The Death of Ivan Ilyich

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LEO TOLSTOY

Tolstoy was born the fourth of five children to wealthy Russian aristocrats. Both of Tolstoy's parents died early in his childhood, and he and his siblings were subsequently raised by relatives on Yasnaya Polyana, the family's estate. As a young man, Tolstoy studied law at Kazan University; however, he was a poor student and quickly dropped out. As a young aristocrat, Tolstoy worked for the betterment of serfs and was an outspoken proponent for their freedom. Tolstoy soon joined the army and began to write, publishing his first novel, *Childhood*, in 1852. He later served as an artillery officer during the Crimean War, where he gained a reputation for bravery and courage, rising to the rank of second lieutenant. After the war, Tolstoy traveled Europe extensively before returning to Yasnaya Polyana to marry Sophia Andreevna Behrs in 1862. Tolstoy and Behrs had 13 children between 1863 and 1888, and Tolstoy wrote most of his major works, including *War and Peace*, during this time. In the 1870s, Tolstoy endured a moral crisis and subsequent spiritual awakening, after which he declared himself a Christian anarchist and pacifist, rejected all material wealth, and dedicated his life to the nonviolent resistance of the State and Russian autocracy. Tolstoy's radical and outspoken views, along with his desire to give away all his money and inheritance, had a negative effect on his marriage. Behrs objected to many of Tolstoy's religious and political views, and she grew tired of the many spiritual followers Tolstoy had taken in on their estate. Estranged from his wife, Tolstoy embarked on a journey with his daughter, Aleksandra, in 1910. Elderly and already ill, the journey proved too much for Tolstoy and he died of pneumonia in Astapovo, Russia at the age of 82.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Leo Tolstoy wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* not long after his religious conversion. This took place shortly after he suffered something of an existential crisis, during which he struggled to see the point of life. Hoping to find answers to his questions, he turned to the Russian Orthodox church, but he found the institution corrupt because of its dealings with the government. By this time in his life, Tolstoy was a pacifist and anarchist, so he disliked the church's association with the Russian government. Consequently, he fashioned his own spiritual and political beliefs, paving the way for what's known as the Tolstoyan Movement, which borrowed from Jesus's teachings but rejected the idea that Jesus performed miracles. Given Tolstoy's rejection of traditional forms of Christianity, it makes sense that *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* ends on an ambiguously spiritual note, stopping just short of becoming a fully-fledged religious novella. It also makes sense that the story condemns the life of aristocratic magistrates, since Tolstoy had by that time decided that systems of government were nothing short of tyrannical. However, even though *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* embodies Tolstoy's religious and political beliefs, he never issued any straightforward teachings or doctrines, which is why he eventually urged people in the Tolstoyan Movement not to subscribe to his ideas or organize around them, but to think for themselves.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Death of Ivan Ilyich falls under the 19th century movement of Russian Realism. Literature in this movement tends to present complex issues—such as those of philosophical dilemma, class struggle, or interpersonal conflict—in a bluntly realistic and truthful manner. Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, and Tolstoy's own *Anna Karenina* are other well-known works of Russian Realism. Beyond Tolstoy's fellow Russian contemporaries, the novella in some ways resembles Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," since both pieces feature protagonists whose bodies have turned against them, becoming unwieldy and unpredictable. Both stories also examine mortality alongside love and the institution of marriage, depicting characters who have become disillusioned with the bond they have with their partners. In addition, it's worth considering that Tolstoy wrote a religious memoir called *Confessions* just before penning *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. In *Confessions*, he presents the details of his recent conversion to Christianity—a tumultuous conversion that in many ways simply enabled him to dispute Christian ideas from a different angle. In this religious memoir, he idealizes the faith that he believes most peasants have, an appreciation that resurfaces in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* when Ivan holds his peasant servant, Gerasim, in high esteem. Furthermore, that Ivan's apparent religious epiphany in the last moments of his life goes unexplained and remains rather opaque aligns with the fact that Tolstoy himself had a complicated relationship with his own faith.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Death of Ivan Ilyich
- **When Written:** 1882
- **When Published:** 1886
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Novella, Philosophical Fiction

- **Setting:** St. Petersburg, Russia
- **Climax:** Having looked into his son Vasya's eyes and asked for his family's forgiveness, Ivan Ilyich dies, though he feels that death has turned into "light."
- **Antagonist:** Greed, egotism, and the fear of death
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Gloomy Gift. Tolstoy presented *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* to his wife, Sophia, as a birthday gift. Despite the novella's morbid title and depressing content, Sophia was happy to receive it because she had recently been worrying about his dwindling output as a fiction writer.

Exit Interview. As evidenced by *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy was fascinated by the process of dying, which was something he had obviously only ever experienced as an onlooker. Accordingly, he wanted his close friends to pose a set of pre-determined questions to him whenever he himself began to die. But when he was finally on his deathbed, he was unable to speak, and though he had accounted for this by devising a system of communicating with his eyes, his acquaintances forgot to ask him the agreed-upon questions.

PLOT SUMMARY

Upon learning that the judge Ivan Ilyich Golovin has died, Ivan's friends and colleagues at the courthouse think privately about how they might benefit from his death. Pyotr Ivanovich, who was friends with Ivan Ilyich for many years, realizes that he might be able to help his brother-in-law transfer because of this new vacancy, and Fyodor Vasilyevich fantasizes about getting a promotion. However, none of the men say these thoughts aloud, instead expressing their sorrow that Ivan finally succumbed to his long, painful illness.

