The Death of Ivan Ilych Study Guide

The Death of Ivan Ilych by Leo Tolstoy

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Tolstoy's "Smert Ivana Ilyicha" ("The Death of Ivan Ilych") was widely acclaimed when it was published in 1886 and remains a compelling narrative for contemporary readers. It is significant for its universally powerful portrayal of a man's physical deterioration and subsequent spiritual rejuvenation at the moment of death, and because it is the first fiction which Tolstoy published after his conversion to radical Christianity. Several critics note a shift in his writing after his spiritual breakdown in the 1870s, which inspired him to write primarily on religious and philosophical issues while repudiating his earlier works. Tolstoy's *Voina i mir* (1869; *War and Peace*) and *Anna Karenina* (1877) are almost unanimously praised as compelling documents of human existence and are lauded as excellent examples of the realistic novel. Devoting his life to introspection and excelling not only as a writer but as a scholar and philosopher, Tolstoy has influenced a wide range of writers and philosophers, from Ernest Hemingway to Martin Heidegger. He has been hailed by a variety of writers as one of the most important figures in modern literary history, successfully animating his fiction with the dynamics of life. Fyodor Dostoyevsky called him "a sublime artist"; Virginia Woolf claimed him as "the greatest of all novelists"; and Marcel Proust honored him as "a serene god." Due to Tolstoy's relentless examinations of psychology and society, he has won the admiration of multitudes of writers and still affects readers with his stark portrayal of human life. "The Death of Ivan Ilych" perfectly demonstrates this introspection as it magnifies a man's struggle with how to live his life.

Author Biography

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), also transliterated as Lev or Lyof Nikolayevich Tolstoi, spent most of his life on his family estate near Moscow engrossed in his personal studies. As a youth he lived a free and restless life, but became socially active in the 1850s, fighting to improve the lot of the serfs. He later served in the army in the Caucasus, at this time working on his first novel, *Detstvo* (1852; *Childhood*). This work gained notice in Russian literary circles and was praised by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Ivan Turgenev. Tolstoy's experience serving in the Caucasus was the impetus for short stories such as "Nabeg" ("The Raid") and his military service in the Crimean War is described in his Sevastopol sketches. Other short stories and short novels were published during this time such as "Dva gusara" ("Two Hussars"), "Tri smerti" ("Three Deaths"), and "Kazaki" (1863; "The Cossacks"). These works began to demonstrate his interest in the issues of morality and the benefits of living simply without the preoccupations of society. This interest formed Tolstoy's Christian doctrine and inspired him to cofound a publishing house, The Intermediary, in 1883, and organize aid for the starving population of Middle Russia in 1891 through 1892. In 1862 he married Sofya Andreevna Behrs; the couple had thirteen children. Tolstoy actively lived his doctrine, renouncing his rights to his books, personal property, and money in 1895-96. In 1901, as his doctrine became more extreme, he was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox church.

Voina i mir (*War and Peace*), written from 1863 to 1869 and translated and published in 1886, is often called the greatest novel ever written. Tolstoy's next work, *Anna Karenina,* published in 1875-77, is considered by critics to be more structured; Tolstoy himself stated, "I am very proud of [*Anna Karenina's*] architecture—its vaults are joined so that one cannot even notice where the keystone is." *Anna Karenina* is unlike Tolstoy's other works in that it is not as didactic as his later writing, nor as optimistic as *War and Peace.*

In 1882 Tolstoy published *Ispoved* (*A Confession*), documenting his spiritual crisis and subsequent rejection of his past work, along with the creations of Shakespeare and Wagner, as being an elitist aesthetic which failed to "infest" one's perception with religious feeling. Tolstoy wrote many nonfiction pamphlets at this point in his life expounding upon the form of radical Christianity which he adopted, entailing celibacy and nonresistance to evil. He also wrote simple tales for the uneducated which conveyed moral lessons, such as "Brazhe lepki, a bozhe krepko" ("Evil Allures but Good Endures"). Critics usually look upon Tolstoy's post-conversion writing as less substantial than his earlier texts, although his talent for storytelling always remained intact. This is evident as one reads his drama, which conveys an urgent sense of realism, especially in his most widely known dramatic work, *Vlast tmy* (*The Power of Darkness*). "The Death of Ivan Ilych" was Tolstoy's first piece of fiction after his conversion. His last major novel, *Voskresenie* (*Resurrection*) was less successful than his earlier novels because of its moral digressions which tend to interfere with the artistic direction of the novel. Tolstoy's moral, theological, social, and political writings at this time led to his excommunication and government censorship.

Plot Summary

I

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" opens with Ivan Ilych's colleagues discussing cases in Shebek's private room. Amidst their friendly disagreements on a specific point of jurisdiction, Peter Ivanovich reads of Ivan Ilych's death in the papers and conveys this information to his colleagues. Half of them are startled that someone so close to them in age and position should die, and half have pleasant expectations of the benefits which the opening of Ivan Ilych's job will create. Peter Ivanovich's colleagues also immediately think of the promotions that they are bound to receive upon Ivan Ilych's absence, and each looks unenthusiastically on the duty of offering their condolences to the widow, Praskovya Fedorovna. They are left with a feeling of ease in knowing it is Ivan Ilych who has died; they are still alive and at work.

Peter Ivanovich tells his wife that he will now be able to help her brother attain a job in his circuit due to the open position once held by Ivan Ilych, and he sacrifices his usual nap to attend the funeral services. At the service he encounters Schwartz, a fellow bridge player who assures him by his look that the funeral will not interrupt their bridge game that evening. Peter Ivanovich is relieved, but he is detained by the widow, Praskovya Fedorovna. While attempting to maintain the proper state of a newly widowed woman, she questions Peter Ivanovich on how she can get financial aid from the government in the guise of asking him information on her husband's pension. Upon realizing that Peter Ivanovich cannot give her any insightful information, she politely ends their conversation and commences with the funeral service, which entails a display of tears, moans, and grieving. Peter Ivanovich leaves the funeral as quickly as possible to cut in on a game of bridge.

II

The second part of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" describes the life of Ivan Ilych while he was healthy. It can be summed up in the opening line, which states, "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." Ivan Ilych's father had been an official, much like Ivan and his oldest brother. Ivan Ilych is praised as being the balance between his two brothers: the oldest is too serious, and the youngest too wild. Ivan Ilych has a pleasant childhood, from which he retains fond memories, and enjoys an easy and proper youth. He studies at the School of Law and is considered "an intelligent, polished, lively and agreeable man." His first job is in the tenth rank of civil service, working under a governor; he is later promoted to the position of examining magistrate in another province. There he meets Praskovya Fedorovna and eventually marries her, not for love but because it seems the proper course of action at his stage in life. At first his marriage is pleasant and does not interfere with his social life. As his wife has children, however, she becomes more disagreeable and causes scenes which give Ivan Ilych much grief. In time he adjusts to these conjugal pressures by devoting his

thought to his official work and playing vint, a form of bridge, with his colleagues. He is eventually promoted to the position of Assistant Public Prosecutor. Although he earns a respectable salary, Ivan Ilych and his wife never have enough money. Three of their children die at birth, while two—the oldest daughter, Lisa, and youngest son, Vladimir—survive.

III

The third section of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" documents the hardest year in the peaceful seventeen years of Ivan Ilych's marriage. He has firmly established himself as a Public Prosecutor at this point and has passed up many offers of new positions, holding out for the best promotion. When this promotion is granted to someone else, Ivan Ilych's existence is shaken by the injustice. To save money, Ivan Ilych and his family live for the summer with his wife's brother in the country. Tormented by depression, Ivan Ilych returns to the city to find a new job and, fortunately, meets an acquaintance who helps him attain a new position at a higher salary, allowing him to gloat over the people who once refused him a promotion. Ivan Ilych and his wife buy a new home, which they meticulously decorate. The interior design of this new house is significant not only because it embodies the propriety and social class which Ivan Ilych has striven to personify but because it is while fixing a detail on the curtains that Ivan Ilych slips and injures his side. At the time, he laughs about it with his wife, but this proves to be "the fall" from which he dies.

The decor of the house creates a pleasant superficial unity within the Ilych household. Ivan Ilych does not argue as much with his wife, and he enjoys his new job. He revels in the correct social setting of which he feels himself to be a part. The Ilych family sheds any remnants of their "shabby friends" and are pleased as their daughter, Lisa, is courted by a wealthy young man.

IV

About this time, Ivan Ilych starts to feel a pain in his side and a strange taste in his mouth. He quarrels with his wife around meals, and she believes herself to be abused despite being tolerant of his temper. Ivan Ilych goes to the doctor as the pain escalates and the doctor is unable to give him a thorough diagnosis, leaving Ivan Ilych bleak and worried over the seriousness of his condition. Ivan Ilych takes the medicine prescribed and his wife scolds him about taking his pills regularly and getting enough sleep, never taking his illness as seriously as she should. Ivan Ilych sees many specialists and doctors, but each tells him something different and none give him relief from his pain. At his office, people look at him strangely, and he feels as though they treat him differently. He even loses the pleasure he once derived from his official duties and from playing bridge; the pain becomes an omnipresent force in his life.

V

Ivan Ilych becomes yet more aware of his illness in this section. His brother-in-law visits and is stunned on seeing him, exclaiming to his sister, "'Why, he's a dead man!"' Overhearing this report by his brother-in-law confirms Ivan Ilych's suspicions that he has changed drastically and is beyond the help of medicine and doctors. He ponders how close he is to death as he hears his family carry on with their social proprieties and is disgusted by their lack of pity for him.

VI

In section VI it becomes apparent to Ivan Ilych that he is dying and that nothing will change that fact. He remembers his childhood and feels that he was sincerely happy in his youth. He tries to go to work to chase away the morbid thoughts that obsess him, but he is distracted by his pain, which constantly reminds him of his approaching death and makes keeping up a social pretense unbearable. Death, to which Ivan Ilych refers as "it," takes on an antagonistic presence in his life. He is tortured not only by the pain in his side and the thought of "it" permeating his life but also by the pathetic manner in which he received his fatal wound—putting up curtains in a vain attempt to fashion his house after a wealth he never had.

VII

Ivan Ilych's illness takes over his life at this point in the narrative. He is given opium to ease the pain and his existence is a sequence of delirium and anguish. His only comfort comes through Gerasim, a Russian peasant who performs the duties of sick nurse. Gerasim emits a healthy physicality and treats Ivan Ilych as a man about to die, granting him all of his wishes willingly and pleasantly. He is the only one who offers him any comfort in these last days.

VIII

Life becomes distasteful to Ivan Ilych and death becomes his only reality. He feels as though his doctor and family are blatantly lying to him as they choose to ignore his condition, just as he once ignored his wife's pleas for attention when she was pregnant. He comes to loathe their fakeness, especially his wife's patronizing attitude. This section ends with Praskovya Fedorovna, Vladimir, Lisa, and Fedor Petrovich, their daughter's fiance, leaving for the opera. His wife pretends that she would rather stay with her husband in his time of need. Since they have a box, however, she must go—for the children's sake, she says. Ivan Ilych is repulsed by their shallowness, and as they leave, he is glad to be relieved of their "falsity" but is again left alone with his agony.

IX

As Ivan Ilych lies dying, he is tormented by the feeling that he is being pushed into a "narrow, deep black sack." He weeps "on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God." He listens deep within himself and hears a voice from within which questions, "What is it you want?" Ivan Ilych replies that he wants to live "well and pleasantly" as he did before his illness. He remembers his life from his childhood to the present and realizes that he was happy as a child but that his life became more and more empty and trivial as he grew older.

X

After a fortnight, Ivan Ilych does not leave his sofa any longer but lies and ponders death. He concludes that his life has gotten worse as time has progressed and that resistance to the loneliness of death is impossible. He searches for reasons for pain and death and cannot find any explanations. He is comforted by reminding himself that he has lived his life in accordance with propriety.

