Rhea Blasdel

The Catalyst of Death: Illusions of Life Dispelled in The Death of Ivan Ilych

Lev Tolstoy wrote The Death of Ivan Ilych after his famous spiritual crisis and subsequent conversion. He wrote the novella in an effort to show a broad audience that the meaning of life lay not in material well-being, but in spiritual pursuits. The Death of Ivan Ilych is a tale of intense spiritual awakening within Ivan Ilych where he becomes aware of the speciousness that ruled the actions of his life; by the conclusion of the novella he realizes a newfound potential for love, compassion, and most of all, sincerity and meaning in life. Ivan Ilych faces the reality of his death with only the simple, kind support of his servant Gerasim, who represents in this story the truest qualities of a life well-lived. Ivan Ilych must come to accept the fact that he is dying and, for the first time in his life, turn inward for spiritual guidance through his journey.

The reader is introduced to Ivan Ilych at a distance through his coworkers, and introduced to his death by way of the Gazette. Piotr Ivanovich, leafing through the fresh periodical, discovers the obituary: "‘It is with deep regret that Praskovya Feodorovna Golovina informs relatives and friends of the death of her beloved husband, Ivan Ilych Golovin…’" (Tolstoy 3). This removed introduction through his peers serves a distinct purpose, emphasizing to what degree Ivan Ilych’s life was centered around work. Ivan Ilych has always been “drawn—as a fly to bright light—to those in the highest circles” (12). His increased involvement with work, and consequently his withdrawal from home life, stemmed from the fact that “the more irritating and demanding his wife became, the more Ivan Ilych transferred the center of gravity of his life to his official duties” (17). The falseness in Ivan Ilych’s life is due to his ethical views being influenced by his superiors:
“There were some things he did [...] that had previously seemed pretty despicable to him and had aroused a strong sense of self loathing in him. Subsequently, seeing comparable behavior in people of the highest standing who thought nothing of it, he began to feel that what he had done was not exactly good but was certainly not worth remembering [...]” (12).

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Ivan Ilych carried out many actions based solely on the notion of what society deemed appropriate. Another illustration of Ivan Ilych’s concern with appearance can be found in his reason for deciding to marry Praskovya Feodorovna: “he was doing what his superiors thought was the right thing to do” (15). By the end of the third chapter, Ivan Ilych manages to side-step each inconvenience and minor disturbance, and through these movements further isolates himself. As Gary Jahn observes:

Ivan Ilych has in fact attained this ideal form of life; he has successfully ignored every warning life has sent him over the years, including the randomly produced basis of his current success, in order to believe in the solidity of the life he believes he has created for himself (48).

It is clear in the text that “Ivan Ilych was a past master at this art of isolating his professional life, not allowing it to mix with his real life” (Tolstoy 23). It was not long after marriage that Ivan Ilych discovered that matrimony was complicated, and “he must work out a definite approach to married life just as he had done for his official life” (17). As time drew on, his wife became increasingly more querulous, “but the approach Ivan Ilych had evolved to family life made him almost impervious to her scenes” (17). His attachment to the view that his life has been appropriate blocks Ivan Ilych from truly living; his avoidance of discomfort leads only to a growing lack of vitality. The deterioration of Ivan Ilych’s home-life, which operates solely on a
superficial level, juxtaposed with his lack of vitality in his work, previously described by Tolstoy as an escape from home, demonstrates the falseness upon which Ivan Ilych’s life is built.

The apathy toward Ivan Ilych’s death held first by his coworkers and then his wife is significant because their attitudes to his death echo his attitudes to his own life. Upon receiving the news of Ivan Ilych’s death, “the first thought of [his colleagues] was how this might affect their own relocations and promotions, and those of their friends” (3). Moreover, hoping to “get money out of the Treasury on her husband’s death” (9), Praskovya Feodorovna recounts the final days to Piotr Ivanovich, Ivan Ilych’s closest friend: “For three days on end he screamed without stopping. It was unbearable. I can’t understand how I survived it; he could be heard three rooms off, even with the doors closed. My God, how I suffered!” (8). That his own wife views Ivan Ilych’s own suffering as something he is doing to her and as a burden shows the extent to which Ivan Ilych’s life is poisoned by self-centeredness. The most significant representative of this egoism is Ivan Ilych’s coworker and friend, Shwartz; his name, meaning “black” in German, signals that he represents the lack of light and life in The Death of Ivan Ilych and, consequently, in the materialistic gentry. At the very moment when Piotr Ivanovich becomes disturbed by death at Ivan Ilych’s funeral, the playful look on Shwartz’ face prevents Piotr Ivanovich from literally looking death in the face. Again at the funeral, “Schwartz stopped and winked at [Piotr Ivanovich] from the top step, suggesting, as it were, ‘Ivan Ilych has made a real mess of things, not like you or me’” (5). Shwartz is quick to make light of the grievous situation and disregards the funeral as trivial as he runs off to his card game.

As Ivan Ilych is coming to terms with his death, he recounts his life, seeking moments of true, pure happiness:
And again, the further back he went, the more life there was. There was more kindness in his life, and more of life itself. And the one thing and the other ran into each other. “Just as my suffering grows worse and worse now, so the whole of my life went worse and worse,” he thought (54).

Though Ivan Ilych fundamentally seems to recognize the error of his ways, he is quick to use logic and determine that he cannot accept that his proper and correct life was anything except comme il faut; he tells himself “it would be quite impossible,” and “compressing his lips in an ironic smile, as though someone could see it and be taken in by it. ‘There is no explanation! Suffering, death…for what?’” (54).