Ivan Ilyich's friends don't just think about the professional opportunities that his death has introduced—they also consider mortality, relieved that they weren't the ones to die. At the same time, though, Pyotr Ivanovich is unsettled when he goes to Ivan's funeral and hears about his friend's suffering. Not only does this make him feel sorry for Ivan, but it also reminds him that he, too, will die someday. And yet, this thought remains abstract, and he manages to push it out of his mind by focusing on the idea of playing cards after the funeral. When he first enters the ceremony and sees all the sad faces and grieving family members, he becomes depressed, but soon spots a colleague named Schwartz, who winks at him and smiles in a way that conveys a lack of true sentiment, as if Schwartz is unwilling to let the morose proceedings interfere with his plans to organize a game of **whist** that evening. Before Pyotr Ivanovich can leave the funeral, though, Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina—Ivan's wife—takes him by the arm and leads him into the sitting room, where she tells him about Ivan's prolonged, terrible death. As she speaks, Pyotr notices that she only talks about her husband's suffering in terms of how it affected *her*, and then she asks him to help her receive the most money possible from the government in the aftermath of his death. Finally, when Pyotr admits that he doesn't know how to help her, they return to the ceremony, and Pyotr leaves as soon as possible, spending the rest of the evening happily playing whist with Schwartz.

The story of Ivan Ilyich's death is one of suffering, misery, and gradual decline. As a young man, he studies law and benefits from his father's reputation. While in school, though, he begins to do certain things that repulse him: spending money frivolously, drinking, and having casual sex. These actions make him feel as if he's embarking on an unsavory life. Over time, though, he recognizes that his superiors also indulge such behaviors, so he stops thinking about whether or not he's leading a good life. Instead, he focuses on his career and social status, dressing himself in fine clothes and accepting a job as an assistant to the governor. He works diligently during this time and develops a certain social charm, eventually becoming an examining magistrate. He relishes his newfound influence in this position, feeling as if it's enough to simply know that he has power even if he doesn't need to wield it. In court he learns how to extract himself from extraneous concerns, approaching each case in an objective, unemotional manner. He soon meets Praskovya, whom he finds beautiful and charming. Though he's never put much thought into the prospect of marriage, he decides that she's a "decent catch" and that he might as well wed her.

Around the time Praskovya gets pregnant, she and Ivan begin to argue. From this point on, Ivan dislikes married life, applying himself even more fervently to his work. As he and Praskovya have more children, he becomes increasingly invested in his career, as it becomes an outlet that helps him avoid the sorrows of the home—sorrows that arise frequently and in good measure, as several of their children die and his relationship with Praskovya loses its appeal. Whenever Ivan and Praskovya start to fight, he retreats by reviewing documents in the evenings. Despite this dedication, though, his work life begins to deteriorate when he's overlooked for a promotion several years in a row. This upsets him greatly, so he decides to confront his superiors and tell them that he deserves more than they've given him. On his way to do this, though, he learns that the entire ministry is about to undergo significant changes, and he manages to position himself so that he gets a promotion when this happens.

Ivan moves to Petersburg in advance of his family, wanting to set up their apartment while he begins his new job. He spares no expense, lavishly decorating the living quarters. While hanging curtains one day he falls and **bruises** his side, which he

dismisses though the injury continues to hurt, focusing instead on setting up his home and pleasing Praskovya, who is happy when she and their children finally arrive. In this new chapter of life, they entertain well-respected guests, have dignified parties, and enjoy a pleasant existence, even if Ivan occasionally notices a strange taste in his mouth and a worsening pain in his side. Soon enough, though, these symptoms affect his mood, causing him to argue with Praskovya about the tiniest matters. Consequently, she urges Ivan to see a doctor and he agrees, though he dislikes having to subject himself to an expert, feeling that the doctor treats him the exact same way that he himself treats guilty defendants in court. During the appointment, the doctor talks about his kidney and "blind gut," saying they will need to do a battery of tests to know what's happening to him. Wanting to cut to the chase, Ivan asks if this condition is life-threatening, but the doctor ignores him and continues his obtuse diatribe. Finally, at the end of the appointment, Ivan asks once more if he's going to die, but the doctor simply stares at him and says that he has already stated his opinion.

Frustrated, Ivan consults other doctors. No matter what they say or what he does, though, his symptoms intensify. He even turns briefly to wholistic medicine and, later, mystical practices, but these methods are equally ineffective as the conventional approaches, so he gives them up and resigns himself to following whatever regimen his doctor suggests. All the while, Praskovya and Liza (their adult daughter) go on with their lives as socialites, acting as if his illness isn't all that serious. Ivan himself even tries to ignore his illness but is unable to do so because the pain and strange taste in his mouth distract him from the things he used to love so much, like presiding over courtrooms or playing whist. As time passes, he becomes gaunt and frail, a shell of his former self. Recognizing that his condition is only getting worse, he starts thinking that his doctors are foolish to focus on his kidney and "blind gut," believing that they're overlooking the most important matter: his imminent death. Thinking this way, he realizes that he's never allowed himself to believe in his own mortality. Although he has always understood that everyone dies regardless of who they are, he has never applied this to himself, since he's been too invested in his own unique experience to fathom its end. Now, though, he sees that he's been wrong to think this way, and this realization causes him to question the very point of life. What, he wants to know, is this all for?

Retreating from this thought, Ivan attempts to distract himself by thinking about the things that used to bring him comfort, but his work and reputation are useless as he experiences an all-encompassing form of pain. No matter how hard he tries to convince himself that his work has given his life meaning, he can't help but think that only his pain is real, and that everything else he has ever focused on has been nothing in comparison to this unavoidable, dreadful experience of agony. It is in this state of mind that he takes a turn for the worse, becoming bedbound in a small room where he receives doctors, his wife, and servants like Gerasim, a young peasant who selflessly helps him. In this capacity, Ivan develops a strong resentment for Praskovya and Liza because they seem incapable of fully understanding his predicament—an inability he links to their *unwillingness* to understand, since they don't want to imagine the end of their own lives. Gerasim, on the other hand, recognizes that death comes for everyone, so he empathizes with Ivan and does whatever he can to make him comfortable, even allowing Ivan to prop his legs on his shoulders for hours at a time because this alleviates Ivan's pain a bit.

Doctors periodically visit Ivan and examine him, but he hates them because he knows they won't admit that there's nothing they can do to save him. Accordingly, he thinks they're perpetuating a lie that everyone else seems to also uphold, as evidenced by Praskovya and Liza's behavior as they refuse to show him that they think he's going to die. One evening they come into his bedroom before going to the opera, and as they discuss the upcoming show, they notice that he's looking at them with unconcealed hatred. From then on, Ivan shrinks away from Praskovya's touch, detesting her presence whenever she enters the room.