XI

Another fortnight passes during which Petrishchev formally proposes to Lisa. When Praskovya Fedorovna goes to inform her husband of this new and pleasant development, she finds him on his back, groaning. As she starts to remind him to take his medicine, he turns to her with hatred and asks to be left alone to die in peace. Ivan Ilych asks the doctor to leave and looks upon him, his wife, and his daughter with disgust, seeing in their every action the fakeness which characterized his own life. He realizes that maybe he "had not spent his life as he should have done."

Ivan Ilych receives the sacraments of confession and communion and feels a slight hope which is dashed as he is reminded by his wife's presence of the falsity and deception of her existence.

XII

Before Ivan Ilych dies, he experiences three days of agony when all he can do is scream. Death is so near, yet he feels that his questions about how he lived his life are unresolved. The image of the black sack returns and he struggles with it when he feels as if he is being stuffed into it. He is, however, "hindered from getting into it by his conviction that his life had been a good one." He is alleviated of this torment when his son, Vladimir, kisses his hand and begins to cry for his father. He feels sorry for his wife and son and finally is able to see "the light." His last words are to his wife ("Take him away . . . sorry for him . . . sorry for you too. . . .") and he tries to ask his family to forgive him. Ivan Ilych is then able to accept his pain, let his life and family go, and feel not death but light.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Peter Ivanovich, a lifelong acquaintance of Ivan Ilych, sits reading the paper in the judges' chambers while the other members of the Court of Justice argue over whether a case is within their jurisdiction. Peter interrupts them with the announcement that Ivan has died of the unnamed illness that has consumed him over the last several months.

Everyone in the room is surprised. They all liked Ivan, but each man starts thinking of who will fill his post and what promotion this might mean for himself. All are disturbed briefly by the nearness of death, but each is comforted by the thought that it is Ivan who is dead and not he. Several realize they will have to fulfill the tiresome duty of attending the funeral at one o'clock on Friday.

On Friday, Peter arrives at the home of Ivan Ilych to pay his respects. It is a fashionable house, richly decorated to look like every other house of its kind. The sight of the dead man seems to convey some sort of reproach or warning, but Peter feels that at least this is not meant for him. Peter would like to make it a quick visit and then join his colleague Schwartz for a game of bridge, but when Ivan's wife pulls Peter aside for a talk, it is evident he must stay for the funeral service. Schwartz goes on to enjoy the Friday night bridge game without Peter.

Ivan's wife talks about how much she has suffered, particularly in the last three days of Ivan's life when he lay screaming almost non-stop. For a moment, Peter is struck with horror to think of Ivan, who he had known as a merry boy, suffering so. He also feels afraid for himself. Almost immediately, however, the thought that this has happened to Ivan and couldn't happen to him returns.

Peter realizes that Ivan's wife really just wants to know if there is any additional government grant she can draw from Ivan's death. After thinking a minute, Peter tells her that unfortunately she has received all the government will give her. She begins to look for excuses to get rid of Peter and he feels free to leave her side.

On his way into the death-chamber for the service, Peter bows to Ivan's daughter and her fiancé, who both look inconvenienced. When Peter sees Ivan's schoolboy son with his tearstained face, however, Peter is struck by how much the boy looks like the boy that Ivan once was. During the service, Peter refuses to look at Ivan's body or yield to any depressing thoughts. On his way out, as the first to leave, Peter is assisted by Gerasim, who was a particular favorite of Ivan's in his last days. According to convention, Peter comments to Gerasim about how sad the whole thing is, but Gerasim says simply that death will come to everyone as God's will.

Peter makes it to Schwartz's house just as they are finishing the first rubber and he joins the bridge game.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Hearing the news of Ivan Ilych's death from the perspective of Peter Ivanovich, the reader is introduced to the world that Ivan has left. It is a world consumed with worldly affairs, status, money and most of all, convention. There is little attention paid to Ivan's suffering and death except as to how it affects the status and fortunes of other people. When Ivan's wife talks about his screaming, she thinks of it in terms of how much it bothered her rather than the pain Ivan must have experienced.

Most of the people introduced in this chapter think of themselves as good people, except perhaps the only two to express any honest feelings. Those two are not thinking of themselves at all. Ivan's son has been crying when Peter meets him and this is the first honest crying Peter has seen. The weeping of Ivan's wife has been only what she thinks is expected of her by society. Gerasim, who was the only person who provided any real comfort to Ivan, is not conventionally sad or sentimental about Ivan's death. He accepts it as part of life and is ready to be of service to the next person who needs him.

Peter is, as Ivan once was, consumed by convention. He goes to Ivan's home when he doesn't really want to and says things he doesn't really mean. The death of his lifetime acquaintance could serve as an awakening for him about the emptiness of his conventional life, but Peter ignores that warning and hurries to play bridge, believing that thoughts of his eventual death are morose and unhealthy.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Ivan's life is most ordinary and hence terrible. He is committed to doing his duty, which he feels is to do whatever pleases those in authority. Ivan goes through school, studies law and eventually marries because it seems expected of him.

Before long, Ivan's marriage becomes unhappy. Ivan feels that his wife wants him to entertain her just because she is bored all of the time. The more Ivan senses that, the more he carves out a life independent of her. He plays bridge with his friends and becomes more and more ambitious in his work. He has no imagination for creating another kind of life. They have children, but three of them die. With each loss, his wife becomes more ill tempered.

Still, Ivan is mostly satisfied with his life. His ambition results in increasing levels of power at work and he enjoys the challenge of wielding power without seeming to do so. His daughter is 16 and educated at home, as girls are these days. His son is a schoolboy. Ivan feels they live very well.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The author takes pains in this chapter to illustrate that Ivan's life is terrible to the exact degree that it conforms to the conventions of 19th century Russia and also to the degree that he doesn't see how terrible it is. Because Ivan has no practice at imagining another kind of life, he doesn't seem to understand his wife's need for companionship or maybe that he needs to comfort her after the loss of their children. It is interesting that this family has faced the death of children without learning anything from it, just like Peter Ivanovich learned nothing from Ivan's death in Chapter One.

The more Ivan makes choices based on convention, the more falsity becomes a part of his life. He enjoys power at work, especially because he has so little power to control his life at home. Ivan likes to seem not to need to make a show of his power, which lets people know just how powerful he is.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

This year, 1880, is the hardest year of Ivan's life because he is passed over for a promotion. He is a public prosecutor with a generous salary, but it doesn't keep up with his standard of living. What offends him most of all is that others seem to see his struggles as quite ordinary.

In the summer of this year, Ivan takes a leave of absence from work and takes his family to stay with his wife's brother's family. He does this to save money, but without his work to distract him Ivan falls into a profound depression. He decides the solution is to obtain a new job, of any kind at all, as long as it carries a salary of at least 5,000 rubles.

Ivan stumbles into a position in Petersburg, where his career began 17 years ago. This new position places him two steps above his former colleagues, so all of his animosity toward them vanishes. He will receive a salary of 5,000 rubles, plus 3,500 rubles for moving expenses.

Keeping his family at the brother-in-law's house a little longer, Ivan gets their new home set up. He and his wife have the same taste, so he finds a house that he knows will please them both. In fact, he really is more interested in the new house than he is the new job, so much so that he participates fully in its decoration. One day, Ivan slips on a stepladder while adjusting a curtain and receives a nasty bruise on his side.

Ivan enjoys his family's delight when they join him in their new house. Once settled, every new stain or imperfection makes Ivan irritable, but in general he enjoys himself. He enjoys giving dinner parties and once a dance, which are no different from that of other people in his circle. His favorite pastime is a good game of bridge. At work, he once again takes pride in doing his duty, which he believes is to keep his work and home life separate. He gets so good at this that he even plays with the line of separation a little the way a master artist will sometimes break the conventional rules of art.

Ivan, his wife and their daughter are all in agreement about their social circle. Without having to talk about it, they know which relationships to cultivate and which to drop. They feel that they live very well and without change.

Chapter 3 Analysis

What constitutes a good life is the overarching theme of this story. Ivan's idea of a good life is one that doesn't change, although the change in his job opened the door to his new job and house. Ivan's summer depression could have been used as an opportunity to forge a more honest and simple life, but he decides the solution is more of the same life he's already had.

Besides Ivan's conformity, another aspect of his character is his belief that his situation is somehow special. For instance, when he is living beyond his means he can't understand why his father feels no need to rescue him financially. He is horribly insulted when he is passed over for the promotion, although if it happened to someone else he would realize that happens to everyone at some time.

We are told that Ivan, his wife and their daughter share the same taste. This is not quite accurate. What the three of them have in common is that they have not developed any taste of their own. The way they socialize, the things they own, the clothes they wear and the items they use to decorate their houses are indistinguishable from anyone else of the same economic status. In their eyes, this is a good thing that signals a good life, but the author will show that this is a lack of life rather than a good one.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

When first confronted with symptoms of his illness, Ivan's response is to assert that they are all in good health, that the weird taste in his mouth and the pain in his side mean nothing. However, as his pain worsens, Ivan becomes so irritable that his wife finally insists that he see a doctor.

Ivan recognizes in the doctor's professional air his own attitude toward an accused person in court. The doctor ignores the real question of whether Ivan's case is serious. Instead of the question of seriousness, the doctor focuses on whether the pain comes from the appendix or the kidney. When Ivan presses the doctor for an answer to his real question, the doctor states that he has already told Ivan what he considers proper. Ivan can only guess at the doctor's prognosis and he guesses that it is very bad.

When Ivan gets home, he tries to tell his wife everything but she and their daughter are anxious to go out. When his wife urges Ivan to take his medicine, he thinks that perhaps his case is not so serious after all because she can go on as usual.

For a while, Ivan's chief concern is to follow the doctor's orders exactly, even when his symptoms fail to match the doctor's expectations. Ivan does not improve and he realizes that his pain worsens when he is upset. Instead of ignoring things that might upset him, however, Ivan is constantly on guard against anything that might distress him, which causes him much distress. Another way Ivan adds to his anxiety is by consulting a variety of medical books and doctors about his condition. Every new opinion agitates him further, but he can't make himself stop.

Ivan realizes something important is happening to him, but he has no one to share it with. His wife behaves as if Ivan has created this illness to annoy and inconvenience her. People at work either treat him too solicitously or make jokes. Even bridge doesn't matter to Ivan anymore and it frightens him to realize why it doesn't matter. He begins to find each hour of the day painful and terrifying.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Ivan and others' initial response to his illness are a classic example of the denial stage of dying. The doctors participate in this denial as much as Ivan himself. Not only is there denial that Ivan is dying, but there is denial that Ivan is powerless over his death. The doctor and Ivan's wife both behave as if his illness and questions are improper and impertinent.

The falsity that Ivan has developed throughout adult life comes back to haunt him now. In the doctor's attitude toward him, Ivan recognizes his own attitude toward accused

people in court. It is no coincidence that the author compares Ivan to an accused person and what he is accused of will be revealed later.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Two months later, Ivan's brother-in-law comes to visit. Ivan sees shock in his brother-in-law's eyes when he first sees Ivan. Examining himself in a mirror later, Ivan sees for the first time how thin and yellow he has become.

After a few hours of trying to think positively about his situation, Ivan realizes that his condition is not a question of whether the appendix or kidney is diseased, but a question of life and death. For the first time, Ivan admits to himself that he is dying. Anger rises up in him. He hears the rest of his family visiting down the hall and he hates them for their good health and merriment.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Although Ivan's denial is not yet broken, he has seen the first crack in that shield when he sees himself through his brother-in-law's eyes. Ivan's response to this is rage. Just as he always thought he should be special when it came to job promotions, Ivan now thinks he is somehow exempt from death.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Now that Ivan has seen clearly that he is dying, he despairs continuously. He keeps trying to understand it, but he cannot. Since he cannot accept his death, he tries to replace the thought of it with thoughts that he considers more proper and healthy. He tries to use these thoughts to protect him from thoughts of death, but they don't work anymore.

