

A Moment of Reckoning: How “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” Redefines Life and Loss

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Mount Everest, the Burj Khalifa, Hyperion: because of their tall stature, people associate these monuments with power, grandeur, and status. These monuments' high stature suggests that not only is being tall a good quality, but so is being taller; hence why heaven is above the sky, and hell is below the ground. Height, it seems, is a matter of relativity. Being a little higher means being a little better, and being a lot higher means being a lot better—or stronger, faster, smarter, successful. But height's relativity also casts doubt on its legitimacy—not only on that of its literal being, but also its significance. Is something actually tall, or is it just tall compared to something else? If height is all a matter of perspective, how can you draw any absolute conclusions about its symbolism? Your deductions may be tainted by self-deception. Something may seem tall to you only because it's next to something short.

In his novella “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” Leo Tolstoy wrestles with the traditional notion of tragedy as a fall from height. Though Ivan's fall off a ladder results in his death, it is hardly his demise. By reckoning with his illness and impending death, he comes to realize what actually matters in life: love and appreciation for meaningful relationships, such as those with Gerasim and his son. This liberates him from his selfishness. Ultimately, Ivan's fall reveals that height is an illusion, suggesting that death is not only humbling as the great equalizer, but a means of making our lives meaningful—contrary to conventional wisdom, which claims that we do so by living, not dying.

Before Ivan falls ill, in the beginning of the story Tolstoy uses the discourse of height and distance to highlight Ivan's shallow values and preoccupation with

power and social status. For example, Tolstoy writes that “estrangement” is the “goal of [Ivan’s] activity in [his] family” because of how unpleasant he finds spending time with them to be (Tolstoy et al. 53). Work “was rather a cause for joy” which “filled his life” (Tolstoy et al. 53). The pleasure Ivan derives from doing “his work” stems from “the consciousness of his power, the possibility of destroying any man he wanted to destroy,” and “his importance” (Tolstoy et al. 53). Thus, Ivan gets off not only on his self-importance but also by putting others down, in turn lifting himself up and further inflating his ego (not to mention, the cost of his absence to his family). Tolstoy suggests that Ivan has long been power-hungry, writing that “from the earliest age [Ivan] had had this quality of being drawn, as a fly is to light, to the most highly placed people in society, of adopting their manners, their views of life and of establishing friendly relations with them” (Tolstoy et al. 47–48). His comparison of Ivan to a fly buzzing toward the light is rich with symbolism. Flies connote death, disease, and sickness; moreover, as pests, they are killed often, and easily. Just as a fly’s attraction to the light proves often fatal, Ivan’s fall off a ladder ultimately kills him. Symbolically, this reflects Tolstoy’s criticism of Ivan’s attempt to climb up the social ladder of 19th-century aristocratic Russian society. Ivan has long attempted to move into a higher social class, befriending those above him by mimicking their behavior. Yet, the comparison of his ambitions to that of a fly buzzing through the air—headed towards the deadly light—foreshadows his own death.

During a visit to the doctor’s office after his fall, Ivan begins to realize the falseness of his life’s philosophy. As a sick patient, Ivan has only one question: “[is] his condition dangerous or not?” (Tolstoy et al. 63). To Ivan, all that matters is the simple, straightforward, yes-or-no answer to that question. However, his doctor has other intentions. Determined to perform his official work duties in the professional, socially acceptable manner society expects of him, Ivan’s doctor