As Ivan's health further deteriorates, he laments the apparent nonexistence of God. He then reviews memories of his childhood, feeling as if he can only live in the past. This, however, leads him to wonder if he's lived his life incorrectly, but he dismisses this idea by reminding himself that he has always done everything "properly." Nonetheless, he is unable to stop questioning his lifestyle and choices, taking up a dialogue with a voice deep within him. When he asks this voice what all of this suffering is for, it replies, "It's just there. It's not for anything." As his pain intensifies, he thinks that everything has been getting worse and worse ever since his youth, when there was still some "light" in his life. He then decides that he has indeed lived improperly, but he doesn't know what he should have done or why he must suffer. Looking at his family, he sees that they embody everything he used to believe in and, additionally, all of the superficiality upon which he has wasted his life.

In the days leading up to his death, Ivan agrees to take communion, which makes him feel somewhat better. But when Praskovya asks if he's improving as a result and he says that he is, he plunges back into misery, knowing that this is a lie. He then begins to scream in pain, never ceasing until he dies three days later. On the final day, he flails his arms and touches his son Vasya's head, and Vasya kisses his fingers. Just then, Ivan feels that he is tumbling through a hole and sees a light, and he knows that his life wasn't as it should have been but that he can still make it "right." Looking at his son and his other family members, he realizes that he's hurting them by suffering, so he tries to say, "Forgive me," though the words sound like, "For goodness." Still, he assures himself that "he who need[s] to" will

understand. Shortly thereafter, his pain recedes. Even when it returns, he doesn't care because his life is about to end, but instead of encountering death, he sees light. "Death is gone," Ivan tells himself, and then so is he.

CHARACTERS

Ivan Ilyich Golovin – Ivan Ilyich is a 45-year-old prosecutor, and the novella's protagonist. Ivan is from a respected family and starts studying law at a young age. While learning, he feels that the lavish lifestyle he's embarking upon is reprehensible and ugly, but he sees that his superiors have no qualms with the matters that bother him, so he stops worrying about whether or not he's leading a good life. Instead, he focuses on advancing his career, becoming the assistant to the governor and, later, an examining magistrate. Before long, he marries a beautiful young woman named Praskovya, and their marriage is good until they start having children, which is when they begin to fight. To mitigate his bitter feelings, Ivan distracts himself by ignoring his troubles and concentrating on his career, eventually rising to a powerful position despite several setbacks. Meanwhile, several of their children die, but this doesn't stop Ivan and Praskovya from continuing to grow their family, though Ivan remains detached from his loved ones. While decorating a new apartment one day, he bangs his side and develops a **bruise**, but he writes it off as nothing. Still, his side continues to hurt, and he starts experiencing a strange taste in his mouth, so he visits a doctor. Feeling challenged by the doctor's authority, he seeks second and third opinions, but nothing anyone says decreases his pain. In fact, his symptoms become quite severe, and he soon stops leaving bed as his illness worsens. During this time, Praskovya and his daughter, Liza, continue to lead extravagantly social lives, which Ivan deeply resents. In the final weeks of Ivan's life, his only relief comes when he interacts with his young servant, Gerasim, whom he sees as innocent and pure in comparison to Praskovya and Liza. He also appreciates the beauty of his young son, Vasya. On the day of Ivan's death, he can't stop screaming until he looks at Vasya and realizes that his prolonged suffering is hurting the young boy and everyone else, at which point Ivan asks for forgiveness, sees death turn into "light," and dies.

Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina – Praskovya Fyodorovna is Ivan Ilyich's wife. A well-respected young woman, Praskovya begins dating Ivan shortly after he becomes an examining magistrate. She is a good dancer, and though Ivan doesn't consider marrying her at first, he gradually decides that it would be a good idea because she's attractive and wealthy, meaning that her family would give him a handsome dowry. Before long, though, the couple begins to bicker on a regular basis, causing Ivan to withdraw from family life. Later, when he falls sick, Praskovya mainly focuses on the ways in which his illness influences her own life, making him feel as if he's nothing but a burden. To that end, she continues to lead the life of a socialite and go to cultural events while Ivan remains in agony at home. However, Ivan is perhaps overly sensitive in his criticism of Praskovya, who does want—for the most part—to help him. The problem is, though, that she seems all too happy to let other people attend to him, having servants like Gerasim care for him while she and her daughter, Liza, focus on their everyday lives. Nevertheless, Ivan decides to forgive her for behaving this way when he's about to die, saying "Forgive me" to her even though he's too weak to properly articulate the words. In the aftermath of Ivan's death, Praskovya continues to think only of herself, telling Pyotr Ivanovich about her husband's suffering only insofar as that suffering affected *her* life.

Pyotr Ivanovich – Pyotr Ivanovich is one of Ivan Ilyich's colleagues, a fellow magistrate in the ministry. He is also a close friend of Ivan's, having known him since they were both young students. Despite their history, Pyotr can't help but think that he might be able to benefit from Ivan's death, realizing that there will be an open position and that he can help his brother-in-law transfer because of this vacancy—something that will please his wife and thus save him from her constant scorn. And yet, Pyotr Ivanovich does feel unsettled by Ivan's death, though this is mainly because it forces him to acknowledge his own mortality. Nonetheless, he reminds himself that Ivan was the one to die, not him. Furthermore, he refuses to let Ivan's funeral throw him into sadness, instead deciding to leave as soon as possible in order to play a game of **whist** with one of his and Ivan's colleagues, Schwartz. Before he can sneak out of the ceremony, though, Praskovya pulls him aside to talk about Ivan's death and to ask him how she might wring as much money as possible out of the government in the wake of her husband's passing. Undeterred by this detour, though, Pyotr manages to leave the funeral shortly thereafter, setting off to spend a pleasant evening playing cards with his friends.