Ivan tries going in to work at the law courts, to live as he lived before, but death intrudes there too. The worst part is that death allows him no action to take except to sit there and face it.

Ivan knows that he gave his life to the decorating of his house. He is sure that this illness began when he fell off the ladder and bruised his side. It galls him to think he will die over something so trivial.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Self-deception no longer provides Ivan with an escape from reality and work is no longer a distraction. In fact, at work it is more evident than ever how much Ivan has changed.

It is ironic that Ivan resents that his death is trivial because his life has been trivial all along and that never bothered him. The author touches here on the other major theme of this book, which is that the way we live is the way we die. If the life we live is largely trivial and self-centered, our death is that way too.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In the third month of Ivan's illness, he realizes that everyone is waiting for him to die so that they can be released from his suffering. He is frequently given opium and morphine, but the depressed feeling the drugs give him is as bad as the pain itself. Food becomes more and more distasteful, so Ivan eats as little as he sleeps.

The hardest thing for Ivan to bear is that others have to be involved in his excretions. He hates it that another person has to witness the unseemliness and smell. Through this humiliation, however, Ivan finds some comfort in Gerasim, the butler's assistant.

Most people pretend that Ivan is not dying, even while they treat his dying as an imposition. Gerasim, on the other hand, is cheerful and kind and he doesn't pretend that Ivan will get well. Before long, it seems to Ivan that he can only rest with Gerasim holding his feet. He wishes everyone else would stop lying, but he can't stop lying himself.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter we see the first foreshadowing of Ivan's way out of despair. For the first time, we see Ivan think of another person. Ivan honestly voices his distress over the fact that Gerasim has to deal with his excretions and Gerasim's response is honest and kind. As a Russian peasant, Gerasim is a symbol of simplicity, service and goodness. Gerasim acknowledges that all people must die. Although Ivan cannot yet be this honest, he begins to rely on Gerasim's honesty.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The pain never leaves him and Ivan is angry with those around him who act like everything is normal. Ivan's physical pain is constant, but his mental pain is worse. One minute, he wishes all of this would be over. The next, he realizes only death will make it end and he wants anything but death. When the doctor visits, Ivan submits to his lies just as he used to submit to the lies of lawyers in the courts. He knows he's lying and why.

When Ivan's wife enters the room, Ivan feels surrounded by lies. She has ordered a visit from a celebrated specialist. She says she has done this for herself to put her own mind at ease. This is true, but she says it as if Ivan must understand she has really done it all for him. The specialist comes but only causes more pain because his visit gives Ivan a brief painful moment of false hope.

One evening, Ivan's wife comes in dressed for the theater. Ivan had earlier insisted that they secure a box to see Sarah Bernhardt, because he thought it would be a good cultural experience for the children. Now, it irritates him. His wife makes sure to say she'd rather sit with Ivan all evening, but she must go along to chaperone their daughter and her fiancé. The couple comes in for a visit, but it is clear this is merely a resentful interruption to their happiness. Behind them, Ivan's young son creeps in, looking frightened and full of pity. Ivan sees that there are dark circles under the boy's eyes.

The others chat about the theater until it becomes evident that Ivan is offended by their conventional conversation. For a moment, no one knows what to say because they can't or won't speak the truth and so the visit ends. It is a relief when they leave, taking all their falsity with them, but the relief passes and Ivan is in pain again. He sends for Gerasim.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The irony in this chapter is that Ivan does not recognize that he is angry with his wife and daughter for being exactly what he has trained them to be. Earlier in their marriage, when his wife wanted more emotion from him, Ivan ran. Now, she can't give what he has never given her. Their daughter has known nothing but this falsity. The little boy is the only evidence of real humanity in this family.

Ivan feels momentary relief when his family walks out because they take their falsity with them. Of course, they can only take their own. Ivan's falsity remains with him and his mental anguish immediately returns. He calls for Gerasim, who represents his hope for honesty and goodness.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Ivan's wife returns from the theater and wants to sit with him, but Ivan sends her away. At her suggestion, Ivan takes some opium for his pain. Stupefied, he feels that he and his pain are being pushed into a narrow black sack. What adds to his suffering is that he is torn between cooperating and resisting. Finally, he breaks through and becomes conscious. Ivan sends Gerasim away and has a good cry.

Ivan begins to question God directly and it seems that God answers. God asks what Ivan wants and Ivan replies, "To live as I used to - well and pleasantly." The question comes back to him, "Well and pleasantly?"

Ivan looks back over his life and it begins to seem as if the only real and honest pleasures were in his childhood, where there was lightheartedness, friendship and hope. Ivan recognizes, for a moment, that the more he has gone up in public opinion during his adult life the less there was any real goodness and the more his real life ebbed. That Ivan has not lived as he ought is the answer to his question, but that answer is too terrible for Ivan to acknowledge. He fights to push that answer away.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Ivan's wife and doctors keep giving him drugs to take away his pain, but it only serves their convenience in keeping Ivan quiet. The drugs do not relieve his suffering. He seems to find some small relief in having a good cry and when he becomes attentive to God's thoughts, his attention is off his pain for the moment. The author does not tell the reader what to believe about God. God as a character in this story can either be something outside of Ivan, a divine voice within Ivan that he usually ignores, or both.

One of Ivan's realizations, though he cannot face it for long, is that he has been dying for a long time. His life began to ebb as he began to give up the honest simplicity of childhood. His lack of honesty now only prolongs his sufferings. This is commonly referred to as the bargaining stage of grief, where one goes back and forth, haggling with reality.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

For two more weeks, Ivan never leaves his sofa and he has stopped thinking about his kidney or appendix. Now, he just thinks about death. In his loneliness, Ivan lives only in memories from the past. His memories lead him back to childhood, which is painful, so he brings himself to the present only to begin remembering again. Time after time, he sees that the further back he goes in his memory, the more there was that was good in life and the more life there was. The only explanation for this is that he has not lived as he ought, but he cannot yet admit this possibility.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter continues the illustration of Ivan's struggle to face the truth. He is lonely in the web of lies he has created out of his whole life. Today, in hospice circles, this might be labeled the depression stage of dying, when the dying person withdraws from everything in the present life.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Another two weeks go by and Ivan quits lying. When his wife comes in to say that their daughter's fiancé has proposed, Ivan angrily asks her to let him die in peace.

Ivan begins to entertain seriously the idea that he has lived wrongly. He thinks that maybe he was too quick to suppress his attempts to resist what others considered good. Maybe those non-conformist urges were real after all, he thinks.

Once Ivan sees this, he begins to review his whole life and all his relationships. He sees that his deceptions have hidden both life and death from him. This awareness adds to his physical sufferings and he groans aloud.

At his wife's suggestion, Ivan takes communion, but since his confession is only ritual and not the truth that he has begun to realize, he finds no lasting comfort. For a moment, he thinks he feels better, but then his wife enters the room. With her, Ivan's realization of the truth comes back full force. He feels his pain and anger rise again, along with a new sensation of suffocation. He shouts at his wife to go away.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This is a typical scene in families where someone is dying or undergoing any major transformation. Ivan begins to find relief in the truth, but those around him encourage him to remain false. The author reveals his belief that religious rituals shield people from an encounter with the Divine instead of bringing them closer to Truth.

This chapter also illustrates that the stages of death are really not as delineated as they might seem. A person may go through all the other stages, toy with acceptance and come back to denial again, as Ivan does in this chapter.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

For the last three days of his life, Ivan screams. During that time, he struggles with the black sack. He suffers from being pushed into it, but he suffers even more by resisting it. He keeps hanging onto the notion that his life has been a good one, because he thinks the alternative view will be unbearable. However, this notion keeps him from going forward and causes more suffering.

Suddenly, Ivan is pushed through the hole and finds light at the bottom. He sees that he has not lived well, but it doesn't matter. Even though he hasn't done it, it can be done. What matters is to ask how it can be done.

Now, two hours before his death, Ivan grows quiet and ponders this question. At this moment, his young son, so full of compassion, catches Ivan's flailing hand and kisses it. Ivan's wife comes in, also crying and Ivan feels sorry for them both. He decides that the important thing is not to add to their suffering more than he already has. He must release them and free himself.

With this realization, the suffocating force drops away from all sides. Ivan still knows his pain is there, but it doesn't matter. He looks for his fear, but there is no fear because there is no more death. Others see Ivan twitch and gasp for two more hours, but Ivan knows only joy. Instead of death, there is light.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The suffocating presence in Ivan's death was his own clinging to life and, more than that, his clinging to his need to be right. Once he admits to himself that his adult life has been the wrong kind of life, it doesn't matter anymore. As was foreshadowed earlier in the story, Ivan finds his release in his compassion for others. As soon as he thinks more of others' sufferings than he does his own, he is set free. The reason there is no more death is that there is no longer a false self to defend.

Characters

Praskovya Fedorovna

Ivan Ilych's wife, Praskovya Fedorovna, is never emotionally intimate with her husband, though they both desire the same lifestyle. They take pride in their new house, which embodies the propriety and class in which they want to live. When she first became pregnant, Ivan complained that she deliberately caused scenes and easily became jealous. Instead of dealing with his wife's emotions, Ivan ignored them. Praskovya ultimately reciprocates her husband's distant coldness. She indulges in extreme self-pity but believes herself to be very tolerant of her dying husband's moans. As her husband is dying, however, Praskovya does not acknowledge the seriousness of his situation. She chastises him for not taking his medicine and suggests that he see more doctors. At his funeral she is preoccupied with maintaining the proper persona of the grieving widow as she asks Peter Ivanovich if he thinks it possible for her to get money from the government to help her financially after her husband's death.

Fyodor

See Fedor Vasilievich

Gerasim

Gerasim is a Russian peasant with whom Ivan Ilych takes much comfort during the last days of his life. He is a servant of the house and selflessly and compassionately acts as sick nurse for Ivan, often elevating the dying man's legs throughout the night. Like Ivan's youngest son, Gerasim does not display the fake and shallow propriety that Ivan comes to resent in his wife, daughter, and doctor during his final days. As a peasant, Gerasim accepts death as a natural element in the cycle of life and does not feel the need to politely ignore the fact that his master is dying. He grants Ivan his last wishes without resentment, and regards him as a necessary and acceptable part of society, rather than a burden.

Ivan Ilych

Ivan Ilych had a pleasant early life, as he studied law and quickly became a professional. He is applauded for his ability both to be career-minded and to maintain a lightheartedness which allows his life to flow smoothly. He has a moderate disposition that was more balanced than that of his two brothers: one is very serious, while the other is too extravagant. Ivan marries an acceptable woman, Praskovya Fedorovna, and attains a respectable position in his career, first working with the governor and later as an examining magistrate. He considers his marriage a matter of convenience and is not in love with his wife. He realizes that marriage altogether is a troublesome venture

when his wife eventually has children and becomes disagreeable. Ivan's life revolves around what he believes convention requires. He conducts his official duties with competence and ease, trying to live as properly as possible. He maintains superficial relations with his family, keeping a facade of propriety while avoiding unpleasantness. He derives joy from absorbing his thoughts in the "official" matters of his work and in playing bridge.

Ivan Ilych's life changes drastically when he slips and falls while adjusting curtains in his new house, a symbol of the proper lifestyle he and his wife wish to portray. This mishap causes Ivan's slow physical deterioration, and inevitable death. His last days of painful existence are plagued by his fear of death and failure to understand why he must die. He is tormented by the possibility that he did not live his life as he should have, though he knows he has lived his life properly. At the moment of his death, Ivan Ilych's son, Vladimir, selflessly kisses his father's hand and Ivan is filled with love. He instantly realizes the shallowness of his entire life and dies finding comfort in the light of his new-found knowledge.

Vladimir Ivanich

Vladimir Ivanich, the younger of Ivan Ilych's two children, has not yet taken on the false social roles which the rest of Ivan's family have assumed. He is comparable to Gerasim, the Russian peasant who helps Ivan Ilych in his last moments of life, in his sincerity and compassion. Vladimir plays a crucial role in Ivan Ilych's death when he kisses his father's hand as he is about to die, allowing him to realize the emptiness of his life and die somewhat peacefully.