It is not until Ivan Ilych’s illness is well underway, when he needs help with the most personal duties, that a glimmer of hope emerges. Of peasant descent, Gerasim is seemingly unimportant in the world of the gentry, but the qualities of life he represents play a crucial role in Ivan Ilych’s metaphysical awakening. The full significance of Gerasim’s statement in chapter one, “We’ll all come to that” (10), directed toward Piotr Ivanovich at Ivan Ilych’s funeral, and his essential role in Ivan Ilych’s transformation are not fully realized until much later. Harriet Hustis recognizes Gerasim as a catalyst for change. “Gerasim transcends his social function as servant when he takes upon himself the additional, unpleasant duties of tending to the dying Ivan Ilych” (271). While health and vitality within others tends to infuriate Ivan Ilych because they stand in stark contrast to his ebbing life force, in Gerasim these qualities take on a new meaning: “[Ivan Ilych] was offended by health, strength, and good spirits in everyone else, but Gerasim’s strength and cheerfulness soothed him rather than hurt him.” (Tolstoy 42) The strength attributed to Gerasim here can be interpreted as not only the physical strength of a young peasant, but also the spiritual and emotional strength he exemplifies in his interactions with Ivan
Ilych. It is when Ivan Ilych realizes that “he suffered most of all from lies” (42) that Gerasim’s honesty shines through. The lie that begins when Ivan Ilych asks the first doctor seen “‘By and large, is it a dangerous illness or not?’” (27), a question which is altogether dismissed by the eminent physician, is a lie of which Gerasim is unable to and refuses to partake; this is made obvious when he tells Ivan Ilych, “We’ll all go someday. Why not take a little trouble?” (42)

The qualities attributed to Gerasim are positive and unique to him: honest, fresh and strong; he is referred to with light imagery several times (as opposed to the darkness found in Shwartz), which can be interpreted as goodness and purity. “He was always bright and cheerful” and he “beamed with white young teeth and bright eyes” (40). That a peasant is Ivan Ilych’s savior comes as no surprise to those familiar with Tolstoy’s distaste for materialism: to Tolstoy, the peasant represents a vital connection to nature, which is critical for spiritual strength. It is through Gerasim’s simple, earthy nature that spiritual renewal is possible for Ivan Ilych.

Upon Gerasim’s later, more significant, appearance in the novella, Ivan Ilych is shown that pain and suffering are means for enlightenment; it is through facing his pain that Ivan Ilych awakens. This path is presented to Ivan Ilych soon after a seemingly insignificant fall while decorating his apartment, but he chooses to push it away: “The pain grew no less, but Ivan Ilych made great efforts forcibly that he felt better” (29). He tried to pretend all was well, and as soon as things did not go his way “he raged against the mishap or the people responsible for it who were killing him, and he could feel his own anger killing him but he was unable to restrain himself” (29). Thus the pain reached a point such that “he could not deceive himself: something terrifying, new, and incomparably significant—more significant than anything in Ivan Ilych’s previous life—was taking place inside him” (30). Although Gerasim was invaluable to Ivan Ilych on his path to enlightenment, Ivan Ilych ultimately had to achieve an awakening alone.
The irony contained in the title and story of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is that spiritual awakening is occurring at the exact moments of physical decay and death. Ivan Ilych’s physical existence was riddled with materialistic trivialities, such as the obsession with decorating his apartment which lead to his fall and illness, and lacked the substance required for true happiness and a meaningful life. We know from the text that for at least 60 days he is in confrontation with his death, and in isolation he finally reaches truth within himself: “It’s not a matter of the blind gut or the kidney but of life and…death. Yes, there was life and now it’s going, it’s going and I can’t hold it back. Yes. Why should I deceive myself?” (35).

Overwhelmingly so, this is a story of transcendence. There is a subtle hint in chapter two (in the description of Ivan Ilych’s childhood and upbringing) where he is given the title of “*le phenix de la famille*” (11). Mythically, the phoenix is a bird which rises from ash as an emblem of hope and renewal. Based on the description of Ivan Ilych, a life riddled with banalities and aspirations to “pleasantness,” it seems inapt to call him a phoenix. This strong imagery points to the paradigm shift that occurs in Ivan Ilych in his last moments of life, when he is redeemed by a rebirth, an awakening. It is at the apex of the intensity of his pain that Ivan Ilych is at last able to experience compassion:

> It was just as this point that Ivan Ilych fell through, saw the glimmer of light, and it became clear to him that his life had not been what it should have been, but that it could still be put right. He asked himself, what is *it*, and fell still, listening. Here he felt someone kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and glanced at his son. He felt sorry for him. His wife came up to him. He glanced at her. She was gazing at him with a look of despair on her face, her mouth open, unwiped tears on her nose and cheeks. He felt sorry for her (58).
Once he is able to feel compassion for his son and his wife, he then wants to ask their forgiveness but he does not have the strength to say this clearly in words. Suddenly, what has been exhausting him is “falling away on two sides, on ten sides, on all sides,” (58) and he is sorry for them and wants to end their suffering. Ivan Ilych has reached the crux of his transformation, and the sympathy he has for those around and the full realization of his own death allow him to die.

It is not until this conclusion that Ivan Ilych is able to fully comprehend that he never lead a “real” life, and that the final hours of his physical existence contained more significance and genuine humanity than all of the preceding 45 years had held. The metaphysical existence discovered by Ivan Ilych on his death bed holds far more meaning for him in the end, and for the reader, than his former life of propriety. While Ivan Ilych lived his life solely for selfish purposes, his initial struggle with death and his inability to let go are of a similarly selfish nature. It is not until he considers that others are suffering because of him and that he is causing himself to suffer as well that he sees clearly the way to free them all is through his acceptance of death. It is through the protagonist’s journey in accepting death that Tolstoy is able to show his audience that meaning in life is more easily attained when materialistic illusions are dispelled.
Works Cited