Gerasim – A young man from a peasant family, Gerasim is one of Ivan Ilyich's servants. Unlike everyone else in the house, Gerasim is more than willing to empathize with Ivan because he isn't afraid to try to understand what it must be like to die. While the other servants, along with Praskovya and Liza, are all unable to sympathize with Ivan because they don't truly want to understand what it must be like to be in his position, Gerasim doesn't mind because he accepts that everyone will someday face a similar fate. In turn, he becomes Ivan's favorite caretaker, often staying up all night and letting Ivan rest his legs on his shoulders, elevating them in such a way that alleviates the dying man's pain. A gentle and kind man, Gerasim is quite wise, reminding Pyotr Ivanovich at Ivan's funeral that death will come for everyone someday.

Vasya – Vasya is Ivan's young son, who is perhaps the only person in his family who truly cares about Ivan's failing health. Unlike Praskovya and Liza, Vasya hasn't been corrupted yet by

fixating on social status or reputation. Similarly, he also hasn't lost his innocence by entering the professional world. For this reason, Ivan admires him for his authentic, untainted goodness. While Vasya is crying and flailing his arms on the last day of Ivan's life, Ivan's hand touches Vasya's head, and Vasya kisses his father's fingers, flooding Ivan with sorrow and regret as he suddenly sees that his suffering is harming his family members. In fact, it is this tender exchange that inspires him to ask for his family's forgiveness just before dying.

Liza – Liza is Ivan Ilyich and Praskovya's daughter. A young woman, she takes after her parents in that she highly values her reputation and works hard to maintain her social status. To that end, she starts seeing a young man named Petrishchev, who is the son of an examining magistrate. This delights her parents, who encourage this relationship because they want Petrishchev to ask for Liza's hand in marriage. However, when Ivan becomes sick, he resents how much Liza cares about life as a socialite, and he begins to dislike Petrishchev, who does eventually propose to Liza. Noticing her father's bitterness, Liza confides in her mother by saying that, though she feels sorry for Ivan, she wishes he weren't such a burden on their lives.

Mikhail Danilovich (the Doctor) – Primarily referred to as "the doctor," Mikhail Danilovich is the first physician Ivan Ilyich consults, and the one who eventually oversees him until his death. Considered a "celebrity" doctor because of his skill and glowing reputation, Mikhail is a confident man who speaks with authority. This bothers Ivan, since he recognizes that Mikhail is talking to him in the same manner in which he himself talks to defendants in court, and he resents being put in a position of powerless inferiority. He also believes that Mikhail—and all the other doctors he sees—fail to grasp the crux of the problem, focusing on his organs instead of treating his illness as a simple matter of life and death.

Petrishchev – The only son of an examining magistrate, Petrishchev is a young man who courts Liza. Praskovya and Ivan Ilyich are very happy when he takes an interest in their daughter. But by the time he proposes to her, Ivan has already become sick and resentful of nearly everyone in his life, so he's incapable of enjoying the fact that Petrishchev and Liza will soon get married.

Schwartz – Schwartz is a friend and colleague of Ivan Ilyich and Pyotr Ivanovich. A playful, devious man, Schwartz is uninfluenced by the sadness of Ivan's funeral. In fact, when Pyotr Ivanovich arrives at the ceremony, Schwartz winks at him, signaling that he should leave as soon as possible so he can join the game of **whist** that Schwartz is organizing elsewhere.

Ivan Yegorovich Shebek – Shebek is one of Ivan Ilyich's colleagues at the courthouse. In a conversation with Fyodor Vasilyevich and Pyotr Ivanovich, Shebek learns that Ivan has died. Though Shebek expresses his sorrow, he—like the others—privately thinks about how he might be able to benefit professionally from his friend's death, since there will inevitably some reorganization as the ministry seeks to fill his position.

Fyodor Vasilyevich – Fyodor Vasilyevich is one of Ivan Ilyich's colleagues at the courthouse. After learning that Ivan has died, Fyodor talks to Pyotr Ivanovich and Shebek about their friend, expressing his sorrow even as he privately thinks about how he might benefit from Ivan's death, since there will inevitably be reorganization as the ministry seeks to fill his position.

Ivan's Brother-In-Law – Ivan's brother-in-law is his wife, Praskovya's, brother, a man who visits several months after Ivan has fallen ill. Upon setting his eyes on Ivan, the brother-in-law can't hide how alarmed he is by the profound physical change Ivan has undergone. Noting his brother-in-law's reaction, Ivan fully grasps just how serious his condition truly is.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEANING AND MORTALITY

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella detailing a wealthy man's gradual death, Leo Tolstoy studies the human impulse to grasp for meaning in the face of mortality. As Ivan Ilyich succumbs to an ailment that is—at the time—mysterious and incurable, he begins to review his life, eventually concluding that he has wasted his energies focusing on his career and social status. To that end, he decides that nothing in life matters because everything he has ever believed in now appears empty and vain. In other words, everything he has focused on has done nothing but distract him from the fundamental truth of existence, which is that death is inevitable. Ivan derives some satisfaction from this thought because he thinks the thought itself gives life meaning. In reality, though, the inevitability of death doesn't actually lend a sense of meaning or purpose to life—rather, it simply spells out an undeniable truth, one that Ivan apparently can only embrace by experiencing the process of death itself. Consequently, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* doesn't illuminate the meaning of life, but merely draws attention to the human desire to eke a sense of greater significance out of existence—whether or not this is actually possible, in either a tangible or spiritual way, Tolstoy doesn't indicate.

For his entire life, Ivan Ilyich has kept thoughts about death at bay by committing himself to his career and searching for ways to improve his social status. These pursuits have ultimately distracted him from considering his own mortality. When he

falls ill and realizes he's dying, then, he finds it difficult to comprehend this harsh reality. Of course, Ivan knows that he is mortal, but he has on some level always rejected this idea. As a sick man, he thinks of a popular syllogism that helps people grasp the fact that everybody dies, no matter who they are: "Julius Caesar is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caesar is mortal." When he considers this, though, he can't help but feel that he has "always been a special being, totally different from all others." Simply put, he isn't Caesar, and he isn't like anyone else either. In this moment, Tolstoy spotlights the way that human subjectivity can warp a person's understanding of mortality, implying that it's difficult for people to fully accept the limits of their own existence without actually facing death for themselves. In Ivan's narrow focus on his singular experience—the specific way he moves through the world, his air of professional gravitas, his subjectivity—he has inadvertently come to see himself as immortal, effectively convincing himself that his life is too unique and meaningful to ever come to an end.