Peter Ivanovich

Peter Ivanovich, Ivan Ilych's closest colleague, studied law with him and felt indebted to him. Peter is the first person to relate the news of Ivan's death to his colleagues, who subsequently begin to wonder who will be promoted to fill Ivan's position. The first part of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" follows Peter to Ivan's house for the funeral service, where he displays the proper conventions of expressing condolences to the widow, Praskovya Fedorovna. Peter wants to escape the morose and discomforting feelings of the funeral and longs to play bridge with his colleagues. As he pretends to grieve he must constantly assure himself that he is alive and that Ivan is the one who has died. Peter is worried about Ivan's ominous expression as he lies in the coffin. He resists the warning he reads on the dead man's face, which seems to relegate Peter and his colleagues to the same shallow existence of Ivan Ilych, realizing too late in life that he had never lived.

Jean

See Ivan Ilych

Lisa

The oldest child of Ivan Ilych's two children, Lisa is very similar to her mother, Praskovya Fedorovna (Ivan Ilych's wife), in that they go visiting and shopping together and attend the opera when Ivan is nearing death. They view him as a burden upon their social lives and an interference in their pleasant household.

Petrishchev

See Fedor Petrovich

Fedor Petrovich

Fedor Petrovich is a respectable examining magistrate who courts Lisa, Ivan Ilych's daughter. He is refined, wealthy, and proper, making him appropriate company for Ivan's wife and daughter. By the time Ivan's funeral has taken place, Fedor and Lisa are engaged.

Pyotr

See Peter Ivanovich

Schwartz

Schwartz is a colleague of Ivan Ilych's who works and plays bridge with Peter Ivanovich. He is already at the funeral service when Peter arrives, and he gives Peter a knowing look which implies that funerals are burdensome and that they will soon be playing bridge. Schwartz contrasts with Peter in that his playful character is not affected by the depressing mood of the funeral; unlike Peter, he maintains an elegance and ease at the service.

Shebek

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" begins when Shebek and his colleagues are in his private room discussing a case and find out that Ivan has died. They each then think of the possibility of their own promotion, reminding themselves that they are still alive.

Sokolov

Sokolov is the butler of Ivan Ilych's house. He discusses the prices of Ivan's plot in the cemetery with Praskovya Fedorovna, Ivan's wife, as she speaks with Peter Ivanovich during her husband's funeral.

Along with Peter Ivanovich, Fedor Vasilievich is one of Ivan Ilych's closest acquaintances. He is also one of the colleagues who may be promoted after Ivan's death; he immediately thinks of this when he reads the announcement in the papers.

Vasya

See Vladimir Ivanich

Themes

Death

Tolstoy was plagued for most of his life with a fear of death. He came to realize, as the character of Ivan Ilych demonstrates vividly, that the closeness of death can create a healthy urgency in life. Ivan Ilych only becomes aware of the superficiality of his social propriety because of his proximity to death. He is horrified in knowing that he cannot escape death as he has escaped all other unpleasantness in life—by treating them with a distance and insincerity. Gerasim stands in opposition to this fear in his simple acceptance of death as a part of life. A comparison can be made between the high-class social falsity among which Ivan Ilych has lived and the peasant, or servant, life among which Gerasim has lived. Ivan Ilych has an agonizing death which is only relieved when he accepts death. Gerasim, as he helps the dying man, comments, "We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble?" Ivan Ilych's refusal to accept death mirrors the sterility of most of his life and the lives of his colleagues and wife. They ignore his pain and maintain their social conventions in the face of his eminent death. Ivan Ilych, however, is unable to ignore his own death. "It," the menacing reality of death, is irrational and goes against the facade of ease and pleasant living in which he has constantly lived and in which those surrounding him still live. Death ultimately forces Ivan Ilych to see the lack of compassion in his once well-ordered life. When he sees this, he can feel love and pity for his son and wife, and death is obliterated in this new light.

Love and Pity vs. Pride

Ivan Ilych had lived most of his life with a sense of pride and vanity. The society of which he is a part praises the trivial marks of wealth and propriety which consume the Ilych family and Ivan Ilych's office. He believes himself to be condescendingly friendly towards those who come before him at work and takes pride in the impersonal "official" relationships which he masters. Ivan Ilych's pride plays a crucial role in his "fall" from the stepladder as he fixes the draping of the curtains which the upholsterer has not done properly for the social decor he wants to exude. Like the Biblical fall of Adam and Eve from grace, Ivan Ilych's pride causes his fall and subsequent pain. Through his eventual selflessness and pity, which he finds through death, and the pity which is shown to him by Gerasim and his son, Ivan Ilych is able to feel love and accept death. Ivan Ilych is touched by the simple way in which Gerasim accepts death, comforts him, and shows him compassion. He is also moved when his son kisses his hand in his last moments of life. These instances, combined with his impending death and his struggle against being pushed into the deep black sack, bring Ivan Ilych to the realization that he pities his son and wife. He tries to ask for their forgiveness, rejecting the pride which previously consumed his life, and showing love.

Nature vs. Civilization

Ivan Ilych lives in an isolated and superficial world embedded within the civilization which his urban class valorizes. He denies his wife sympathy when she becomes irritable during her pregnancies and creates more walls within his social roles to compensate for ignoring her needs. The same lack of compassion, then, is all that she can demonstrate towards him as he lies dying; she maintains her social proprieties and is absorbed with going to the opera and with their daughter's engagement. These impersonal relationships within the Ilych family and the insincere friendships between Ivan Ilych and his colleagues serve to depict the shallowness of his civilized world. As he used his friends and colleagues to gain higher positions, so they use him when he dies and his job is left vacant. The worth which each of these characters finds in one another depends on what they can get from one another. Likewise, at Ivan Ilych's funeral, his wife's main concern is how she can procure funds from the government after her husband's death. The lack of humanity within Ivan Ilych's world is contrasted to the world of Gerasim and the childhoods of Ivan Ilych and his son, Vladimir. Gerasim is of the land and not of the same social class as Ivan Ilych. Because of this, he does not display the same propriety towards death as Ivan Ilych's friends and wife. Death, for Gerasim, is not an inconvenience which is to be ignored but is natural and pitiable. Ivan Ilych remembers his childhood, before he assumed the mask of propriety which death has shown him to be false, as his happiest days. Ivan sees this same innocence in his son, who shows Ivan pity and kisses his hand. The honest manner in which Gerasim and Vladimir pity Ivan contrasts with the falsity of his wife and colleagues and the shallow civilized life which is also Ivan Ilych's before his revelation at death.

Style

Point of View

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" is narrated by a third-person voice, telling Ivan Ilych's life story from what often seems like an objective point of view. The narrator speaks of the events in Ivan Ilych's life, both great and small, in the same tone. Ivan's marriage, his new house, the deaths of three of his children, the birth and education of two, and his fall while fixing the curtains are described in impersonal, quick paragraphs. Events that seem as though they should be more significant in his life are often thrown together with matters that are trivial, bringing all in Ivan Ilych's life down to the same superficial level. As paragraphs start with "So . . . ," they sweep away years of Ivan Ilych's life that are pleasantly and inconsequentially lived. Because Ivan Ilych treats all aspects of his life, from his work to his friends and family, in the same decorous and proper manner, everything within his life floats past him and is met with the same air of indifference.

Setting

The first section of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" takes place in Shebek's private room, where Ivan Ilych's colleagues first learn of his death and immediately think of the promotions that they are bound to receive. It orients the reader to a setting in which Ivan Ilych himself is later said to have enjoyed many breaks during the workday, and it connects the shallow mentality of his colleagues with his own lifestyle before his fall. The next section takes place at Ivan Ilych's home during his funeral services, where the same shallow attitudes are further displayed—not only by his colleagues, but by his wife as well. This setting foreshadows the shallowness later described in Ivan Ilych's life as details are given about the decorations and furniture of the room where Peter Ivanovich meets Praskovya Fedorovna. Sections III through V depict Ivan Ilych's ordinary and pleasant life, and sections VI through XII mainly present Ivan Ilych dealing with the thought that he is a dying man until he is limited to the confines of a sofa as he dies.

Symbols

The "fall" of Ivan Ilych, creating the wound which eventually leads to his agony and death, can be interpreted as representative of the Biblical fall from grace of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve disobey God because of the sin of pride. Satan is able to tempt them by telling them that eating the forbidden fruit will make them as powerful as God. Ivan Ilych falls victim to the sin of pride as he insists on draping the curtains in a particular fashion which is most characteristic of the wealthy society of which he wants to be a part. It is his preoccupation with public opinion that leads to his demise. Ivan Ilych's fall is further dramatized by the fact that, while he has fallen from a small step ladder, he feels as though he is being stuffed into a deep black sack. The black sack into which Ivan Ilych feels himself being thrust is symbolic of his struggle with death. He

is unable to ease into the sack (death), since he fears that he did not live his life properly, but he cannot see how he can possibly redeem the life which he once thought so correct. As Ivan Ilych sees the light, his struggle with death (the sack) disappears. The light he sees can be identified as the light of love, enlightenment, or spiritual rebirth.

Irony

The irony of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is a tool utilized from the beginning of the narrative, when Ivan Ilych's colleagues sit and discuss his death in the very same superficial manner which characterized his entire life in all of his affairs. The same shallow attitude, to which Ivan Ilych subscribed up to his moment of death, plagues his wife, daughter, doctor, and colleagues as he is dying. After he is dead, empty, conventional expressions of sympathy are the only emotion which Ivan Ilych's death elicits, except those from his son and Gerasim. But Ivan Ilych's colleagues and family treat him no differently than he would have treated them if they were dying. The doctors treat Ivan Ilych as impersonally as he treated those who came before him in his own official job. As Ivan Ilych lies dying, no one recognizes him as a dying man but instead treat him as a disturbance in their once-pleasant lives. This is an ironic treatment because it is the same manner in which Ivan Ilych always conducted his own affairs—never letting anyone's troubles interfere with the easy and pleasant progression of his own routines. Examples of this would be the way in which he treated those who came before him when he was an examining magistrate and his treatment of his wife's jealousy when she was pregnant. In both of these incidents, he kept a polite distance which displayed social propriety without making any personal investments.

Historical Context

In the period during which Leo Tolstoy was writing, Russia was experiencing much turbulence politically, socially, and economically. In the 1880s, the assassination of Alexander II and the reign of Alexander III facilitated violent reactions to the government and a period of autocracy within the government. Alexander III was extremely conservative and imposed many new rules upon the people of Russia to guard against revolution. His regime also saw a new campaign of Russification and antiSemitic legislation. While industrial growth stagnated during this time, the first Trans-Siberian Railroad was built, which eventually aided in Russia's development.

The hardships endured by the peasantry at this time, including a famine in 1891 and a cholera epidemic in 1892, were severe. One can read in Tolstoy's writing the deep respect which he held for the peasants of his time who worked in harmony with the land and were not obsessed with material success. The character of Gerasim in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" demonstrates Tolstoy's fascination with and romanticizing of Russian peasantry. Tolstoy devoted time before the writing of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" to improving the lot of the Russian serfs. He even organized relief for the starving population of the eastern "backlands," which consisted of twenty provinces and forty million peasants, in 1891 and 1892. Even in the 1850s, before he began his writing career and became a soldier in the in the Caucasus, Tolstoy was politically active as a social reformer. He continued in this manner with even more determination after his spiritual conversion.

After Alexander III took over as Czar, the political climate of Russia was one of censorship and administrative dominance. Tolstoy's pamphlets and political works were censored as he further developed his own Christian doctrine advocating pacifism, simplicity, and nonresistance to evil. Schools and universities became restricted and government sanctions infiltrated the education system. In 1859 Tolstoy became involved in education by organizing an experimental school to educate peasant children who were excluded from the education system by the new government.

