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## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novella. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novella using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novella. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

*The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. As early as the second page, Tolstoy presents the unspoken thoughts of several different characters before focusing on the viewpoint of Pyotr Ivanovich for the rest of the chapter. Thereafter, the focus is on Ivan Ilyich himself, at first from the outside, then increasingly in terms of his own feelings and attitudes. But throughout the book, the narrator shows us the private thoughts and emotions of other characters—especially Ivan Ilyich’s wife—when it suits his larger purposes to do so.

### Discussion Activities

The fact that Pyotr Ivanovich is the point-of-view character for so much of the first chapter might make the reader assume that he will be a major figure in the novella, yet after that opening chapter he is given only a few passing mentions. Why does Tolstoy give so much attention to his reactions to Ivan Ilyich’s death? How do his private reactions to the situation help to communicate Tolstoy’s intentions in the novella?

### Writing Exercise

We see Pyotr Ivanovich take leave of Praskovya Fyodorovna (pp. 39-41), and briefly encounter her children. Have students imagine this encounter from the point of view of Ilyich’s wife, daughter, or son. Include the character’s inner feelings as well as his or her perception of Pyotr Ivanovich. To go deeper, write this character’s perspective about the dance (Chapter 3) and as he or she witnesses Ilyich’s deepening illness (Chapter 4).

### Homework

Read Chapters 5-7 (pp. 73-88). We are shown more and more of Ivan Ilyich’s interior life as his illness progresses. Ask students to consider whether they find themselves growing more sympathetic to him as the novella proceeds, and to consider the reasons for their responses.