At a certain point in his illness, though, Ivan can no longer deny that he will soon die. With this realization comes the understanding that nothing he has done will save him from his fate; there is, he thinks, "nothing left but to die." Accordingly, he cynically reviews his life and realizes that he has wasted it by focusing on inconsequential matters like power, status, and his career. This, in turn, causes him to question the entire meaning of life, wanting to know what actually matters if not the superficial things he used to hold dear. Moreover, he questions the point of the painful suffering he endures throughout his illness, asking, "Why all this horror? What's the reason for it?" It's worth pausing to consider who, exactly, Ivan is addressing in this moment. Although he has never shown any interest in religion, his existential questions seem directed at God, or at least at something that has an omniscient understanding of life and death, ultimately indicating that he is desperately grasping for answers in the face of death. More importantly, though, his questions underscore his assumption that existence must have some kind of inherent, overarching meaning in the first place.

The closest Ivan gets to wringing meaning out of existence comes when he decides that everything he has focused on in life has been a mere distraction from the inevitability of his own death. Once he accepts that he has squandered his life obsessing over meaningless things, he senses that these distractions have been nothing but "gross deception[s] obscuring life and death." Thinking this way, he embraces the only tangible truth about human existence, which is that everyone dies. This comes to him as something of an epiphany, suggesting that only by experiencing death for himself can Ivan derive meaning from mortality. And yet, this thought does nothing to truly add purpose or significance to life and death—rather, it just provides him with a bit of clarity about death's inevitability. Nonetheless, Ivan experiences this moment of realization as laden with meaning, and he even appears to have a spiritual awakening in the final minutes of his life, as death turns into "light" while he himself fades away from the material world. This religious awakening allows him to further embrace his own death, but it doesn't actually imbue his life with a sense of meaning, or least not one that Tolstoy presents to readers. Rather, Ivan's realization only changes his relationship to the fundamental dichotomy between life and death that people assume to be at the heart of existence. As Ivan dies, he sees death turn into "light"—the two states appear to join as one, illustrating that death is *part* of life, not separate from it. And though this is perhaps somewhat profound and might strike Ivan as an epiphany, it's hard to argue that it actually gives readers a sense of meaning. For a novella in which the protagonist yearns to grasp the meaning of life, then, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is profoundly empty of any actual conclusions about the purpose of existence, instead simply assembling a portrait of human desperation and uncertainty in response to unsettling existential truths.

EMPATHY VS. RESENTMENT

In many ways, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a story about failures of empathy. As Ivan's health deteriorates, his family members come to see him as a burden, viewing his illness as an impediment to their everyday happiness. Rather than genuinely caring for him, his wife Praskovya only checks in on him every once in a while, relying on expensive doctors and servants to do the real work of caring for him. As Praskovya continues to lead a rather lavish life, Ivan begins to resent her and the rest of his family. In turn, readers see that Praskovya's lack of true empathy for Ivan has pushed him away from her, interfering with their relationship in ways that would likely continue even if he were to recover. At the same time, though, Ivan eventually regrets the fact that he resents his family members so much, recognizing that a large amount of his scorn has to do with nothing other than his awareness that they're healthy and he isn't. In turn, readers see that his family's lack of empathy has inspired a lack of empathy in him, too, as he unjustly criticizes them. In this regard, Tolstoy intimates that resentment often perpetuates itself, estranging loved ones from each other and making it nearly impossible for them to support one another in times of hardship.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich begins after Ivan has already died, giving readers a glimpse of his funeral before jumping back in time to outline the details of his long and painful death. In an interaction at his funeral between Ivan's longtime friend Pyotr Ivanovich and Ivan's wife, Praskovya, readers sense the extent to which Praskovya failed to empathize with her husband as he went through his illness. As she tells Pyotr about Ivan's death, she explains her husband's suffering "only in terms of the distressing effect [it] had" on *her*, not on Ivan himself. This emphasis on her own experience underlines her failure to

consider what it must have been like for Ivan to die such a harrowing death. Instead of focusing on Ivan's feelings, she fixates on how his deterioration affected her life—the exact mindset that Ivan himself senses and comes to resent when he's still alive. Indeed, as Ivan's health declines, he develops bitter feelings toward Praskovya. At first, this bitterness arises because Praskovya and Liza, their daughter, go on with their social lives without paying much attention to his health, acting annoyed that he isn't "much fun" and that he wants so much from them. In keeping with this, he begins to feel as if he's a mere nuisance to his own family members. Worse, Praskovya adopts a self-centered attitude toward Ivan's illness, one in which she implies that his ailments are *his* fault and that he's doing nothing but making her miserable. Of course, Ivan thinks that she's adopting this mindset unknowingly, but Tolstoy goes out of his way to remark that Praskovya's lack of ill intent doesn't make the relational dynamic any easier for Ivan to bear. After all, it's clear that Praskovya can't bring herself to empathize with her husband, thereby leaving him to deal with the emotional difficulties of his illness all by himself.

Even when Praskovya tries to show Ivan compassion, her kindness does nothing but upset him. This is because he has sensed that neither she nor any of his family members or friends actually *want* to empathize with him. To that end, nobody fully pities him because nobody has even "the slightest desire to understand his situation." This sentiment suggests that a person has to fully understand someone else's hardship in order to show legitimate empathy. The only person in Ivan's life who is capable of doing this, it seems, is Gerasim, a kind young peasant who works for him. Unlike Ivan's family members and friends, Gerasim is willing to try to understand what it must be like to be so sick. This is because Gerasim recognizes that everyone dies, so he's comfortable showing others the empathy that he hopes he himself will receive when he's on his deathbed. People like Pyotr Ivanovich, on the other hand, can't empathize with Ivan because they refuse to admit that what he's experiencing will one day befall them, too. Instead, they distance themselves from Ivan, reminding themselves that this illness has happened to him, not to them. As a result, Ivan begins to resent everyone except Gerasim, who is singularly capable of making him feel less alone with his illness.

