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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novella

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novella can shed light on these age-old debates, by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novella in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* makes about the following themes:

Duty

Ivan Ilyich is described as a man “strict to carry out whatever he considered his duty, and he considered his duty all things that were so designated by people in authority” (p. 44).

Does Tolstoy endorse Ivan Ilyich’s view of what his duty is? What are the dangers of adhering to such an attitude?

Morality

“As a student he had done things which, at the time, seemed to him extremely vile and made him feel disgusted with himself; but later, seeing that people of high standing had no qualms about doing these things, he was not quite able to consider them good but managed to dismiss them and not feel the least perturbed when he recalled them” (p. 44).

Which of Ivan Ilyich’s reactions to his behavior does Tolstoy imply to be the proper one? Does the novella support the idea that the most important thing in life is to feel good about oneself?

The Purpose of Life

Ivan Ilyich has devoted his whole existence to career advancement, social position, and material comfort. How well have these things prepared him for his final crisis?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due the next class period.