During 1882, Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* was translated into Russian and slowly began to have an impact within the philosophical and political circles of Russia. In 1892 "Legal Populism" promoted a socialism based on the peasant "mir" and on clusters of small producers. These populists continued with propaganda in favor of rural socialism. About this time, a small working class rooted in rural society began to emerge within Russia. It became more of a risk to protest against government policies and to think differently from the regime of Alexander III after laws were passed to increase the prison terms for strikers (four months) and the organizers of any political rally (eight months) in 1886. Tolstoy continued with his political activism and pamphlets, but it became more dangerous and he was often censored. Although a law was passed in 1883 granting non-Orthodox religious groups the right to practice their religion with the strictest of limitations, Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox church in 1901.

Critical Overview

Though "The Death of Ivan Ilych" was Tolstoy's first piece of fiction after his spiritual conversion, and many critics have thought his post-conversion writing to be less art and more moralizing, this particular short novel has been respected as an intriguing work. Dennis Vannatta confirms this view when he states that, in "The Death of Ivan Ilych," "the two phases meet in one of the most memorable short stories ever written." This deeply affecting story has been Tolstoy's most-praised post-conversion work, a topic of discussion, along with Tolstoy's other major works, in literary courses and critical discourse. As Edward Wasiolek remarks in *Tolstoy's Major Fiction,* "The story is great enough to support the weight of different critical perspectives. It has the 'transparency' that Roland Barthes has put forth as a mark of the greatest works of literature, permitting us to speak about it with the different critical languages of time, place, and critical intelligence." The fact that "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is still meaningful today and is discussed within modern literary theory once again demonstrates its artistic merit.

The last moments of Ivan Ilych's life seem to be a common focus for many critics. What is the light that Ivan Ilych sees as he is about to die? Most critics agree that after Tolstoy takes such pains in structuring the narrative, demonstrating the pathetic shallowness of Ivan Ilych's existence only after ironically depicting the same shallow attitudes of his colleagues and wife, his last dying moments take on a much more significant meaning than when one first reads of his death through Peter Ivanovich. Irving Halperin traces Ivan Ilych's struggle with death in his essay "The Structural Integrity of 'The Death of Ivan Ilych'"; he describes Ivan's death as "the route of his metamorphosis . . . from despair (the black hole) to love (the son's kiss) to redemption (the light). Thus Ivan Ilych's dialectical direction, so to speak, is from nothingness to meaning: he has learned that the one thing necessary for a man is to be." Dennis Vannatta similarly concludes, "The most somber and forbidding of stories, 'The Death of Ivan Ilych' is also the most optimistic. It shows that a man can live his entire life in darkness but in the final moment be resurrected into the light." Wasiolek comments in *Tolstoy's Major Fiction* that "it is the consciousness and acceptance of death that reveals the significance of life.... Without the consciousness of death, the things themselves become spectral, as indeed they become with Ivan's consciousness of his impending death." By way of contrast, Temira Pachmuss notes in "The Theme of Love and Death in Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilych'" "that despite Ivan Ilych's perception of the mystery of death and his ultimate calm acceptance of it, the whole story reflects an icy coldness." As examples, he cites Gerasim acting only out of moral duty to his master, and not out of sincere love, and Tolstoy's focusing on the emotions and experiences of Ivan Ilych only, as if no other characters mattered. He also claims that Ivan Ilych's dead face fails to evoke pity in those at the funeral service, but rather gives a look of warning. Pachmuss resolves this inconsistency by asserting, "There is no need for us, however, to dwell on Ivan Ilych's facial expression in death as perceived by his relatives and colleagues, for the constructive principle of 'The Death of Ivan Ilych ' requires concentration on the dying man rather than on those who surround him. The high point of the story is undoubtedly Ivan Ilych's discovery of the ultimate reality which is love." Most critics agree that though

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" may seem like a dark and moralizing story, especially when viewed from the context of Tolstoy's religious conversion, it is ultimately a liberating story about the power of love.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Frattarola is a freelance writer and scholar. In the following essay, she discusses characterization and the theme of redemption in the story.

Though "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is an affective text which is still read with enthusiasm today, there are some difficulties which contemporary readers may have with Tolstoy's novella. The character of Ivan Ilych and the shallowness of his colleagues and wife are haunting for any reader. They come alive in their superficiality and their mundane worries. In many ways, these characters can be seen as the norm in our society when viewed through a pessimistic lens. However, Tolstoy does supply his readers with a few minor exceptions among the majority of pathetic characters. It is important to note that Ivan Ilych is depicted as being equally shallow and thoughtless in his "agreeable, easy, and correct" life, of which the reader is informed after reading of his death in the opening sketch. The extreme pervasiveness of characters who are primarily concerned with propriety is interrupted by the introduction of Gerasim and Vladimir. These characters demonstrate deeper emotions than the others and are singled out as being the only characters able to show pity and kindness to Ivan Ilych in his last days of life.

Gerasim is the Russian peasant who acts as Ivan Ilych's sick nurse as he is dying. Ivan Ilych takes much comfort in Gerasim's presence and feels that his healthy and agile body gives him hope. While looking at Gerasim's "sleepy, good-natured face with its prominent cheekbones," Ivan Ilych meditates, "What if my whole life has really been wrong?" This is an example of Tolstoy's often overly romantic and idealized portrait of Gerasim which can grow tiresome to readers who are constantly on the guard against such essentialistic characters. These pure characters frequently fail to be dynamic figures within a text, and merely become stereotypes of an idealized image. Critics have repeatedly noted Gerasim's role in "The Death of Ivan Ilych"; Edward Wasiolek sums up Gerasim's character, "He breathes the health of youth and natural peasant life, lifts up the legs of the dying Ivan Ilych, cleans up after him with good humor, and in general shows him a kind of natural compassion." Irving Halperin echoes these sentiments when he concludes, "because of Gerasim's devotion, Ivan Ilych becomes capable of extending compassion to his wife and son. In this overall perspective, then, Gerasim may be viewed as the true hero of the story." And another critic, Temira Pachmuss, asserts that Gerasim possesses "real humanity" since "Tolstoy thought the instinctive understanding of life and death that enabled Gerasim to do right naturally, to tell the truth, and to feel a deep sympathy for his fellow creatures was a result of Gerasim's natural identification with nature." The recurring portrayal of Gerasim as the healthy and simple Russian peasant, who has more compassion and understanding than all the other socially proper and therefore entirely empty and shallow characters, is often hard to accept because it is too easily interpreted as a black and white photo; these are the "good guys," these are the "bad guys." (It is also essentialistic in that it is like saying that all women understand nature because women are essentially bound to the earth and the body, or that African Americans naturally have "soul.")

This overly simplified and essentialistic stereotype is again found in Vladimir, Ivan Ilych's son. Because Vladimir is a child, he is immediately assumed to be innocent and beyond the socially determined conventions of his mother, sister, and Ivan Ilych's colleagues. This image is too simple, too easy. In such a hauntingly vivid depiction of death, it can be disappointing for a reader to encounter such one-dimensional characters who are supposed to carry heavily essentialistic ideologies: the rough Russian peasant who innately holds an understanding of death and love because he is in tune with nature; the innocent youth who has not yet been corrupted by social convention and is therefore privileged with a more sincere and real love for the dying man. These images allow a reader to fully grasp the intentions of Tolstoy and therefore they are useful. However, their limitations may make Tolstoy a less dynamic writer. These characters are less believable because they are designed to embody all that is good and innocent in "The Death of Ivan Ilych." They represent one side of a dualism, or schism, which Tolstoy perpetuates throughout the text and which serves his purpose—to bring the reader a better understanding of a facet of life which he feels is important.

Regardless of Tolstoy's possible shortcomings in his character development, he is able to present a timeless masterpiece for contemporary readers. Though "The Death of Ivan Ilych" was written after Tolstoy's conversion to radical Christianity and some critics believe that the moralizing of his post-conversion writing detracts from his artistic abilities as a writer, it is because of the message which Tolstoy is striving to convey that "The Death of Ivan Ilych" is so memorable. Even without a belief in God, Tolstoy's message comes across to a reader as a lesson of life. Ivan Ilych is callously treated after his death because that was the attitude which he showed others. It is not until his last days that he is forced to think about his life with an urgency which colors every conscious minute due to the proximity of death. It is within this context that Ivan Ilych ascertains that he most definitely did not live his life as he should have and gets "the sensation one sometimes experiences in a railway carriage when one thinks one is going backwards while one is really going forwards and suddenly becomes aware of the real direction." Tolstoy devotes the text to detailing the reasons why Ivan Ilych and his peers are living within a "falsity," and within a few crucial paragraphs is able to sum up how he rids himself of this "falsity" in his final days. Tolstoy's point is not to taunt a reader and mock the one who realizes only moments before death that he had never lived. Rather, Tolstoy wants the reader to have this realization along with Ivan Ilych so that she/he too may discover the beauty to be found in love before it is too late. The simple concept that one gets back what one gives is the apparent message I find in Tolstoy's novella.

After his death, Ivan Ilych's family and colleagues seem to carry on as if nobody has stopped to think about their lives after the death of their friend. Instead, characters like Peter Ivanovich and Schwartz, Ivan Ilych's co-workers and friends, fight thoughts of death from their minds and are constantly assuring themselves that they are still alive and that it is Ivan Ilych who has died. Praskovya Fedoravna is still preoccupied with her proper role of the grief-stricken widow, the maintenance of their meticulously decorated house, and her financial situation. Tolstoy assures the reader that no one has learned from Ivan Ilych's death; they all continue to live as he once did—shallow yet always correct. This contrast makes the reader conscious that Tolstoy is now pointing to you;

you are the one who should learn from Ivan Ilych's death. Tolstoy's ability to make the reader feel as though he/she is seeing a revelation which no one else can see privileges the reader as the one who can benefit from Ivan Ilych's agony.

Gerasim and Ivan Ilych's son are able to give the dying man love and through experiencing this, he realizes that love is what he must give back. Though some critics believe that the revelation which Ivan Ilych feels in his last moments of life and which allows him to die in peace is an unrealistic hope for most readers, I believe that the existence of such a revelation is exactly Tolstoy's point. Ivan Ilych was lucky in that death fell upon him and he was able to come to this realization of the need for love and compassion in life. We, as readers, can read the story of his death and learn from it what the other characters so obviously miss. In contrast, John Donnelly attests, "[Both] Tolstoy and Ilych (that is, the Ilych in the last two hours of his drawn-out dying period) were much too sanguine about the human condition and the prospects for attaining moral integrity in this life. In short, I believe the Tolstoyan lesson to be drawn from Ilych's dying is not a realistic expectation, although it is devoutly to be wished." This reading seems to neglect the basic lesson behind "The Death of Ivan Ilych," leaving a reader with little else.

Before Tolstoy died, he told his daughter, "The more a man loves, the more real he becomes." This seems to be the overwhelming message of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" also. Tolstoy understood this concept most completely after his spiritual conversion and could not rest until he tried his best to convey it to others through his writing, whether in parables, folk tales, drama, pamphlets, or fiction. Like the look of warning on the dead face of Ivan Ilych which Peter Ivanovich looks down upon, Tolstoy's story communicates a warning of the same message to his readers. Thus, "The Death of Ivan Ilych" can be read repeatedly throughout one's life as one always needs to be reminded, or rather warned, to live and love before death comes.

