

## The Rebirth of Ivan Ilyich

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* begins with the death of its main character, a man who is thoroughly unimaginative, small-minded, self-centered, and who has devoted his entire existence to comfort and conformity. How is it that out of such unpromising materials Leo Tolstoy was able to fashion one of the greatest novellas in all of world literature?

In line with Tolstoy's larger purposes, the first chapter does little to prepare us for what is to follow, a powerful examination of the most profound questions of human existence. We smile at the satirical presentation of human nature, as Ivan Ilyich's friends and colleagues, and even his widow, are affected by his death largely in terms of its interference with their pleasures and comforts. There are troubling hints—Ivan Ilyich in his coffin, with his “expression a reproach or a reminder to the living;” Ivan Ilyich's son, whose “eyes were red from crying”—but their significance will not become fully clear until the end of the book.

With the onset of his illness, things begin to change for Ivan Ilyich, but it is a long and painful—and thus very realistically portrayed—process. He notices that the doctors treat him with the same indifference with which he had treated prisoners in court, but his sense of the injustice of his being treated this way does not lead him to re-examine his own previous behavior. He accepts the fact of human mortality in the abstract, as shown in the syllogism of Caius, but he strenuously resists its application to himself. When he does accept the fact that he is dying, he bitterly resents the refusal of his friends and family to openly acknowledge it,

but he cannot see that their attitude proceeds from the very same values that he has lived by all his life and still refuses to reject.

In the brief but devastating final chapter, Ivan Ilyich arrives, both physically and spiritually, at the end of his journey. At the conclusion of the previous chapter, the gnawing voice within him could no longer be denied, and he surrendered to the awareness that he had wasted his life. His first reaction is terror and despair, for now he has nothing—not only nothing to show for his forty-five years upon the earth, but also nothing to sustain him in his final agony. It is only when he feels his son kiss his hand that he fully experiences the true meaning of life—honest emotion and genuine caring for others—and he can triumph over death and fall into the light.

We are never in suspense about what is going to happen. The first page—the title itself—has told us that. But a much more significant suspense has carried us to the end—how (not physically, but emotionally and spiritually) will Ivan Ilyich die, and what will be the meaning of his life and death? In the end, Ivan Ilyich achieves the status of a true Everyman, not only because death will come to us all, but on a much deeper level. As harrowing as the conclusion of the novella is, it is also hopeful: if even so thoroughly commonplace a person as Ivan Ilyich can see the truth at last and find peace and salvation, then there is hope for everyone.