

Mourn me not: an exegegesis



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ivan Ilych's funeral, like all funerals, is not his own. While it is held in his honor, and he provides the token corpse for the occasion, each person experiences his funeral in the same self-centered way that they experience his death. Pyotr Ivanovich, one of Ivan Ilych's colleagues and closest friends, is no exception. Ivan Ilych's funeral is an undesirable trip across the river, and everything about the occasion makes him uncomfortable. When Pyotr arrives at the apartments, he is in no rush to get inside and see the neither the corpse nor Ilych's grieving family. Feigning chivalry but truly just dreading making an entrance, he "let the ladies go ahead of him and slowly followed them up the stairs" (41). When Pyotr sees Schwartz, another colleague of Ilych's, he assumes without speaking that Schwartz is hanging around in order to arrange a game of vint for the evening. This supposition is referred to as "obvious" (14). Though *Death of Ivan Ilych* features a third person omniscient narrator, the narration often zooms in to give a more detailed and personal point of view of one of the characters. The narrator is also untrustworthy in the sense that what he states is not fact; it is fact as one character, Pyotr in this case, sees it. Pyotr, short of reading Schwartz' mind, has no way of knowing that his intention in standing idly in one place is to arrange a game of cards. In this narration, we are given insight into a character's head and shown by his assumption that it probably is Pyotr's own intention to arrange a game. Pyotr is already planning his activities for after the funeral, leisurely and enjoyable ones which will distract him from the unpleasantness of the affair. All of Pyotr's thoughts and actions reflect the larger human tendency that Tolstoy wants to convey, to be self-centered and uncomfortable at funerals.

As the ladies ascend the stairs, going to see “ the widow” (41) it is Pyotr’s turn to go upstairs as well. Ivan’s wife is referred to by only the marital status he left her in, and likewise he is simply “ the dead man” (41). These references to the deceased and his wife only further depersonalize the act of dying. When you die, you lose your individual identity and are reduced to yet another dead man, and your wife yet another widow. This makes the way that others engage with your death less personal; they are attending a funeral, like all others. Only Schwartz seems to be able to openly act towards the funeral in way that such a trite ritual deserves. Upon Pyotr’s ascension up the stairs, “ Schwartz, with seriously compressed, firm lips and a playful glance, moved his eyebrows to show Pyotr Ivanovich to the right, to the dead man’s room” (41). The majority of Schwartz’ facial muscles pay the appropriate and expected respect to the dead man, but his eyes give away his secret. He is enjoying the whole charade, and wants to draw Pyotr into his insider experience. At least, this is the way that Pyotr perceives it. It is nearly impossible for one to move their eyebrow muscles sideways in the suggestive manner described in the passage, so this act of Schwartz may just be another time that his actions mirror Pyotr’s internal impressions of the funeral. Pyotr may be imagining Schwartz as his accomplice at the funeral, in not taking it seriously and only really wanting to play vint, as a way to justify the feelings that he assumes are wrong but that really all people feel at a funeral.

Once Pyotr enters the room, there is nobody to give him playful hints for how to act. He “ went in, as always happens, with some perplexity about what he was to do there,” (41). The narrator makes a more direct claim here about

how people always feel when attending a funeral; it is a forced occasion with an assumed prescribed way of acting, but nobody knows exactly how they should act. Comically, as many people do, Pyotr reverts to religious activity in the face of his uncertainty over how to proceed. He crosses himself, because he knew only that “ crossing oneself on such occasions never did any harm” (41). Religious observance is perhaps the one type of activity that always feels at home at a funeral. Pyotr’s crossing of himself doesn’t seem to come from any genuine place of deep spiritual feeling, such as believing that it serves his dead friend. As he also begins to bow halfway, unsure of if it is the couth thing to do but feeling some obligation, Pyotr begins to people watch around him “ insofar as his moving hand and head allowed him” (41). Pyotr, feeling out of place, looks again to others for how to act at the funeral. He cannot do this openly, because that would mean ceasing his crossing and bowing activity, and simply looking around at others gives no impression of respectful mourning. Pyotr observes young men also crossing themselves, and though they probably feel just as lost as him, the sight is a comforting affirmation that he chose the correct behavior.

Pyotr is only jolted from his observances of others’ behavior when he sees Gerasim sprinkle something on the floor and he “ at once sensed a slight smell of decaying corpse” (41). This is the first time that Pyotr is reminded of why he is in the room; there is dead body present, this is a funeral. Gerasim sprinkling a substance, presumably some sort of cleaning agent, doesn’t actually cause Pyotr to smell the corpse, he simply is reminded of the situation he is in and begins to imagine the disgusting decaying body that awaits his visit. Pyotr, after having thought of the corpse and Gerasim during

Ivan's life, " kept crossing himself and bowing slightly in the intermediary direction between the coffin, the reader, and the icons...when this movement of crossing himself seemed to have gone on too long, he stopped and began to examine the dead man" (42). This image of Pyotr doing what he thinks is correct, crossing himself in the general direction of the objects that Ilyich's family believed were correct to place at a funeral shows the hilariously arbitrary customs of a funeral. The image serves to reinforce the idea that at a funeral people are simply acting as they believe is the correct way. The funeral, at least as Ilyich's guests experience it, is not a personalized mourning process that serves neither the mourners nor the mourned. Pyotr had just remembered a scene during Ivan Ilyich's life involving Gerasim, a memory which referred to Ilyich by name. However Pyotr only views him as " the dead man" when approaching the body. This switch in Ivan's identity, which takes place in the mind of one of his closest friends, reinforces further the depersonalization of one's life in death.

