

THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH

by Leo Tolstoy



THE AUTHOR

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) lost his parents before the age of ten, and was raised by an aunt. He briefly studied law, later fought in the Crimean War, and began his professional writing career with the publication of *Sevastopol Sketches* in 1855. In 1869, his reputation was firmly established with his epic *War and Peace*. His second great novel, *Anna Karenina*, was published in serial form between 1875 and 1877.

In addition to his novels, Tolstoy wrote plays and short stories, as well as producing reading curriculum for the Russian public school system. His personal life, however, was one of continual struggle and depression. His search for the meaning of life brought periodic spasms of joy like that experienced by Levin in *Anna Karenina*, but Tolstoy fell back again and again into black periods of despair, culminating in his conversion in 1878. He considered himself to be a Christian, but his ethical brand of Christianity required none of the traditional doctrines of the Russian Orthodox Church, which excommunicated him for his liberal views. His struggles with the inevitability of death and his search for meaning in life are reflected in his post-conversion novels, beginning with *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). The centrality of love for one's neighbor and the futility of religious dogma play a central part in these writings.

Tolstoy was also influenced by the prevailing philosophies of his day, especially the teachings of Immanuel Kant, and was equally concerned with the social changes occurring in Russia. The liberation of the serfs had brought about major changes in Russian life, with farming becoming increasingly difficult, the influence of the aristocracy waning, and the restlessness of the newly-freed serfs hanging like a cloud over the future of the country. Tolstoy's books deal primarily with the life of the aristocracy, and reflect the essentially conservative values of that somewhat reactionary group (though at the same time challenging those values). Despite what we know from hindsight about the growth of Marxist thought during this era, his works see communism as little more than a minor view among many competing political and economic theories.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins when Ivan Ilyich's co-workers in the law court read of his death at the age of 45 in the newspaper. Rather than feeling any real sympathy, they concentrate on what promotions now might be available to them with the new vacancy opening in the office. Pyotr Ivanovich, his closest friend, goes to the funeral and speaks to the widow, but his thoughts are largely on the game of whist he is scheduled to play that night, while the widow tries to pump him for information about how to enhance the pension the government will provide for her following her husband's death.

The narrative then shifts to an account of Ivan's life, which is dominated by conformity to the expectations of society. He pursues a career in law, makes all the right connections, forms no opinions of his own, marries the expected sort of woman (though he does not love her), and rises in the legal profession until he reaches the office of public prosecutor. Meanwhile, his home life is becoming more and more intolerable. His wife becomes bitter and difficult, and to get away from the constant harassment he receives from her and the children, he devotes increasing amounts of time to his work; it becomes his pathway of escape from his wife and family. After seventeen years of marriage, when he is 43 years old, he is passed over for a hoped-for promotion and his life begins to fall apart. He becomes increasingly bitter, though no one seems to sympathize with his anger at the loss of position and the indebtedness he has incurred by living beyond his means. He takes a leave of absence from his job, then decides, against the advice of his family, to move to Petersburg to seek a new appointment. He doesn't care what job he gets as long as it pays five thousand rubles (his old job paid thirty-five hundred rubles), allowing him to show his old boss that at least *someone* valued his services. He succeeds in getting an appointment in the Ministry of Justice at the desired salary. Both he and his wife now look forward to the lifestyle to which they would like to become accustomed. Ivan moves immediately to Petersburg, finds an apartment, and becomes preoccupied with redecorating it. One day while hanging curtains, he falls off the stepladder and bangs his side against a knob on the window frame, but thinks nothing of it. When his family arrives they are pleased with his work, but once they settle down they realize that the apartment is just a little too small, as is his salary. He does his work well but with no personal involvement with people, and his evening parties are no better. One night, when he insists on ordering expensive pastries for a dinner party, he and his wife have a terrible fight over the money he has spent. Soon Ivan begins to feel discomfort in his side, which makes him irritable and makes life, both at home and at work, more difficult. He finally goes to a doctor, who tells him nothing of consequence, but prescribes a form of treatment that seems to do no real good. He then seeks out other physicians of all sorts with no better result. He becomes increasingly depressed, especially when he realizes that his family and friends have little sympathy for him, but think only of the consequences of his impending death for themselves.