Source: Angela Frattarola, "An Overview of 'The Death of Ivan Ilych'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Wasiolek offers an overview of Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych," paying particular attention to how Ivan's refusal to accept death affected his life.
"The Death of Ivan Ilych" was Tolstoy's first published work after his conversion. It was written after almost a decade of immersion in theological reflection and writing, and indifference to the writing of fiction. More schematic and deliberate than the early tales, it is more pruned of descriptive and analytic detail. The density of circumstances is largely absent, and it reads like a distillation rather than a representation of life. Disdaining the verisimilitude that such density often confers upon an artistic work, Tolstoy makes his appeal by way of formulaic selection of essential detail. This gives the tale the air of a chronicle or parable. Such a manner could easily lead to abstract moralizing; yet, though the moralizing is there, the details and skeletal action have been so skillfully chosen that the distinctly uncontemporary mode of narration succeeds in an astonishing manner. There is, too, in "The Death of Ivan Ilych"—as there will be in the tales that follow—a punishing quality about Tol-stoy's moral passion. He seems now more certain of the truth—more eager to castigate those who do not live by the truth. These are unpromising attitudes for the production of great art, but Tolstoy does not hesitate to express them. It must be remembered too that these are the years when Tolstoy's views on the uselessness and perniciousness of Western art, his own included, are maturing. The passions for moral truth and pedagogy cannot overcome his art, but they themselves are conquered and turned to the purposes of great art. It is to the art that we must turn in order to see how this had been accomplished.

The art of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" has affected widely diverse audiences and lent itself to various modes of dissection. The story is great enough to support the weight of different critical perspectives. It has the "transparency" that Roland Barthes has put forth as a mark of the greatest works of literature, permitting us to speak about it with the different critical languages of time, place, and critical intelligence. The Freudians, for example, have had little to do with Ivan Ilych, and Tolstoy's narrative manner as well as his philosophical convictions would seem to leave little terrain to work over. Tolstoy abjures ambiguity and symbolization; the intent of the narrative style is to lay everything out as clearly as possible. Nevertheless, Ivan Ilych's life may be described as a system of determined evasions of love, human contact, and self-knowledge. Because he has arranged his life in a rigid, ritualistic manner, it is easily unhinged by unexpected events, however trivial. There is nothing of the flexibility of interaction with reality that is the mark of a healthy man for Freud. Freud spoke of "love and work" as the two qualities of the healthy person. But Ivan Ilych has never learned to love and never learned to love work. He follows his career—in his father's footsteps—as one would a military campaign, with ramparts thrown up to keep him from contact with reality or human emotions, whether those of others or his own. It would take only a shift of vocabulary to see his rigidities and evasions as neurotic flight and defense....

Before Tolstoy gives us the chronicle of Ivan Ilych's life, he tells us what it was worth, how it should be judged. Irony is his weapon of judgment; we know immediately what we are supposed to be for or against. We are supposed to be against the predatory self-

interest barely concealed beneath the routine expressions of condolence. The contrast between the conventional forms and private feeling is something Tolstoy has done many times before, but here he is doing a great deal more. The announcement of Ivan Ilych's death comes in one of those respites from judicial labor that Ivan Ilych loved so much, as is commented on later in the novel—when he was able to smoke, drink tea, talk about politics, general topics and most of all about official appointments. That is, we learn about his death in a situation that recalls one of the pleasures he enjoyed while he was alive, and the scene is the first of a series of identifications by which the life of Ivan Ilych before and after death is compared and analogized. The opening scene which presents Ivan Ilych in death is at the same time a representation of his life.

Tolstoy meticulously re-creates in the opening scene the atmosphere, conditions, values, and modes of behavior by which Ivan Ilych had lived, and the recreation in dramatic form is a judgment on Ivan Ilych in death. Life as Ivan Ilych had lived goes on after he is dead. As Ivan had a passion for bridge, so Pyotr Ivanovich, wearedly performing the duty of paying respects to the dead, hurries away to meet the impish and impious Schwartz for a game of bridge. As Ivan Ilych had taken from Praskovya Fyodorovna only the conveniences of board and room, so Praskovya Fyodorovna in her tearful conversation with Pyotr Ivanovich reveals a predatory concern only with the monetary convenience she can gain from her husband's death. Ivan Ilych had labored to furnish his house with whatnots, antiques, dishes and plates on the walls, and Tolstoy goes to the point—in his recreation of Ivan Ilych's life—of drawing our attention to some of the commodities that had ruled his life and which continue to exist after his death. The room in which Pyotr Ivanovich talks to Praskovya Fyodorovna is filled with furniture and bric-a-brac that Ivan Ilych had collected. Pyotr Ivanovich's attention is explicitly drawn to the upholstered furniture in pink cretonne that Ivan Ilych had consulted him about and to the antique clock that Ivan Ilych had liked so much.

As Ivan Ilych treated people before death, so they treat him after death. The "worth" of his colleagues was their capacity to advance his welfare and his pleasure, and the "worth" of Ivan Ilych in death is the opportunity his passing gives to others to advance their welfare and pleasure. He treated people impersonally and was indifferent to their vital interests. This was most evident in his relationship with his wife, with whom he talked at times only when a third person was present. She pays him back in death. We learn of his death in the opening scene by way of the formal obituary that Praskovya Fyodorovna has written, which Fyodor Vasilievich reads to his colleagues in the judicial chamber. The conventional expression of sorrow in the obituary is the precise correlative, in impersonality, of the actual emotions Praskovya Fyodorovna has toward her deceased husband. The items of description in this opening scene are a duplication of the kinds of feelings, human relationships, and objects in which Ivan Ilych had lived. Tolstoy is saying that Ivan Ilych's life is the ironical factor in his death.

The dramatized beginning casts its shadow over the chronicle that follows. We know that Ivan Ilych's life will be shallow, impersonal. The form of the narration that follows reinforces this judgment. Large blocks of Ivan Ilych's life are expressed in a few paragraphs, and Tolstoy deliberately mixes matters of consequence and inconsequence so as to reduce all the events to a kind of undifferentiated triviality. He tells us, for

example: "The preparations for marriage and the beginning of married life, with its conjugal caresses, the new furniture, new crockery, and new linen, were very pleasant ...," mixing love and furniture in similar grammatical form and brevity. Later, the death of two children is reported in a subordinate clause, while the main clauses are retained for an account of the father's troubles.

The narration of the first seventeen years of Ivan Ilych's married life—an accounting of moves, promotions, successes—reads like an inventory rather than a life. The sameness of the events makes it difficult to remember what is individual, signifi-cant, or striking. Events of a significant personal nature do appear in his life, but Ivan Ilych manages, by adhering closely to the proper and decorous rules of his society, to avoid them. During the first months of her pregnancy, Praskovya Fyodorovna interrupts the even course of properness and pleasantness by irrational bursts of jealousy, by demands for his attention, and by coarse and ill-mannered scenes. But Ivan Ilych evades such pleas for sympathy by spending more time away from her; he evades her pleas as he evades similar pleas of the accused in his courtroom. All this is done in the name of good breeding, conformity to public opinion. The law of the society, to which Ivan Ilych subscribes enthusiastically, is the law of pleasantness and properness. What is disagreeable and improper has no place in this mode of life, and when it obtrudes itself—as had Praskovya Fyodorovna's behavior during pregnancy—it is ignored or relegated to irrationality.

Ivan Ilych's meaningless life takes on meaning only when the disagreeable that intrudes on his life cannot be ignored. When he is passed over for promotion, he is jolted out of mechanical complacency and projected into anger and self-evaluation. By happenstance, this intrusion in his well-planned and decorous life is quickly erased when Ivan Ilych manages to obtain a position better than the one he had been denied. His life resumes its decorous, pleasant course, but another disagreeable event, more fateful than the first, intrudes upon his life. He "falls," and the ambiguity of the word and its biblical connotations were probably intended by Tolstoy. The "fall," to be sure, is appropriately trivial: from a ladder and while he is occupied with the objects that are the explicit badge of his place in society. Ivan Ilych has climbed only as high as the drapery, but the fall is as deep as the abyss of death and the agonies of consciousness before death. This second accident with its attending misery brings Ivan Ilych to a kind of spiritual rebirth, to irritation, reflection, self-evaluation, and finally to an awareness of himself and of others. Little by little the pain, which penetrates his usual activities, excludes him from the unpainful lives of his associates, bringing him to isolation and to confrontation with that isolation. The pain in his side makes him different from others; it individualizes him.

The pain grows to affect his dinner, his bridge, his relations with his wife; it spoils his work and his enjoyment of his furniture. His pleasant, decorous life becomes unpleasant, indecorous. At first it affects only his outer life, but gradually it affects his inner life; it overcomes the resistances of self-satisfaction and self-exoneration and leads him to self-assessment and self-incrimination. Ivan Ilych comes finally to see that his life has been wrong, but he comes first to see that the lives of others are wrong. He notices that no one really cares that he is in pain. They ignore his pain; when they

cannot ignore it, they trivialize it; and when this is no longer possible, they blame him for it. It is Ivan Ilych's pain, not theirs, and they want to be touched by it as little as possible. They give only what they have always given, which is what Ivan Ilych had always given when confronted with someone else's pain and someone else's appeal for compassion and love: pretended compassion and love, that is, the conventional forms of polite interest and concern. As Ivan Ilych earlier defended himself against involvement in his wife's pain by blaming her (she was irrational) and absenting himself, so now Praskovya Fyodorovna defends herself against involvement in his pain by blaming him (he was irrational in not following the doctor's orders) and by absenting herself with her opera, social life, and involvement in her daughter's coming marriage.

To the measure that Ivan Ilych's pain mounts and his behavior becomes disagreeable, the indifference of those about him becomes more determined. The weapons they use to protect themselves against his pain are the weapons that Ivan Ilych used to protect himself from everything unpleasant. Schwartz continues to be impish; the bridge games go on; his wife, daughter, and the daughter's fiance go to the theater and carry on the foolish conversations about art. Indeed, the tempo of enjoyment of those close to him seems to mount in inverse relationship to the increase of his pain. When he is about to lapse into the final day of unceasing pain, the daughter announces her engagement to the young examining magistrate, and the pleasure of Praskovya Fyodorovna and the daughter is at its apex.

Ivan Ilych comes to see their indifference and cruelty and he comes to blame them. He does not blame himself—not, at least, until the very end. Several times during his illness the thought comes to him that perhaps he has not lived his life well, but each time he dismisses the idea as nonsensical. He comes far enough in his forced, slow reassessment to admit that there had been little happiness in his life, and what there has been took place in childhood and has been decreasing ever since. But it is not until his final hours that Ivan Ilych sees the truth of his life. Undoubtedly the struggle he puts up in the black bag is a symbol of the struggle he maintains to justify his life. He slips through the bag and into the light only when, in his final hours, he stops justifying his life and listens, specifically when he himself feels pity for others: first for his son, who has come with eyes swollen with tears, and then for his wife.

It is hard to make artistic sense of Ivan Ilych's conversion, of the symbolism of the black bag, and the truth that he sees in the last moments of his life. The gradual reassessment of the worth of his life that he makes under the bludgeon of pain, the frustrated demands for compassion, the polite indifference to his plight from others, and his terrifying aloneness before impending death are all psychologically believable and well done by Tolstoy. But it is another matter to believe in the "revelation" that Ivan Ilych experiences when he slips through the bag and to believe artistically in a spiritual rebirth.

There is another difficulty, too, present throughout the long ordeal of Ivan Ilych's sickness. Ivan Ilych himself poses the problem one night about a month before his death when, exhausted by pain, he weeps "because of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God." He cries out

to God: "Why hast Thou done all this? Why hast Thou brought me here? Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?" The problem is correctly expressed in his anger against the senselessness of the suffering he undergoes, the lack of proportion between whatever he has done and what he has been forced to suffer, and against the contingency, accidentality, and senselessness of his fate.

If we ask with Ivan Ilych why he had to be bludgeoned by pain, we cannot say it is because he lived his life badly, although Tolstoy seems to be saying that. Even if we suppress the perfectly normal rejoinder that all the others in the society have lived lives just as badly but do not suffer, we still cannot find in any moral calculation a connection between the badly lived life and the physical pain. The life is not that bad, and the pain and terror are too much. The life is too trivial for the pain to be so great. We can make sense of the psychological pain—the loneliness, the suffering from lack of compassion, the humiliation of being treated as a thing by those about him—because these follow on the kind of life that Ivan Ilych has led. The lives of others in the society, like Ivan Ilych's, are trivial and terrifying, for reasons that are artistically believable. But we cannot make sense of the physical pain that Ivan Ilych suffers, nor, for that matter, why he and not others must suffer such pain.

