

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novella. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novella.

Leo Tolstoy was born into an aristocratic family. He lived like many other young men of his class, enjoying the privileges of wealth and rank while indulging in the pleasures of youth. Yet, unlike many others of his class, Tolstoy had a reformer's spirit and a puritan conscience. In the years before he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, his inner tensions led him to a spiritual crisis and belief in a radical form of Christianity. Although Tolstoy does not put forward his religious beliefs in the novella, he does assert his rejection of vanity, worldliness, and materialism. In addition, the frequent strains in Tolstoy's own marriage are echoed in the relationship between Ivan Ilyich and Praskovya Fyodorovna.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Copy and distribute Reader's Guide handouts "Introduction to the Novella," "Leo Tolstoy (1828—1910)," and "Tolstoy and Christianity." Divide your class into groups and assign an essay to each. Have the groups present what they learned about their topic from the essay and the CD. Ask your students why they think Tolstoy was so concerned with death. Why would he choose to write a novella exploring the death process rather than an essay?

Read the first two and half pages in class, ending with "paying the widow a condolence call" in the middle of page 33. What do we learn about Ivan Ilyich in these first few pages? What statement does Tolstoy make about human nature by having the friends react with: "Well he's dead but I'm alive!"?

Writing Exercise

Have your students write about an experience of the death. How closely did their feelings and responses match those of Tolstoy's characters?

Homework

Distribute Handouts One and Two. Read Chapters 1-2 (pp. 31-52). Prepare your students to read approximately 20 pages per night.