Several months later, Ivan's brother-in-law comes for a visit and is shocked to see how much Ivan has changed - a change of which Ivan himself had not been aware. He then pays another visit to the doctor, who assures him that his condition can be easily remedied. He is comforted, but soon the pain returns and he realizes he is dying, and becomes angry at the indifference of those around him and frustrated by his own fears of the unknown. He tries to lose himself in work so he won't have to think about death, but his pain keeps him from functioning normally and he begins to make mistakes in the courtroom. As his condition worsens, the doctor gives him opium and morphine, which provide little help. He can't sleep, can't stomach the foods

they feed him, and can't even attend to his own bowels. He does derive some comfort, however, from the attentions of Gerasim, the pantry boy who is charged with attending to his needs, which he did with a kind and generous heart. Ivan becomes infuriated, however, with the lies about his condition that others continue to tell him, feeling that they cheapen the momentous event of his demise. More doctors visit and give false hope. One night, his family goes to the theater - without him, of course. After they return, his wife tells him to take some opium, and under the influence of the drug he has a dream in which he is being pushed into a narrow black sack, from which he finally emerges. After the dream, he cries out to God in agony, demanding an explanation for his suffering and impending death. He tells God he wants to live, to return to life as it was before, but then he realizes that his life before was empty and miserable, with little of happiness since his childhood. As Ivan lays dying, he thinks of his childhood and its happiness, then returns to the misery of his adult life, but still is unable to bring himself to the point of admitting that his life was not what it should have been. At his wife's request he takes the sacrament, but it means nothing to him. Finally, shortly before he dies, Ivan reaches the point of repentance, recognizing the emptiness of his past life. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he savors the simple love of his son and grieves for the sorrow of those he will leave behind. Having repented of his life, he realizes that death is no longer real, and therefore nothing to fear, and he dies in peace.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Ivan Ilyich Golovin - A mid-level bureaucrat in the Russian legal system whose life and death is the theme of the novel.
- Praskovya Fyodorovna - Ivan's wife, a shrewish woman who lost interest in her marriage within a year of contracting it. She can hardly wait for Ivan to die once he becomes ill.
- Liza - Ivan's daughter, engaged to Fyodor Petrovich, a young man with good standing in society.
- Vasily Ivanovich - Ivan's young son, a student in the gymnasium.
- Gerasim - The pantry boy, he cares for Ivan during his illness.
- Pyotr Ivanovich - Ivan's best friend and fellow jurist, he bears Ivan little real affection.
- Schwartz - Another friend of Ivan from the office, he is irrepressibly cheerful, spending his time at Ivan's funeral trying to organize a whist game for that evening.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“In addition to the speculations aroused in each man's mind about the transfers and likely job changes this death might occasion, the very fact of the death of a close acquaintance evoked in them all the usual feeling of relief that it was someone else, not they, who had died.” (ch.1, p.37)

“Ivan Ilyich’s life had been most simple and commonplace - and most horrible.” (ch.2, p.49)

“Neither as a boy nor as an adult had he been a toady, but from his earliest youth he had been drawn to people of high standing in society as a moth is to light; he had adopted their manners and views of life and had established friendly relations with them.” (ch.2, p.50)

“As for the rest, he tried to find enjoyment in family life, and, if he succeeded, was very grateful; but if he met with resistance or querulousness, he immediately withdrew into his separate, entrenched world of work and found pleasure there.” (ch.2, p.58)

“In actuality, it was like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich, and therefore end up looking like one another.” (ch.3, p.66)

“The pleasures Ivan Ilyich derived from his work were those of pride; the pleasures he derived from society those of vanity; but it was genuine pleasure that he derived from playing whist.” (ch.3, p.70)