Because Ivan feels that Gerasim is the only person willing to understand his pain, Ivan becomes so hateful toward his family that he stops masking his contempt when they come to visit him in his final days of life. As Praskovya enters his room, he looks at her with unconcealed bitterness and recoils from her touch, deciding that he hates her. Not only has she failed to empathize with him in this time of hardship, but she has continued to lead a life that only a healthy, happy person can lead, effectively rubbing his face in his own suffering. Consequently, he "hate[s] her with every fibre of his being." In this manner, then, he fails to empathize with the fact that she is about to lose her husband and thus her stability. To be fair, this is arguably a minor loss compared to what he is about to lose (his entire life), but it still illustrates the ways in which one person's lack of empathy only spawns animosity, alienating loved ones from one another simply because they're unwilling to inhabit each other's perspectives. Finally, though, Ivan sees just before his death that he's harming his family members by resenting them so vehemently in the last moments of his life. Accordingly, he tries to say, "Forgive me," in an effort to reach across the gulf of misunderstanding between him and his loved ones, which has estranged him from them and left him even more isolated in his illness than necessary.

GREED, PURITY, AND CORRUPTION

Focusing on Ivan Ilyich's careerist worldview and its destructive qualities, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* warns against the toxic, soul-corrupting effects of fixating on status, money, and power. By giving an overview of Ivan's life before his illness, Tolstoy illustrates that success and praise can easily lead to greed and isolation, as Ivan becomes less and less capable of caring about anything except his job. By the time Ivan falls ill, he has effectively cut himself off from anything that might have actual value to him on his deathbed, including his relationships with his wife, Praskovya, and adult daughter, Liza, both of whom have grown accustomed to his disinterest in family life. In fact, Praskovya and Liza have structured their own lives based on the same desire for power and admiration that has driven Ivan up until this point. For this reason, Ivan begins on his deathbed to idealize the few people in his life who have not been corrupted by greed or egotism. Removed from his false sense of self-importance, Ivan covets people like his peasant servant, Gerasim, and his young son, Vasya, both of whom he sees as innocent and pure. That these are the only characters in the entire novella who embody these qualities is especially noteworthy, since this indicates that Tolstoy believes everyone else in Ivan's milieu has been corrupted by the very same bourgeoise affectations and superficial concerns that leave Ivan feeling so lonely and wretched at the end of his life. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Tolstoy sees the trappings of high society as capable of poisoning otherwise pure and authentic ways of moving through the world.

The influence of greed is all around Ivan, so apparent in his social circles that even his supposedly close friends can't help but think about how they might benefit professionally from his death. Upon hearing that Ivan has died, people like Pyotr Ivanovich—who is not only his colleague but also an old friend—immediately start thinking about the fact that Ivan's position has just opened up, devising schemes to capitalize on his death as if it's nothing but a new opportunity. Pyotr Ivanovich maintains this insensitive mindset when he attends

Ivan's funeral and eagerly looks for excuses to leave, wanting nothing more than to make a quick exit so he can go play cards with his friend Schwartz, who winks at him during the services and makes no effort to hide how unwilling he is to let Ivan's death get him down. Thinking this way, Pyotr Ivanovich manages to leave the funeral, meeting up with Schwartz and three other men to play a game of **whist**. That he chooses to gamble instead of paying respects to an old friend shows readers that, throughout Ivan's life, he tended to associate with people who exclusively cared about earning money and socializing.

As the story jumps back in time to chart Ivan's professional rise, Tolstoy frames the development of young Ivan's careerist attitude as something that slowly but surely poisons his inherent moral sensibilities. While studying law, Ivan starts to do things that he finds "utterly revolting," and though Tolstoy never clarifies the nature of this behavior, he notes that Ivan Ilyich often feels "disgusted with himself" during this period. However, as Ivan continues to do these things, he notices that well-respected and successful people are behaving in the exact same way. Of course, this doesn't necessarily convince him that this lifestyle is completely good or virtuous, but recognizing the behavior of his superiors allows him to excuse his own actions. By the time he himself is a lauded magistrate, he has completely stopped questioning his behavior, having fully relaxed into a way of life that he instinctively felt at the outset of his career—when he was still young and uncorrupted by greed and opportunism—was shameful and uncouth.

When Ivan is on his deathbed, he can no longer truly enjoy the power and wealth that previously distracted him from acknowledging his life's shortcomings. Throughout his adulthood, he has become increasingly attached to his work and less involved in his familial relationships. Anytime he and Praskovya have fights, for instance, he distracts himself by turning his attention to his work, looking over documents instead of trying to mend their relationship. Similarly, he obsesses over the appearance of his apartment, going to great lengths to decorate it so that other people in his social circles will think highly of him. When he falls while hanging a curtain and **bruises** his side, the injury signifies the extent to which his fixation on appearances has superseded all other concerns, indicating that his greedy, egotistical outlook on life is taking a tangible toll on his wellbeing. After all, none of the work he does nor the effort he puts into his apartment actually matter when he's on his deathbed, since these things cannot heal his illness or atone for his past mistakes. Accordingly, he finally recognizes while dying that his life has become utterly vapid, but that it's too late to go back and lead a more substantial existence. Consequently, he covets his relationship with Gerasim, a young servant from a humble background who remains untainted by the materialistic and power-hungry preoccupations that have consumed everyone else in Ivan's environment. For Ivan, Gerasim, along with Ivan's own young son, Vasya, represent the kind of faultless integrity that he himself *could* have embodied if he hadn't wasted his life chasing wealth and status. In this regard, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* warns readers about the harmful effects of leading a greedy, superficial life, ultimately suggesting that such lifestyles can corrode a person's virtues, and eventually their happiness.

