

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Author: Leo Tolstoy

The Death of Ivan Ilyich marked one of the final books I read in 2022. What a way to end out the year.

Tolstoy writes with masterful brevity. In just over fifty pages, I get a sour taste of what death feels like. I am enthralled by this concise and relevant and beautiful work.

Ivan Ilyich is dying. Actually, he's already dead. Tolstoy opens the novella with Ivan's funeral. His self-absorbed wife is wondering if she is entitled to more money and his ambitious coworkers anticipate the new promotional opening with rapture. It seems as though Ivan will not be missed.

But we soon learn that there's more to Ilyich than money. The novella describes Ivan's life: his not entirely loveless yet clearly strategic marriage with the respectable Praskovya Fyodorovna, his stable career as an official in St. Petersburg, and his delightful home where he resides with his wife and children. On what seems like all accounts, Ivan is content with his life. Yet when he learns that he is plagued by a terminal illness, he realizes that he has yet to truly live.

In his prime, Ivan spent most of his time prioritizing his work to fit in. His dedication to decorating his home, a symbol of social status, illustrates his desire to meet the expectations of members of elite society. Ivan reminds me of an ill-fitting suit. From a distance, he appears put together. His job has enabled him to reach the peak of high society. Yet take a step closer and we see that Ilyich's fulfillment is an act. At the end of the day, we are left with baggy, impractical trousers and suit jacket sleeves that are comically long.

And so as Ilyich's condition worsens, he realizes that he may not be as unique as he previously believed. While he lives in comfort with the money he makes at work, Ivan is, after all, just another faceless employee in the sprawling bureaucracy. Additionally, he questions the hours wasted reading mainstream books. Why did he read books for the sake of being included in conversation? Why didn't he read books for himself? Most notably, Ivan remains indifferent at the mention of death around him. Yet at the prospect of his own demise, he struggles to cope with leaving life behind. Is he not just another entry in the local obituary?

As we delve deeper into the mind of Ivan Ilyich, we feel as though we have become part of him. We can understand his physical discomfort. The perpetual ache gnawing at his side. The strange taste buzzing in his mouth. Morphine doesn't seem to be doing its trick. But we can also understand, and maybe even experience, his mental distress. The feeling of entrapment. This unrelenting and unadulterated, demoralizing pain. It is torturous and insufferable and unfortunately, incurable. For him and for us, it is agony.

And at its worst, the pain is personified. Ivan's wife becomes the walking, breathing, and living embodiment of his pain. His marriage to her is an obligation. He becomes sickened by the sight of her, and through his spurn of her being, we catch a glimpse at the mentality of a man on the brink of death. A man struggling with his existence. He feels like a burden, as if everyone around him is waiting on him to die. He wants to avoid relying on anyone for help. He wants to face his suffering

alone. In the midst of this bloody battle, he pleads with god. "Why me? Why is this happening to me?"

But by some miracle, Ivan Ilyich stumbles upon what we all hope to find someday: Atlantis.

No. But he finds peace. He stops hating his greedy wife and selfish daughter. He hopes his passing will bring them ease. He fathoms that this is not the end of life, but rather the end of his fear and pain. "'Death is finished!' he said to himself, 'It is no more!'" Ironically, death is responsible for allowing Ivan to reflect upon his life. With this thoughtful examination of his values and the deliberate release of his pettier emotions, he elevates himself. And dies.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is unflinching and poignant. Within this simple, nearly rambling account of man, we face fear and isolation and loss. Like Ivan, we face the horror of dying in solitude. We face the decay of flesh and its undeniable transience. We face the dismay that our lives may one day be reduced to a list of trivial accomplishments. The dilemma which ass fucks Ivan surpasses the scope of philosophy or religion or fiction. Tolstoy illustrates the ruthless demise of physical and mental condition with perturbing realism. Either by fate or by chance, nature is unveiled as erratic and wanton, and man's desire to fulfill expectations collides with the finitude of his hackneyed existence.