If Tolstoy insists on the psychological suffering that Ivan Ilych undergoes after the "fall," he insists even more crudely on the sheer physical pain that Ivan Ilych endures. The unremitting howling of Ivan Ilych in the last three days of his life is a detail so monstrous that only Tolstoy's art could make it palatable. We know why Ivan Ilych suffers loneliness, fear, anger, resentment, depression after the "fall" but we do not know why he has to die. I believe that Tolstoy is conscious of the gulf between Ivan Ilych's behavior and his fate, and it is precisely the irrationality and the utter inexplicability of the gulf that he wants to express. Death exists, and it is the truth. It is something that Ivan Ilych has not believed in and that the others in his society do not believe in. But it is the reality, nevertheless. The "pain" they so assiduously avoid, of which death is a summation, comes to be referred to as *ona* in Russian ("it" in the feminine gender), that is, both to pain (*bol'*) and death (*smert'*). It is this pain-death that makes Ivan Ilych's former life increasingly spectral, and that unmakes the pleasure he has guided his life by.

I am suggesting that it is the refusal to accept "death" as part of life that leads to the sterility of Ivan Ilych's life and the lives of those about him. Why this is so is something that follows upon Tolstoy's conception of death. The society is built upon a pursuit of well-being and an avoidance of discomfort. "Self-pleasure" is the law of society. The avoidance of "pain" and ultimately death explains the series of abstract and impersonal relations that obtain in the story. One protects oneself from involvement in the pain others suffer by formalizing and thus impersonalizing relations with others.

This process is illustrated in the relations between Ivan Ilych and his wife, in his indifference toward her pain in pregnancy and her later indifference toward his pain in his mysterious illness. Each blames the other. His friends act similarly; they want nothing to do with his pain, and when it obtrudes on their lives, they trivialize it, formalize it, and deny it. Ivan Ilych may be irascible, annoying, and embarrassing, but

he is not dying. They will not accept his pain as part of their lives, nor will they accept his dying.

It is Gerasim alone who acknowledges the truth. He accepts the fact that Ivan Ilych is dying and cheerfully acts to make him comfortable. He breathes the health of youth and natural peasant life, lifts up the legs of the dying Ivan Ilych, cleans up after him with good humor, and in general shows him a kind of natural compassion. Expressly conjoining Gerasim's health and vitality with his acceptance of death, Tolstoy seems to be saying that death and life go together. But it is not immediately clear how they go together.

Death is for Tolstoy the supreme irrational event: an event impervious to human desire, understanding or the manipulation of will. It is also the summation of whatever is disagreeable in life—of every pain, sickness, and accident. Ivan Ilych's plea for justice from a seemingly cruel God may arouse our sympathy, but for Tolstoy the plea is an attempt to bring death into the realm of human understanding. There is no logic to Ivan Ilych's sickness and death, no accounting for the intrusion of such pain into his well-ordered life, and surely none that he rather than someone else be picked out for the special bludgeoning. The fact cannot be understood or justified. But it does make a difference, apparently, whether we acknowledge death. If we ignore it, then our lives are struck with sterility; our relations with others and ourselves become impersonal.

Source: Edward Wasiolek, in *Tolstoy's Major Fiction,* The University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 167-79.

Critical Essay #3

At the time this article was published, Halperin was teaching at San Francisco Stage College. In the following excerpt, he examines the narrative structure of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" and discusses Ivan's emotional transformation in the story.

[The] question may occur—why does the novel open with minor characters on-stage? To begin with, this structural arrangement is in accord with the protagonist's ultimate discovery that the apparent end of human consciousness, death, is in reality the beginning of life. But, more important, if we first witness the actions of some people whose interests and values are very much like those that the dead man subscribed to, the typical values of average men in a quantitatively oriented society, we may more fully grasp the nature of Ivan Ilych's failure as a man. And this is the salient function of Part II —to adumbrate his history of self-deception.

Throughout Part II Ivan Ilych's life is described as filled with duplicity. He married because marriage was considered the "right thing" in his social set. Between husband and wife there had been little human connection; their essential attitude toward each other remained one of deep hostility. For the sake of mutual convenience, they sought to project the appearance of a happy marriage.

From an unhappy marriage, Ivan Ilych retreated into his work; but there, as magistrate, he existed in an equally reprehensible state of falsity. Yet he is not to be criticized, Tolstoy seems to imply, simply for being attached to the baubles and trinkets of professional prestige and gain, but rather because he set himself up over others. Specifically, he did not turn a human face, as it were, toward those who were tried in his court; his most common attitude toward them was one of prideful condescension. Altogether, he prided himself on maintaining a public image of professional incisiveness and coolness.

Ivan Ilych's mask resembles the one worn by his colleagues, Petr Ivanovich and [Schwartz]. All three are self-centered and indifferent to humanity; they wish to lead lives of light-hearted agreeableness and decorum. And viewed within the frame of our larger consideration, the novel's structure, the likeness of the three men constitutes an important functional relationship between Parts I and II.

If it may be held that Part II sketches the lineaments of Ivan Ilych's pride, the key purpose of Part III is to trace his Fall. Just as he chooses to *appear* before others as the prominent public official and the pleasant, well-bred social figure, he needs his house to lend proof to his professional attainments and aesthetic taste. In this perspective, his explosive reactions to the slightest disarrangement in the house's meticulously selected furnishings may be understood. For what is this compulsive orderliness if not the expression of a need to be on guard against the warm, spontaneous feelings of human affection? So it seems ironically fitting that during this cycle of preoccupation with material details (he *had* to show the upholsterer how the curtains were to be draped), Ivan Ilych should suffer the accident which eventually resulted in his death. Accordingly,

his fall was more than from a ladder, but, symbolically, from a pinnacle of pride and vanity. And from this point in Part III to the ending, the novel's narrative focus narrows in proportion to the contracting scope of Ivan Ilych's delusion.

Enter the doctors of Part IV who pursue their profession in much the same way that he does his—from behind well-mannered masks. They appear to be self-assured but will not commit themselves on whether his condition is serious; instead they speculate that the cause of his pain may be a floating kidney or a defective appendix, perfunctorily referring to these organs as though they were separate from his total, sentient nature. The doctors' reluctance to commit themselves on his condition reduces him to a state of helplessness comparable to what, doubtless, was felt by some who had been tried in his court: "he had to live thus all alone on the brink of an abyss, with no one who understood or pitied him."

But if Ivan Ilych is agitated and fearful, at least he is no longer playing at life. Suffering has humanized him; in consequence, he is able to look outside of himself. In contrast to the man of Part III who was obsessed with house furnishings, his chief interest now is in the health and ailments of others.

Until this stage in his illness, Ivan Ilych has continued to hope that he would recover. Therefore, it is the function of Parts V-VI to shock him into emotionally recognizing that death is not simply a commonplace fact, something that happens to everyone—rather *it* is coming to him. Previously, he had manipulated the machinery of marriage and his official duties; but he will be unable to control death; this irrational force is coming to upset his temporal plans. He is especially fearful because dying appears to him to be a revelation of the nothingness of the self, a "dead emptiness" [Dimitri Merejkowski, *Tolstoy as Man and Artist*, 1904]. This awareness drives him into further despair, and yet is a requisite condition for his final illumination: for to the extent that despair scourges him of pride, he is vulnerable to self-scrutiny....

It is immediately significant that Gerasim comes from the country, from the fecund earth [see Charles Neider, *Short Novels of the Masters*, 1948] as contrasted to the sterile urban backgrounds of Ivan Ilych and his colleagues. Gerasim's clothes are clean, neat, and functional: his boots smell of tar and winter air. Thus he is literally and figuratively "a breath of fresh air" in the sick-room. Moreover, honest and self-sacrificing, Gerasim actuates the familiar Tolstoyan principle that the primary purpose of existence is to live for others and not merely, as did Ivan Ilych, to gratify one's own will and desires. He does his work willingly and without lying to his master about the latter's hopeless condition. Hence Ivan Ilych can abandon himself to Gerasim's care, and this is no small act for a man who hitherto had been given to placing himself over others, especially those of lower social stations. Implicit, too, in this relationship between master and servant is the suggestion of a generic interdependence between human beings which transcends considerations of worldly station and rank. Again, because of Gerasim's devotion, Ivan Ilych becomes capable of extending compassion to his wife and son. In this overall perspective, then, Gerasim may be viewed as the true hero of the story.

In Parts VIII and IX, Ivan Ilych is brought a step closer to his most important discovery. What impels him in this direction is the continuing duplicity of the doctors and the obtuseness (e.g., their desertion of him for Sarah Bernhardt's performance) of his family, who look on him with the humiliating pity of the living for the dying. Searching for an explanation to account for his suffering, he reflects on the past, concluding that his life had been going downhill for many years; his marriage, work, and social ties have not satisfied him. Altogether, his existence seems to him in this moment of "ontological shock" to have had no meaning. Only death looms as the *real*. He can not understand why such a meaningless, wretched ending ought to be for one who has conducted his life so properly. "Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?" he complains. "What for?" Yet though Ivan Ilych has begun to pose questions about the past, he nevertheless avoids asking *the* crucial one.

The central effect of his physical and mental anguish in Parts X and XI is to edge him into asking the significant (for the older Tolstoy it was the "obsessive") question—"What if my whole life has really been wrong?" Then Ivan Ilych finally perceives that amid the mechanics of familial, offi-cial, and social functions, he had been estranged from his essential nature, had shrunk from life itself. And though he had been driven by pride and vanity, these motives had not only been condoned but actually praised by his society. Following this admission, he is assailed by extreme torment and self-hatred, because he does not know how, in these last few hours of consciousness, to rectify the falseness of the past.

In Part XII, two hours before his death, he suddenly apprehends the "right thing" to be done. Death is inevitable but a man can choose to die loving instead of hating. The Christian principle of brotherly love, he now feels, as did Pierre in *War and Peace* and Nexljudov in *Resurrection,* is the supreme human value. Here he seems to be in communion with the words Tolstoy himself dictated to his daughter, Aleksandra, a few days before his death—"The more a man loves the more real he becomes."

Acting out of conscious choice, Ivan Ilych gestures to his wife and son to forgive him. Signifi-cantly, this gesture occurs at the moment he feels himself being thrust into a black hole. The point is that grace comes to him only when he is in a state of utter despair. Previously, in Part VII, we have noted this identical pattern of despair followed by grace (Gerasim's help). Now, too, grace comes from the outside in the form of his son's love. Moreover, it is revealing that directly following his son's kiss, Ivan Ilych claims to see a light. For now the route of his metamorphosis becomes clearly visible—from despair (the black hole) to love (the son's kiss) to redemption (the light). Thus Ivan Ilych's dialectical direction, so to speak, is from nothingness to meaning: he has learned that the one thing necessary for a man is to *be.*

Source: Irving Halperin, "The Structural Integrity of 'The Death of Ivan Ilych'," in *Slavic and East European Journal,* Vol. 5, No. 4, Winter, 1961, pp. 334-40.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Pachmuss examines Ivan's transformation from his fear of death to his discovery of love.

Tolstoy described a most terrifying agony in "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" Ivan Ilyich also lived a false life, filled with lies and artificially multiplied needs. All his colleagues liked him, and yet, on receiving the news of his death, their first thoughts were of the changes and promotions it might occasion among themselves or their acquaintances. They gave no thought to the deceased himself, who had but recently lived among them. Even in the beginning of the work we may conjecture from Ivan Ilyich's feeling of loneliness that the sense of isolation while dying horrified Tolstoy as much as the thought of death itself. This isolation, the novelist warns, influences man's relationship with nature, which includes not only his life but his death. Affected by "civilization," Ivan Ilyich had escaped real life and failed to see his inner loneliness. He was completely absorbed in self, and this absorption, in turn, intensified the feeling of solitude he experienced at the approach of death. The very basis of Ivan Ilyich's relationship with nature was corrupt; however, although able to escape real life, he could not escape death.

