

Russian Names

Most people who have never read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* probably assume that Ilyich is the protagonist's last name. No doubt many people who have read it make the same assumption. They must wonder why Tolstoy always refers to him by his full name, and so do other characters when they talk about him and even to him. In fact, as we learn from the obituary notice on the first page of the novella, the central character's last name is not Ilyich at all. His full name is Ivan Ilyich Golovin. It follows the standard Russian pattern: given name, patronymic, family name.

The patronymic is derived from the given name of one's father. Ivan Ilyich's patronymic was established when his father was born and was named Ilya. In the same manner, as soon as Ivan Ilyich was given his first name, the patronymic of his children was established, as in the case of his surviving son, Vasily Ivanovich.

The patronymic is usually formed by adding *–ovich* or *–evich* to the father's name, meaning son of, or by adding *–ovna* or *–evna* to the father's name, meaning daughter of. (In an exception to the general rule, the patronymic meaning son of Ilya is Ilyich, not Ilyevich.) A woman is identified as her father's daughter, not her mother's. Thus, the patronymic of Praskovya Fyodorovna, Ivan Ilyich's wife, indicates that her father's name was Fyodor. But women's last names are given the feminine form: the obituary notice at the beginning of the novella refers to her as Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina.

First name and patronymic is the polite form of address in Russian. It is appropriate for Tolstoy's protagonist to be called Ivan Ilyich not only by his professional colleagues but also by his servants.

Gerasim shows respect, not familiarity, when he addresses his master that way. Notice that Gerasim, like the other servants, has no patronymic; while patronymics are universal nowadays, they began among aristocrats and only gradually spread to other levels of society. It cuts right to the heart of Tolstoy's intentions that the most truly honorable character in the book is also the least "respectable" one.

In more familiar or intimate relationships, diminutives are used (as with Bill for William or Betty for Elizabeth). There are different forms for different relationships. For example, at one point Ivan Ilyich recalls his childhood, when he "had been little Vanya." Ivan Ilyich's daughter, who is called Liza, is affectionately referred to as Lizanka at several points in the novella. And when he has secured his new position and higher salary, and has decorated the family's new apartment in St. Petersburg, Ivan Ilyich is in such a good mood that he even thinks of his wife in terms of her diminutive, Pasha.

Interestingly, Praskovya Fyodorovna does not use an affectionate diminutive to address her husband, which helps to emphasize the coolness of their relationship. Instead, she calls him Jean, the French equivalent for Ivan. (Its English equivalent is, of course, John—yet another way in which Tolstoy emphasizes the ordinariness of his character; had the book been written in English, he might very well have been called John Smith.) *Jean* not only sounds less intimate; it also shows an affectation for French names and phrases that is part of the larger pattern of falsity and pretension that Tolstoy is satirizing in the novella.