

Novel & Short Story

The Death of Ivan Ilyich - Leo Tolstoy

Overview:

The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886) is a fictional novella by the Russian author Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). The story raises questions about what is important in life through Tolstoy's observation of social interaction and individual priorities.

❖ Leo Tolstoy's life influence on his works:

In 1828 Leo Tolstoy was born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Moscow. Death visited the Tolstoy family early as his mom died when he was only two and his dad died shortly after that.

In 1875 Tolstoy experienced a period of increasing depression and psychological crisis that was to alter both his philosophy and his art. Tolstoy wrote in "A confession" that the principal cause of his depression was his inability to find an acceptable meaning in human life. The inevitability of death overwhelmed him, and all formulations of life's meaning appeared to him shallow and valueless. Tolstoy also felt that Russia had started to lose its identity, he criticized the orthodox church for using religion to exploit people, that's why he proposed his own understanding of religion: It is based on treating other people nicely, being kind and spreading love. He was considered a religious guru by many critics.

Tolstoy found that the uneducated peasants possessed a definite conception of the meaning of a life, a comfort and security derived from "irrational knowledge," from faith in a creator God. This faith rescued them from despair and suffering and infused their life with meaning.

It is not insignificant that *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, written in 1886, was the first major fictional work published by Tolstoy after his crisis and conversion. Tolstoy's religious philosophy serves as a background to the understanding of the novel. Brotherly love, mutual support, and Christian charity, values that became essential to Tolstoy in the second half of his life, emerge as the dominant moral principles in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. And just as Tolstoy's discovery of the true meaning of life led him to fulfillment and an acceptance of death, so too, Ivan Ilych's awakening exposes him to the light of a meaningful life and assuages his fear of dying. Thus, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* can be seen as a reflection and an elaboration of Tolstoy's post-conversion philosophical concerns. The novel is a fictional answer to the questions that plagued Tolstoy during the mid 1870s.

- Before the age of 41, he was very indulged in the pleasures of life and addicted to gambling and sex.

- ❖ *“Even when Ivan Ilyich was at the School of Law he was just what he remained for the rest of his life: a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man, though strict in the fulfillment of what he considered to be his duty: and he considered his duty to be what was so considered by those in authority... From early youth he was by nature attracted to people of high station ... assimilating their ways and views of life and establishing friendly relations with them.”*
- ❖ *“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. His house was so like the others that it would never have been noticed, but to him it all seemed to be quite exceptional.”*

Ivan was a competitive and gloomy person who didn't enjoy life. His defining characteristic and principal shortcoming is that he lives his life by the dictates of others. Rather than relying on his own reason and good sense to direct his moral life, Ivan blindly adopts the beliefs and values of aristocratic society.

Like a fly to a bright light, Ivan is drawn to those with high social standing. He believes that if he only imitates their conduct and lifestyle, if he only runs in the prescribed tracks of high society, his own life will progress according to plan and he will find meaning and fulfillment. Ivan becomes obsessed with standards of propriety and decorum, the etiquette of the upper class. He begins to act as one in his position should act. He takes a wife because a young legal gentleman with secure means should have a wife. He buys a house in the city and furnishes it with sophisticated ornaments because a cultured aristocrat should have a material status symbol.

As Ivan accustoms himself to propriety, he grows increasingly intolerant to everything that threatens his own comfort and material well-being. He fences himself off from every discomfiting influence.

When Praskovya introduces something unseemly and unpleasant with her pregnancy, Ivan retreats from his wife and absorbs himself in his official work. When married life becomes difficult, Ivan adopts a formal, contractual attitude toward his family. Ivan's professional ability to reduce

complicated cases to mere forms on paper, to deal with potentially emotional and personal situations in terms of cold externals, is reflected in every sphere of his life. As Ivan scrambles to avoid the unpleasant, he reduces his personal relationships to **shallow, self-preserving simulations**.

⇒ *By adopting the values of aristocratic society, then, rather than using his reason to discover what is truly meaningful in life, Ivan isolates himself from the rest of the world. And instead of meaning and fulfillment, Ivan finds only pain and dissatisfaction.*