We find the consciousness of this loneliness at the moment of dying not only in the works of Tolstoy but also in many other writings, such as the English morality play *Everyman* and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's adaptation *Jedermann*. When Everyman felt the approach of death, he sought desperately to find a companion for his last journey, and when he failed to do so, he was overwhelmed by despair at his terrible loneliness. A man like Ivan Ilyich, who during his life had no real contact with his closest relatives and was so alienated from nature that he could place no trust in it, had to experience his separateness in full measure. This same loneliness made him while dying want to weep: ". . . he wished most of all for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied. He longed to be petted and comforted." As soon as he knew that death was approaching him, he felt "a loneliness, in the midst of a populous town and surrounded by numerous acquaintances and relations, yet which could not have been more complete anywhere—either at the bottom of the sea or under the earth." He wanted to be loved and to be pitied; he wanted others to feel and share his distress and sorrow: "And he had to live thus all alone on the brink of an abyss, while no one understood or pitied him." He remained alone with death: "And nothing could be done with it except to look at it and shudder." "He wept on account of this terrible loneliness . . . and the absence of God." Slowly Ivan Ilyich came to understand that loneliness had always been around him, but he had been blind to it because of his false ideas of life. He had always lived for himself alone, near his fellow creatures, yet never in real community with them. Tolstoy called these wrong ideas of life "falsity," describing "the approach of that ever-dreaded and hateful death which was the only reality, and always the same falsity." This "falsity," in Tolstoy's opinion, sprang from man's overrating himself. Ivan Ilyich's approach to life had always been completely egocentric; he considered his existence the center of the universe, never being able to understand that he, as a human being, was just a small particle in nature. His individualistic outlook was the trap in which he remained all his life. "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," argued Ivan Ilyich.

"That Caius—man in general—was mortal was completely correct, but he wasn't Caius, not man in general, but a creature quite, quite different from all others."

This attitude was the reason why only "I" had meaning for Ivan Ilyich, never "you." As a result, his whole life was filled with unceasing care for himself and his own comfort, and this attitude even characterized his family life. He cared for his own feelings, never for those of his wife. Even the death of his children meant nothing more to him than an inconvenience. He always did what was considered decorous in his circle, yet always managed to connect what was considered necessary for "decorum" with what was pleasant for himself. Living this kind of life, Ivan Ilyich naturally lacked all sense of humility. He liked the feeling of possessing the power of crushing at his will people dependent on him, and yet, at the same time, it pleased him to think of himself as a generous and kind man. He deceived one feeling with another: he wanted as a *comme il faut* and decorous man to display his love and kindness toward human beings, but at the same time he was not prepared to renounce the heady feeling of possessing authority. Thus his kindness, all the enjoyments of his business and private life, his love for his wife and children, all these were falsity—the feeling that originated in his false attitude toward himself. All the people around him also lived the same kind of life and were involved in this same pretense. Like Ivan Ilyich, they accepted falsity as reality: ". . . I and all my friends felt that our case was quite different from that of Caius." In Tolstoy's words, "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary, and therefore most terrible." Tolstoy's words may seem paradoxical, but it was Ivan Ilyich and his associates who considered their lives to be simple and ordinary, and the very fact that their twisted and distorted lives should seem ordinary to themselves was in itself terrible.

Ivan Ilyich's physical sufferings were insignificant compared with his spiritual pain, which enabled him gradually to understand the complete falsity of his simple, ordinary, and therefore terrible life. While he lay dying he saw truth slowly supplanting falsity, yet all living people still kept on lying. Even in the presence of death they still lived in accordance with decorum, the master he had served all his life. His wife simulated sympathy and care for him because these belonged to that decorum; but now Ivan Ilyich was sick of falsity, and "while his wife was kissing him he hated her from the bottom of his soul and with difficulty refrained from pushing her away." "Those lies—lies enacted over him on the eve of his death and destined to degrade this awful, solemn act to the level of their visits, their curtains, their sturgeon for dinner—were a terrible agony for Ivan Ilyich," because now he understood that all their interests and enjoyments, which he had shared while healthy, were nothing but illusions created by his selfishness. With this discovery, life appeared unreal, in contrast to which stood death, the only reality, about which there could be no mistake: ". . . the approach of that ever-dreaded and hateful death which was the only reality, and always the same falsity."

Ivan Ilyich gained comfort only through his contact with Gerasim. Gerasim, a fresh peasant lad, knew nothing of the pretenses of the "civilized" life Ivan Ilyich had lived before his malady; on the contrary, his life had been more real because he sensed his minute part in the universe, that he was a human being just as any other human being. Because of his real humility he alone was able to grasp Ivan Ilyich's position: "We shall

all of us die," said he, "so why should I grudge a little trouble?" Death was to him not only inevitable but also natural; he did not fear his dying master, and so Ivan Ilyich felt at ease only with him. Gerasim's assistance to him was not an act of hypocrisy; it was not burdensome work at all, but a service to life. Tolstoy thought the instinctive understanding of life and death that enabled Gerasim to do right naturally, to tell the truth, and to feel a deep sympathy for his fellow creatures was a result of Gerasim's identification with nature. His closeness to nature enabled him to live a life which, being foreordained by God, stood in striking opposition to Ivan Ilyich's life corrupted by culture and civilization. Culture and civilization were the poisons that filled Ivan Ilyich's soul and body all his life and became evident only through his malady and the torments caused by the prospect of death. "Ivan Ilyich was left alone with the consciousness that his life was poisoned and was poisoning the lives of others, and that this poison did not weaken but penetrated more and more deeply into his whole being."

It was love that Ivan Ilyich experienced after the realization of his guilt and the purification of his soul, and it was this love that enabled Ivan Ilyich to face death without fear. His pity for his family was part of his new relation to people—free of egotism and selfishness. "Love is the sole medicine against death," Unamuno maintained [Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 1954], insisting, like Tolstoy or Thomas Mann, on the interrelation between love and death. Elsewhere in Tolstoy's works we find this feeling of love experienced by dying people. However, the sequence of the stages of death is somewhat vague, or perhaps is represented as just one step, including all three in one. At the time of writing *Three Deaths*, Tolstoy, it seems, lacked the spiritual maturity which permeates "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," written some thirty years later.

Love is ultimate reality—this is Tolstoy's conclusion. As opposed to the primitive man, the "civilized" individual becomes a part of the harmonious whole only through death, or, during life, through love. Without love, Ivan Ilyich's life was empty and meaningless. With the discovery of love, Ivan Ilyich felt that his death was reduced to insignificance. He was allowed to become a part of the unity of the whole, an experience he described with the words: "Death is all over. It is no more."

It is, however, striking to note that despite Ivan Ilyich's perception of the mystery of death and his ultimate calm acceptance of it, the whole story reflects an icy coldness. Even kind and understanding Gerasim acts out of a sense of moral duty rather than from real love. Furthermore, Tolstoy is concerned here only with Ivan Ilyich; no one else matters. Ivan Ilyich's painful experience is over; his dead face does not express any pity for those who survive him, but a reproach and a warning. It seems that he has slipped back into his former remoteness from the world of mortals, of the Caiuses, those frightened and confused people who came to bid farewell to his coffin. There is no need for us, however, to dwell on Ivan Ilyich's facial expression in death as perceived by his relatives and colleagues, for the constructive principle of "The Death of Ivan Ilych" requires concentration on the dying man rather than on those who surround him. The high point of the story is undoubtedly Ivan Ilyich's discovery of the ultimate reality which is love.

Source: Temira Pachmuss, "The Theme of Love and Death in Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich'," in *American Slavic and East European Review,* Vol. XX, No. 1, February, 1961, pp. 72-83.

Adaptations

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" was adapted for the stage by Myrtle Pihlman Pope and published by Stephen F. Austin State College in 1958.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the philosophical attitudes of Leo Tol-stoy's contemporaries on death. Was a fear of death and its implications for a meaningless or more meaningful life a common preoccupation during the time Tolstoy was writing? What ideas of death are made more lucid in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych" which where also being explored by contemporary philosophers?

Explore Tolstoy's ideas about social conventions and their effect on human development in comparison with Franz Kafka's portrayal of Gregor in "The Metamorphosis." Could any of Freud's works elucidate what these authors are trying to convey?

Are Tolstoy's allusions to religious ideologies in "The Death of Ivan Ilych" (such as his use of Ivan Ilych's fatal fall and the Biblical fall, and his reference to Ivan seeing the light before he dies) too dependent on a framework which has faith in God? Do Tolstoy's religious undertones detract from the narrative of Ivan's death?

Compare and Contrast

1900s: People in developed countries often die in their own homes before 50 years of age, following a brief illness. Families often gather around the deathbed, a ritual in which much importance is placed on the dying person preparing for death.

1990s: Most people in industrialized countries die after age 65. The average person spends about 80 days in a hospital or nursing home during the last years of life.

1882: Tolstoy publishes *A Confession,* in which he documents his spiritual crisis and repudiates much of his earlier work. He undergoes a radical religious conversion which greatly influences his subsequent works.

1990s: *The Celestine Prophecy,* by James Red-field, predicts a spiritual renaissance and renews interest in spiritual matters for many readers.

1800s: Social conventions discourage unhappy couples from divorcing. Divorce is frowned upon and even illegal in many nations.

1990s: Statistics show that more than half of all marriages end in divorce.

What Do I Read Next?

In Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1891), Peyton Farquhar is about to be hanged from a bridge because of a military crime. The rope breaks, he escapes by swimming away, and he reviews the events of his life—all in a hallucination in the instant before his death.

In Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), Louise Mallard receives news that her husband has died in a train wreck. Tearlessly, she retreats to her room and reviews the course of her married life. She comes to recognize that she has gained great personal freedom with his death. When her husband suddenly walks in the door—he was not on the train after all—she drops dead. Her family and physician assume she died of joy.

"The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka, published in 1937, depicts the transformation of Gregor Samsa from a responsible young man to a bug. Kafka's emotional portrayal of Gregor and his family create insight on the facade of social propriety and one's need to escape the dominating roles of society.

In Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town,* written in 1938, the central character, called the Stage Manager, reviews the histories of the lives of various inhabitants of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire.

Joan Didion's "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," published in 1966, mingles fact and fiction. It is the real account of a real woman, Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller. However her story is told through Didion's narrative and her notion that life can become superficial without a hint of the forbidden.

Trainspotting, published in 1993 by Irvine Welsh is a collection of short stories recounting the revelries and derelict antics of a group of boys in Edinburgh doing everything in their power to not fall victim to "growing up."

Further Study

Citati, Pietro. *Tolstoy,* Schocken Books, 265 p.

Examines Tolstoy's life and works, with sections specifically addressing his short fiction.

Magarshack, David. Afterword to *"The Death of Ivan Ilych,"* New American Library, 1960, pp. 295- 304.

Discusses the story focusing on the circumstances under which it was written and the extensive revision process Tolstoy employed.

Maude, Aylmer. Preface to *"Ivan Ilych," "Hadji Murad," and Other Stories,* Oxford University Press, 1935, pp. vii-xiv.

Introduces the story, describing the actual events from which it originated.

Olney, James. "Experience, Metaphor, and Meaning: 'The Death of Ivan Ilych'," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* Vol. 31, No. 1, Fall, 1972, pp. 101-14.

Olney suggests that it is the innocence of the characters Gerasim and Vasya in Tolstoy's " Ivan Ilych" that leads Ivan to the realization of divine love.

Rowe, William W. *Leo Tolstoy,* Twayne, 1986, 143 p.

Biographical and critical study with sections devoted to Tolstoy's short fiction.

Simmons, Ernest J. Introduction to *Leo Tolstoy: Short Novels,* Modern Library, 1965, pp. v-xv.

Examines Tolstoy's short stories, citing them as examples of his realism and as forerunners to his novels.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535