Ivanovich taking in the physical appearance of the corpse offers a view that doesn't differ from any other funeral. Ilyich is once again stripped of his personal name; " the dead man lay, as dead man always lie, with a peculiar heaviness, dead-man fashion...displaying, as dead men always do, his yellow, waxen forehead with the hair brushed forward on his sunken temples" (42). It is expected that Pyotr, upon seeing the corpse of his dead friend for the first time, would experience some remarkable emotion. To Pyotr, however, Ivan's corpse is simply another dead man. He doesn't think of Ilyich in the context of his individual identity, and his name is not referenced again for the rest of the selected passage. Though it is evident

that Pyotr's experience of Ivan's funeral is mostly self-centered, it doesn't make Pyotr necessarily a bad person or bad friend. With the repetition of "always" when describing the dead man and the funeral, the narrator conveys that this way of experiencing the dead and the funeral is inherent, and not a product of Pyotr caring particularly little about his Ivan. Besides, mourning for the dead may be futile, as they are not necessarily worse off than they were in life.

While Pyotr observes that Ilyich looks thinner than he did at their last visit, "as with all dead people, his face was more handsome, and above all more significant, than it has been in the living man. There was on his face the expression that what needed to be done had been done, and done rightly" (42). Ivan actually looks better to Pyotr than he did in life, and gives Pyotr the impression of being at peace with what he did and accomplished in life. Those who have read the entirety of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and know that Ivan led a largely unhappy life, and only in dying found peace and happiness. Death, then, can serve as the ultimate reprieve to the series of miseries in life, and salvation from the preoccupations of life. For Ivan, these preoccupations came in the form of dreams of advancement and trying to avoid his family members. Upon looking at Ilyich, Pyotr can see that he is in a better state, and the generalization of "as with all dead people" reinforces that this is a circumstance of death and not a special case reserved for Ivan. This provides another reason that the concept of a funeral is ridiculous; not only do people feel uncomfortable and focus solely on themselves at a funeral, there's actually no reason to mourn because people are, as Ivan clearly is, absolved of their burdensome lives in death. Even upon viewing

the corpse, Pyotr cannot bring himself to confront the negative feelings associated with death. After taking in Ivan's appearance of calm and comfort he feels that, "there was also in that expression a reproach or a reminder to the living. This reminder seemed out of place to Pyotr Ivanovich, or at least of no concern to him. Something felt unpleasant to him, and therefore Pyotr Ivanovich crossed himself...turned and went out the door" (42). Pyotr's initial observations had been centered on the dead man's appearance. Once he sensed a "reminder to the living," however, a way that the dead man somehow connected or communicated to those still alive, he hated it. This conveys the idea that the living are unable to conceive of dying, and when the dead man, who Pyotr feels little personal connection to, is providing some sort of advice to the living, he instantly feels quite uncomfortable. The reminder may have been that this fate, being a semi-anonymous corpse at a funeral, is the fate that awaits us all. Either way, messages from the dead are "of no concern" to Pyotr because he doesn't want to hear them, and doesn't want to focus on this death at all, for that is unpleasant. The thought is enough to make him leave, but not without observing the correct process by crossing himself on the way out.

Pyotr meets Schwartz on his way out of the room, and this is no accident. Schwartz is found "playing with his top hat behind his back," (42). Always focused on playing games and seeming completely unfazed by the death, beyond mirroring Pyotr's internal desires, Schwartz serves as a symbol for life in the story. Though he is being somewhat respectful, not openly playing with his hat, he refuses to have his spirit quelled. It makes sense, then, that after the uncomfortable encounter with the reality of death that Pyotr just

experienced, “ one glance at Schwartz’ playful, clean and elegant figure refreshed Pyotr Ivanovich” (42). Schwartz embodies the death-denying vitality that cannot even fathom coming to an end, and so encourages living in the moment and revelling in pleasures. Pyotr feels that “ Schwartz was above it all and would not succumb to depressing impressions. His look alone said: the incident of the funeral...could in no way serve as a sufficient motive for considering the order of the session disrupted,” (42). They would indeed be cracking open a new deck of cards that evening. It is again unclear how much of Schwartz’ character is merely a projection of Pyotr’s inner feelings, in this case those about life. Either way, the aspect of human nature that cannot coexist with death is present. However, the fact that Pyotr’s mind and impressions keep returning to what is more a sign that he is obsessed with the prospect of playing than that Schwartz is. Schwartz’ hasn’t yet made any verbal affirmation that they will be meeting for cards that evening, Pyotr is judging based off of Schwartz’ general spirit and what he projects it to mean based on his own desires. The way that Pyotr interacts with Schwartz is the way that we all interact with life; we see it meaning what most closely matches our desires. Schwartz never entered the room with the body in it, as life cannot comprehend, much less come in contact with or accept, death.

A funeral is a dreaded occasion, but ought not to be. One dreads attending funerals of friends and loved ones, and upon arrival at a funeral, it is impossible to think of the dead body as the same person that they used to know. Humans dread their own funerals, when they let their minds confront the uncomfortable idea of them, though this isn’t often. This passage from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* proposes that the funeral is a ridiculous occasion

because people are too uncomfortable and self-centered to mourn, and the dead don't need mourning anyways. Ivan is the most at peace he's ever appeared in death. Schwartz, the ultimate symbol of life, seems to be the only one who accepts that the funeral is completely useless, and he makes no effort to even pretend to go through the stages of mourning, only moves ahead with his own life. The passage overall gives an optimistic account of life, one that cannot be touched by death and one which we ought to live without preoccupation of death.