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A Servant Understanding of Reality

In 'The Cherry Orchard' by Chekhov and 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' by Tolstoy, the primary servant characters, Firs and Gerasim, appear as though opposites at first. For Example, Firs is often recollecting on past while Gerasim always lives in the present; Firs talks a lot, always willing to express what he thinks and feels, while Gerasim only speaks when necessary; Gerasim had just become an adult in the story while Firs dies in the final scene. However, both are sincerely loyal to their masters and their duties because they have accepted the reality of their own lives and see no need in working against fate.

When Firs was young, he was a serf and, even then, appreciated the simplicity of his life. Though Gerasim has no personal experience to act as reference, he, too, has no resentment of living as a servant and no jealousy towards his master. Both works were set in the turning of the 19th to the 20th century, a transitional period of uncertainty and instability. Firs and Gerasim are, respectively, the last connections to the simple and predictable lives Ivan Ilyich and Ranevsky remember, but they still accept the changing of their times and the changing of their place in the world.

The character of the other servants of 'The Cherry Orchard' actually have very little to do with their status as a servant. Their developments within the story are centred only around their love interests and pursuit of personal ambitions, much like the aristocrats. They are also similar to the aristocrats in how there is no direction to their lives and this lack of control is their primary worry. Yet Firs' path had always been clear. As the era of serfdom and landowners passed and former serfs, such as Lopakhin, were becoming more powerful than their former masters, Firs has

no ambition to bring himself up or others down. Firs has no regrets as he dies, his last words being “life’s gone on without me, as though I’ve never lived.” This is the greatest fear of every other character but for Firs, it is him acknowledging a fact of life and death. Since he had done what he felt he was supposed to do with his life, looking after Gaev until the end, he did not mind his life being over. Firs seems a personification not only of nostalgia for the simplicity of the past but also for getting through a turbulent present, neither societal nor personal changes, such as his growing deafness, affect his mental state in any way. In the end, the main character failed to cope with the changing times and abandoned both Firs and the idea of Firs.

Gerasim has all the qualities of a conventionally good person, living by values of honesty, kindness and selflessness. While other characters’ good health offends Ivan Ilyich, Gerasim’s inspires him and keeps him grounded in the reality of his own situation as he is the only one Ivan Ilyich knows to be honest about death, be it of others or their own. While others worry about their lives and delude themselves by avoiding the topic of death, even in thought, Gerasim says “we shall all of us die,” being open and honest about mortality. This acceptance allows him to live an orderly and simple life, without internal conflict nor indecision. Gerasim influences Ivan Ilyich as they spend more and more time together throughout the novella with Ivan Ilyich learning and adopting Gerasim’s perspective, eventually finding peace in his last moments.

Ivan Ilyich and Ranevsky are both upper class people, having lost everything they value and their servants are their only connections to the times when they used to not be resentful of the direction their lives are going. As both servants represent the accepting of change and the understanding one never has complete control, Ranevsky ignores Firs through the play, fighting a futile fight for ownership of the cherry orchard, ending up having to leave regardless though

unable to move on and still full of regret. Meanwhile, Ivan Ilyich bonds with Gerasim and learns. As a result, his story also ends with inevitable loss, though he faces his death with peaceful understanding.