“After supper his friends went home, leaving Ivan Ilyich alone with the knowledge that his life had been poisoned and was poisoning the lives of others, and that far from diminishing, that poison was penetrating deeper and deeper into his entire being.” (ch.4, p.83)

“It seemed inconceivable to him that all men invariably had been condemned to suffer this awful horror.” (ch.5, p.89)

“As she was kissing him, he hated her with every inch of his being, and he had to restrain himself from pushing her away.” (ch.5, p.91)

“He went to his study, lay down, and once again was left alone with *It*. Face to face with *It*, unable to do anything with *It*. Simply look at *It* and grow numb with horror.” (ch.6, p.97)

“Nothing did so much to poison the last days of Ivan Ilyich’s life as this falseness in himself and in those around him.” (ch.7, p.105)

“He cried about his helplessness, about his terrible loneliness, about the cruelty of people, about the cruelty of God, about the absence of God.” (ch.9, p.118)

“Perhaps I did not live as I should have, but how can that be when I did everything one is supposed to do?” (Ivan, ch.9, p.120)

“But if that is the case, and I am taking leave of life with the awareness that I squandered all I was given and have no possibility of rectifying matters - what then?” (Ivan, ch.11, p.127)

“He felt that he was in agony because he was being shoved into that black hole, but even more because he was unable to get right into it. What prevented him from getting into it was the

belief that his life had been a good one. This justification of his life held him fast, kept him from moving forward, and caused him more agony than anything else.” (ch.12, p.131)

“One hand fell on the boy’s head. The boy grasped it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it should have but that he could still rectify the situation.” (ch.12, p.132)

“He searched for his accustomed fear of death and could not find it. Where was death? What death? There was no fear because there was no death. Instead of death there was light.” (ch.12, p.133)

“Death is over. There is no more death.” (Ivan, ch.12, p.134)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the role played by justice in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Be sure to consider both the role of justice as the protagonist’s career and the role it plays in his meditations on death. To what extent is Tolstoy’s treatment of the subject ironic?
2. Dylan Thomas wrote a poem to his dying father in which he urged him to “Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” To what extent is this view of death shared by Leo Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? What view of death leads to the horrible screaming that seized the protagonist almost up to his final hours? Assess this view of death in light of the teachings of the Scriptures.
3. Discuss the impact of the protagonist’s impending death to his relationships with others in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Why is Ivan consumed with hatred of all around him? Why does this attitude change in the closing pages of the novel? What happened to the protagonist to cause the change?
4. Discuss the concept of repentance as it appears in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Though Tolstoy never uses the word, the idea plays a central role in the story. Is his approach to repentance a biblical one? Why or why not?
5. Henrik Ibsen once said, “Take the saving lie away from a man and you take his happiness away.” On the basis of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, would Tolstoy have agreed? Why, at various times in the story, do the “saving lies” make the protagonist happy or unhappy? Would you agree that it is cruel to lie about his condition to a dying man? Why or why not?
6. In Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the protagonist’s last words are, “Death is over. There is no more death.” What do these words mean? In what way are they a suitable climax to the struggle related in the novel?