neglects his needs. Ivan is subject to “the waiting and the doctor’s assumed pompousness...and the tapping and the auscultation and the questions requiring predetermined and clearly unnecessary answers” (Tolstoy et al. 62). In other words, the doctor follows the respectable social graces, niceties, and etiquette associated with his profession, maintaining proper bedside manner throughout Ivan’s appointment, even though his overwrought behavior results in poor patient satisfaction. Ivan recognizes that he behaves similarly in his own work, too: “all this was just exactly what Ivan Ilyich himself had performed as brilliantly a thousand times over the accused” in court (Tolstoy et al. 62). However, this kind of performative behavior is problematic because during the appointment, the doctor tries to impress upon Ivan that “[he’ll] fix everything” (Tolstoy et al. 62). By downplaying the severity of Ivan’s illness, the doctor lies. Thus, Tolstoy reveals the bankruptcy of the doctor’s “performance,” with that very word casting doubt on the legitimacy of the doctor’s power. If it’s all just an act, doesn’t that render everything he does insignificant? In this moment, Ivan realizes that the same power he held in his work—which the doctor now holds over him as he “[glances] over his spectacles at the accused” (meaning at Ivan)—is meaningless, inflated with a hollow air of lawfulness, correctness, and decorum (which characterized not only Ivan’s work, but the way he went about living his entire life, dismissing his family, seeking greater social status, etc.). It doesn’t matter that the “doctor performed his summing-up brilliantly, triumphantly, even cheerfully”; despite how good he is at putting on an act, his behavior serves no meaningful purpose. Even the spectacles he wears seem to be for show. As a symbol of perception, glasses typically improve vision, providing clarity. However, the doctor looks at Ivan “over” them, not through them. This highlights the irony of the doctor’s pretense, made even more ironic by the fact that it is his falseness that provokes Ivan’s clarity.

Tolstoy also dismantles deceptive power relations in his portrayal of Ivan's relationship with Gerasim, who helps relieve Ivan's pain by holding Ivan's legs over his shoulders. Though Gerasim, a poor peasant, is financially bound to Ivan, he chooses to hold Ivan's legs "willingly, simply, and with a kindness that moved Ivan" (Tolstoy et al. 75). Offering this physical support simply out of goodwill, Gerasim also acts as an emotional resource for Ivan, serving as a source of strength and comfort that consoles Ivan in his time of need (much in contrast to the doctor, who fails to alleviate Ivan's anxieties). In this way, Ivan comes to appreciate intimate connections with others; whereas "health, strength," and "vigor of life in all other people offended Ivan...Gerasim's strength and vigor of life did not distress but soothed him" (Tolstoy et al. 75). Ivan is also drawn to Gerasim's honesty, a stark contrast to everyone else's minimization of his illness. Ivan is tormented by how everyone else acts as if "he was merely ill and not dying," not "wanting to acknowledge what they all knew and he knew"—the harsh reality of his suffering and imminent death—which they see as "an accidental unpleasantness" and "partly an indecency" that taints the clean air of the social circles in which they operate (Tolstoy et al. 75). Ivan's condemnation of how everyone else disparages his dying "in the name of that very 'decency' he had served all his life" reveals his change in perspective since falling ill (Tolstoy et al. 75). No longer subscribing to the false obligations of decency and decorum he thought were required in work and social life, he has been liberated from the pressure to live his life with such frivolity. Though the life he spent climbing up the social ladder—and fatal fall off of a literal one—is sunk time, he is still able to bond with Gerasim at the end of his life. Making this genuine human connection helps him become less self-centered and gives his life meaning. Similarly, the end of Ivan's life also reveals a shift in his family relations. Whereas Ivan previously believed in the "estrangement" of family life with "his goal [consisting] in freeing

himself more and more from” their “unpleasantness” by “spending less and less time with his family,” in the final moments of his life he shows his family love (Tolstoy et al. 53). Despite being in pain, he allows his son to hold and kiss his hand (Tolstoy et al. 91), demonstrating that he is capable of giving and receiving love, thus indicating a shift from his previously selfish ways. Instead of being isolated and self-absorbed, he comes to derive meaning in his life through love, thereby truly “freeing himself.”

Ultimately, Tolstoy uses Ivan’s descent into disease to make a social critique of the frivolity and shallowness of aristocratic social life and the selfishness and self-absorption it encourages. However, killing Ivan is not a punishment, but a blessing in disguise. Grappling with his illness and approaching death prompts Ivan to re-examine his values and philosophies about life, giving him the opportunity to intimately connect with others and find true meaning in life through the process of death itself. While many might consider Ivan’s life a waste given what it took for him to experience love, find clarity, and achieve liberation from his selfishness, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” reveals that sometimes, it is actually through death that we live.

Works Cited

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