Though there were some disputes between husband and wife, they were both so well satisfied and had so much to do that it all passed off without any serious quarrels. When nothing was left to arrange it became rather dull and something seemed to be lacking, but they were then making acquaintances, forming habits, and life was growing fuller. (Tolstoy 19) Home decorating is the only thing that husband and wife have in common. This is the only time in which they are not arguing because they are occupied with building the façade that will help them ascend in society. This broken relationship between husband and wife, and father and children affects his whole family and becomes mutual. Later on, when Ivan falls ill and needs people to feel pity and affection for him he realizes his grave mistake. He led his life estranged and not present as a father figure but merely a source of income to his children, and finally at the end of his life when he needs the presence of his family for support they treat him the way he has always treated them - as a burden.

Ivan's ambitions ensured him a superficially pleasant and joyful life, but never a life of happiness. He is portrayed as a character who is completely oblivious to the real joys of life and is capable of experiencing only simple

pleasure from mundane tasks. 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. He acknowledged that whatever disagreeable incident happened in his life, the pleasure that beamed like a ray of light above everything else was to sit down to bridge with good players (Tolstoy 21) For Ivan the sources of happiness are achievements at work, superficial social interaction and games. Tolstoy gives the game of bridge such a sarcastic importance in the novella aiming at condemning Ivan's shallow perception of life. Family has no place in Ivan's idea of joy and happiness. Ivan's happiness depends solely on his growth in the middle class and building fake appearances to please those who are above him. However, at the end of his life, Ivan finally is faced with the realization that his whole idea of happiness was a lie. When Ivan is isolated from society for the first time due to his illness, and for the first time becomes aware of his inner world he comes to a terrifying conclusion. " 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" (Tolstoy 46). Ivan finally realizes that he has led a terribly unhappy life. At the very end of his life he comes to the conclusion that the only moment in which he experienced true happiness was during his childhood. During this period of his life he was carefree, not concerned with social norms of living up to society's expectations, and this is where the beauty of life lies. To be able to live one's life according to one's own beliefs and needs is the best achievement in a person's life. If one falls in the trap of pleasing someone even if it contradicts with one's own outlook on life, <https://assignbuster.com/the-death-of-ivan-ilych-the-sad-truth-behind-the-faade-of-19th-century-middle-class/>

morals, ideas and aspirations, his life loses meaning. Ivan's inevitably approaching death caused him to realize that his whole life was deprived of any real purpose. " Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done," it suddenly occurred to him. " But how could that be, when I did everything properly?" (Tolstoy 46). The reason for his meaningless and unhappy life lies in his complete ignorance of his own needs and beliefs for the purpose of superficial success. Even though he decides to ignore these thoughts and go back to his illusions in order to try to preserve his peace of mind, this tragic realization soundly affects his last living moments.

Leo Tolstoy portrays a complex but tragic image of middle class society in the 19th century. He shows a society of humans devoid of humanity, feelings, attachments or morals. People who exist but do not live. Their sole concern is to fit in and do what society expects them to do and deems appropriate regardless of their own beliefs or needs. People who strive for success and uniqueness, but waste their lives and end up being just like everybody else. A society built on falseness and appearances. The only positive character in Tolstoy's novella ends up being the one no one expects to be - the servant, Gerasim. He, in contrast to everyone else, is the only one capable of truly experiencing life because he is the only one who takes pleasure in truth instead of false appearances. The beauty of Gerasim's philosophy of life lies in that he finds joy in the simple every day things unlike the people surrounding him who are striving to live up to society's expectations by focusing on acquiring wealth and purposeless items.