ILLNESS AND CONTROL

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy uses Ivan's decline to illustrate the uncomfortable fact that becoming ill often means involuntarily relinquishing control over one's own life. Although Ivan has long enjoyed the privilege of fine-tuning his life by manipulating his power and influence in society, he now has to come to terms with the fact that he is at the mercy of his body and, to a certain extent, his caretakers. This is particularly disturbing to him because he resents that his doctors are in a position of power over him. In fact, he even comes to resent them for treating him the same way he might treat a guilty defendant in court. Rather than seeing them as people trying to help him, he sees them as malicious figures of authority who threaten his sense of superiority and control. He soon views their diagnoses and suggestions with great animosity, as if undermining what they say will somehow make him feel better. With this outlook, he gives up all hope of recovering, completely surrendering to his illness and thinking of his doctors as liars when they act like they might still be able to help him. Ivan effectively accepts that he has no control over his body while simultaneously discrediting the only people who might actually have a modicum of influence on his illness. In turn, this ability to oppose his caretakers gives him a small sense of control, thereby illustrating what little sense of agency is available to people who have otherwise been forced to recognize the harsh reality of life's unpredictable and seemingly unfair nature.

At first, Ivan is quick to overlook his symptoms, clearly eager to disregard anything that might suggest his body's ability to slip out of his control. In the initial stages of his illness, he experiences an odd taste in his mouth and a slight pain in his side, but he doesn't pay much attention to either sensation, deciding that these symptoms don't "count as ill health." As time goes on, though, these discomforts begin to affect Ivan's mood, causing him to mistreat Praskovya. In this subtle way, Ivan fails to fight off his encroaching illness, allowing it to get the better of him and influence his marriage. As a result, it becomes clear—even at the mere outset of his bad health—that simply asserting himself over his body's whims is an ineffective and futile pursuit, since he will always be at the mercy of his physical condition.

When Ivan finally agrees to see a doctor, he once again finds himself in a position in which he has very little control. Not only is he unable to force his ailments to subside, but he now has to

face an authority figure who, because of his superior knowledge of the human body, only emphasizes Ivan's own powerlessness over his entire predicament. This is apparent right away, as Ivan instantly notices that the doctor behaves like he, as a magistrate, behaves when he's presiding over a case in court. According to Ivan, the doctor looks at him in the exact same way that he looks at defendants, lording his power over them and controlling the nature of the ensuing conversation. In keeping with this, Ivan listens to the doctor speak at length about anatomical matters that he can't comprehend, feeling lost in a sea of words that leave him confused and uncertain about his future. Trying to regain control of the conversation, then, he asks the doctor the only question that matters to him: "Is this condition life-threatening or not?" Unfortunately for him, though, the doctor ignores this question, instead returning to his clinical assessment. When he finishes, Ivan asks his question once again, but the doctor only claims to have already told him what he thinks. This disconnect between Ivan and his physician accentuates Ivan's overall lack of control—not only can he do nothing to change his physical state, but he can't even manage to get his doctor to give him something as basic as a clear diagnosis.

Hoping to recapture a sense of control, Ivan seeks out multiple other doctors, but none of them tell him anything he wants to hear, nor do their assessments stop his pain. After trying to diligently follow various regimens, he begins to view his doctors with consternation, thinking of them as liars who don't truly care about his health and are only pretending that what they do will help him. Moreover, he convinces himself that these doctors are focused on the wrong thing, believing that they're getting hung up on unnecessary anatomical considerations instead of considering the practical nature of the problem—namely, whether or not he is going to die. Before long, he embraces that he *is* going to die and that nothing any of his doctors give him or tell him to do will stop this from happening. In this strange way, he comes to terms with his lack of control over his body. In doing so, though, he underhandedly opposes his doctors, who—despite what they might really think about his hopes of surviving—will apparently continue indefinitely to talk about his organs and try new approaches. By finally letting go of the idea of beating this illness, Ivan goes against his doctors, and this is perhaps the only kind of control over his life that he's able to recapture before dying—a kind of control that has more to do with the way he mentally frames his situation than with what will actually happen to him. In this sense, Tolstoy intimates that the only things humans can truly control in life are their own thoughts.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RESPICE FINEM

Respice finem, the Latin inscription that Ivan Ilyich has stitched onto his expensive luggage, represents his cognitive dissonance about his mortality. The phrase reminds him of the fact that life will not last forever, which is rather obvious since the phrase itself means "consider the end." However, the inscription itself takes on a somewhat ironic meaning, since Ivan is actually quite incapable or unwilling to think about the end of his life. Although he has these words stitched onto his new suitcases, he fails to come to terms with the overall message, meaning that his decision to have this embroidered on his luggage is nothing more than a shallow attempt to seem wise. In the same way that Ivan understands that all humans will die yet doesn't accept that *he* will die, he has *Respice finem* printed on his luggage without coming to terms with the idea it embodies. In turn, the phrase comes to represent the ways in which he refuses to admit the inevitability of his own death even as he accepts the abstract idea that nobody is immortal.

WHIST

Because whist—the card game that Ivan and his friends play—serves as a distraction that briefly helps Ivan ignore his illness, it stands for the shallow, materialistic concerns that people like Ivan tend to gravitate toward in order to distract themselves from their own discontent. Ivan takes great joy in gambling, relishing his ability to best his opponents. When he becomes sick, he continues to play for as long as he can, treating it like his work, at least insofar as both whist and his job give him something to focus on other than his various hardships. Similarly, Pyotr Ivanovich rushes out of Ivan's funeral to play a game of whist, clearly eager to stop thinking about death. As a result, the card game becomes a symbol for the denial that the characters in this novella experience, as they turn to petty gambling to avoid having to think about whatever is bothering them.

THE BRUISE

The bruise Ivan gets while trying to hang curtains in his new apartment is a physical manifestation of the fact that his obsession with status and wealth is detrimental to his wellbeing. When he secures a new job in St. Petersburg and buys a fancy apartment, he becomes completely consumed by the process of decorating the family's new abode. Focusing only on how the place looks, he tries to show a worker how to properly hang the drapes in the way that he thinks looks best, and as he does so, slips off a ladder and bangs his side against a knob on the window. This leaves a painful bruise that continues to hurt for a long time. However, Ivan denies the severity of this injury, which Tolstoy suggests is what ultimately leads to the

illness that kills Ivan. Later, when Ivan's condition gets worse, he curses that he has "lost [his] life" because of a measly curtain—a clear sign that he recognizes just how ridiculous it is that he has fixated throughout his life on such trivial matters, none of which matter once he falls ill. Accordingly, the bruise symbolizes the fact that Ivan has wasted his life chasing unimportant things that do nothing but keep him from attaining true contentment and even harm him as he moves through the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories* published in 2008.