7. In Luke 9:24, Jesus says, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” Apply this truth to Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Discuss the extent to which the protagonist may be said to have lost or saved his life as the story progresses.
8. Leo Tolstoy was a professing Christian, but he rejected the dogma of the Russian Orthodox Church and was excommunicated for his heterodox beliefs. To Tolstoy, the church had long ago turned away from the teachings of Christ, which could be summed up in the injunction to love one’s neighbor. How does Tolstoy’s emphasis on love as the focus of true religion appear in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? Is his treatment of love a biblical one? Why or why not?
9. Compare and contrast the treatments of conformity in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. What do the two authors believe to be the consequences of living a life dedicated to conforming to the desires of others? Use specifics from the stories to support your arguments.
10. In William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Malcolm describes the death of a traitor in these words: “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.” Could these same words be applied to the protagonist in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? Use specifics from the novel to support your arguments.
11. Many critics of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* recognize that the character of Gerasim is the vehicle for communicating Tolstoy’s beliefs about what constitutes a truly righteous and meaningful life. Analyze the character of the pantry boy and draw conclusions about Tolstoy’s beliefs concerning the ideal manner of living. Is his approach a Christian one? Why or why not?
12. In Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the author suggests that the manner of one’s living determines the manner of his dying. To what extent is this true? Why should one expect to find such a clear connection between one’s approach to life and his approach to death? Be sure to incorporate biblical teachings into your analysis.
13. When speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said, “You must be born again.” Discuss the relationship between these words of Jesus and the image of the black sack in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Is the sack an image of spiritual rebirth? If not, what is it intended to communicate? Be sure to support your conclusion with specifics from the story.
14. Compare and contrast the treatments of a life of conformity to the standards of society in Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Ellen Kay’s poem *A Pathedy of Manners*. How are the lives of the two central figures the same? How are they different? Is your assessment of conformity changed by the fact that one protagonist lives and the other dies? Why or why not?

15. Discuss the significance of the opening chapter of Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Why does the author include this brief glimpse into Ivan's social circle before launching into the story of Ivan himself? How does the chapter contribute to the overall themes of the novel?
16. Leo Tolstoy once said of Charles Dickens, "I consider him the greatest novelist of the nineteenth century." Discuss the possibility that the former's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* might be modeled on the latter's *A Christmas Carol*. What similarities do you perceive in the stories? Be sure to consider the structures of the narratives, the characters of the protagonists, and the societies that the authors are criticizing.
17. Almost all of the characters in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* are completely self-absorbed. Are any characters in the story exceptions to this generalization? Do any of the characters undergo change during the course of the narrative? How do these exceptions illustrate Tolstoy's understanding of sin and salvation? Is his viewpoint biblical? Why or why not? Use Scripture and the text to support your arguments.
18. In the opening chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon presents a graphic picture of the human condition, while the closing verses of the book give Solomon's remedy for that condition. Would Leo Tolstoy have agreed with Solomon's assessment? Defend your conclusion with specific quotations from Ecclesiastes and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.
19. The account of the fall of man in Genesis 3 implies that sin is the root cause of man's alienation, both from God and from other men. Contemporary thinkers, on the other hand, argue that alienation is inevitable because each man creates his own reality and is ultimately incapable of having meaningful relationships with others. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the protagonist struggles with his alienation from those around him. Do you believe that Tolstoy's understanding of alienation is more biblical or postmodern? Support your arguments with quotations from the novel and from Scripture.
20. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, why does the protagonist fear death? Relate his fear of death to his attitude toward life. In what way does only a change in the latter allow for a change in the former? Assess Tolstoy's ideas on this subject from the standpoint of Scripture.
21. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, compare and contrast the response of Ivan to his wife's pregnancy to her response to his illness. What do these responses tell us about the characters of Ivan and Praskovya? What do they tell us about the quality of their marriage?
22. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, is the protagonist a distinct individual or is he a faceless Everyman? What do you think was Tolstoy's purpose in portraying his central character in the way he did? How does this portrayal contribute to the themes of the novel?

23. Why must a person recognize his sin before he is able to find salvation? Discuss this question in the context of Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Use details from the story to discuss the theme of sin and salvation as it is presented by Tolstoy.
24. Compare and contrast the musings on death found in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Consider the attitudes toward death expressed in the two works as well as the worldviews of the characters that generate their respective understandings of death.
25. If true reality is found only in Christ, we must also conclude that anyone who organizes his life outside of Christ is living in a false reality. How is this idea expressed in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? How does the protagonist escape his false reality and find the true one? Is Tolstoy's view of reality biblical? Why or why not?
26. Leo Tolstoy, in describing the essence of the Gospel, said, "He who does good will know the truth, and he who knows the truth will be liberated from evil and from death." To what extent does his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* demonstrate this belief on the part of the author? What interpretation would this quotation lead us to place on the final chapters of the story?