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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Style and Genre

To fully understand and enjoy a work, it is sometimes helpful to know its historical background and cultural context, including the category or genre to which it belongs, and the rules or conventions that apply to that category. Obviously, it would be inappropriate to dismiss *Animal Farm* on the grounds that pigs can't talk, or to say that *West Side Story* is ridiculous because teenage gang members don't sing and dance down the street.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich belongs to the genre of Realism, which succeeded the Romantic movement that dominated the first part of the 19th century. A heightened style, epic events, and larger-than-life protagonists, as in Goethe's *Faust* or Melville's *Moby-Dick*, often characterized romantic narratives. Fiction in the realistic mode, by contrast, tends to be written in a straightforward and often plain style, to give precise descriptions of the surface of daily life, and to focus on ordinary protagonists confronting the same kinds of problems that we all face. The controlling assumption of Realism is that an accurate depiction of real life is a solid foundation for an exploration of its larger significance.

Discussion Activities

Examining Chapters 8-12, find examples of Realism. Have students break into groups with each group responsible for one chapter. Have them report examples to show where the novella embraces Realism or strays from Realism.

Works of fantasy such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* have gained large audiences. Have students discuss why such books and films acquire such popularity. Can they think of films that embrace the Realism reflected in the novella? What do audiences gain from Realist artworks and what do they gain from non-Realist artworks?

Writing Exercise

Examining Chapters 8-12, determine whether Gerasim is realistically portrayed. Explain and defend your conclusion with specific references to the text.

Homework

Instruct students to pay particular attention to the use of metaphors and symbols (relatively rare in the novella) to try to capture Ivan Ilyich's experience of dying—for example, the "narrow black sack" (p. 99), the "executioner" and "black hole" (p. 111), and the "light" (p. 113). How effective is this technique in creating a sense of that experience?