Chapter 1 Quotes

So, the first thought that occurred to each of the assembled gentlemen on hearing the news of his death was how this death might affect his own prospects, and those of their acquaintances, for transfer or promotion.

'I'm sure to get Shtabel's job now, or Vinnikov's,' thought Fyodor Vasilyevich. 'They promised me ages ago, and a promotion like that would give me another eight hundred roubles a year, plus expenses.'

'I must apply to have my brother-in-law transferred from Kaluga,' thought Pyotr Ivanovich. 'My wife will be delighted. She won't be able to tell me I never do anything for her people.'

'I had a feeling he wasn't going to get better,' said Pyotr Ivanovich. 'It's sad.'

Related Characters: Pyotr Ivanovich (speaker), Fyodor Vasilyevich, Ivan Yegorovich Shebek, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ivan Yegorovich Shebek, Fyodor Vasilyevich, and Pyotr Ivanovich react to the news of Ivan Ilyich's death. They are all his colleagues and friends, but they privately think about how his death will positively impact their lives. While Fyodor Vasilyevich thinks greedily about how he'll most likely get promoted because his superiors will be reassigned, Pyotr Ivanovich considers the fact that he'll be able to help his brother-in-law get a better job and, in doing so, please his wife. However, none of these men say what they're thinking, instead acting sad that their so-called friend has died. Instead of talking about how he'll be able to benefit from Ivan's passing, for instance, Pyotr says that his death is "sad," acting like he's more upset about this turn events than he truly is. By foregrounding the novella with this scene, Tolstoy shows readers the kind of people Ivan Ilyich associated with in his life: people who care more about personal advancement and power than about the wellbeing of their own friends.

Apart from the speculations aroused in each of them by this death, concerning the transfers and possible changes that this death might bring about, the very fact of the death of someone close to them aroused in all who heard about it, as always, a feeling of delight that he had died and they hadn't.

'There you have it. He's dead, and I'm not' was what everyone thought or felt.

Related Characters: Fyodor Vasilyevich, Pyotr Ivanovich, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of Ivan Ilyich's death, his friends and colleagues think greedily about how their professional lives will improve because there is suddenly a new vacancy in the courthouse. At the same time, though, thinking about this appears to be an attempt to distract themselves from an even more pressing matter: the inevitability of mortality. In the back of their minds, each man sees Ivan's death as a reminder that he too will one day die. And yet, they also reject this idea, focusing on the simple fact that they're still alive. By telling themselves that Ivan is dead, and they are not, they effectively invest themselves in their current experience, refusing to admit that they won't *always* be alive and well. This refusal to think frankly and realistically about death underscores Tolstoy's interest in exploring the ways in which people keep themselves from accepting the fundamental truth about life, which is that it ends.

Pyotr Ivanovich entered the room, and hesitated, as people always do on these occasions, not knowing precisely what to do. The only thing he was certain of was that in this situation you couldn't go wrong if you made the sign of the cross. Whether or not you should bow at the same time he wasn't sure, so he went for a compromise, crossing himself as he walked in and giving a bit of a bow as he did so. At the same time, as far as hand and head movements permitted, he glanced round the room.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin, Pyotr Ivanovich

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Pyotr Ivanovich struggles to figure out how to behave at his friend Ivan Ilyich's funeral. Unsure of himself, he makes the sign of the cross as he enters the room in which Ivan's body lies in a coffin. He does this because he knows that nobody would ever fault him for being religious, even if the occasion doesn't actually call for him to cross himself. However, he worries that this is perhaps not enough, so he decides to bow, though not all the way because he's nervous that this might look absurd or out of place. As he considers what to do, readers see how focused he is on his own appearance. To that end, he thinks more about what people think of him than about Ivan Ilyich, despite the fact that he's at Ivan's funeral and that he and Ivan were longtime friends. And as if this doesn't already mark him as a self-involved man, he glances around the room while bowing, using it as an opportunity to take stock of who is there and who might be watching him. In turn, it becomes clear that Pyotr Ivanovich cares very little about his friend's death, instead fixating on his own reputation and going through the motions in order to seem sad and respectful.

He had changed a good deal; he was even thinner than he had been when Pyotr Ivanovich had last seen him, but, as with all dead bodies, his face had acquired greater beauty, or, more to the point, greater significance, than it had had in life. Its expression seemed to say that what needed to be done had been done, and done properly. More than that, the expression contained a reproach, or at least a reminder, to the living. The reminder seemed out of place to Pyotr Ivanovich, or at least he felt it didn't apply to him personally.

Related Characters: Pyotr Ivanovich, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After Pyotr Ivanovich enters the living room in the Golovin household, he approaches Ivan Ilyich's coffin and peers at his friend's lifeless body. Upon studying the corpse's face, he feels as if Ivan has taken on a sense of "greater significance," as if death has dignified him and made him somehow wiser and more respectable. This suggests that Pyotr Ivanovich has a certain reverence for those who have died, perhaps because he himself fears death. In keeping with this fear, he senses that Ivan Ilyich's facial expression is one of "reproach," as if admonishingly reminding everyone who looks at the corpse that death will come for them too. Because Pyotr doesn't want to consider this, though, he decides that this message is "out of place," even though this is exactly the kind of sentiment that he should expect to encounter at a funeral, since funerals serve as evidence of the fact that everyone dies at some point. Still, Pyotr decides that this doesn't "apply to him personally," exempting himself from the conditions of mortality in an absurd attempt to avoid thinking about death—an attempt that readers will later recognize when Tolstoy narrates the tortured thoughts that Ivan himself entertains in his final days.

'Three days and three nights of horrible suffering, and then death. Just think, it could happen to me any time, now,' he thought, and he felt that momentary pang of fear. But immediately he was saved, without knowing how, by the old familiar idea that this had happened to Ivan Ilyich, not him, and it could not and would not happen to him, and that kind of thinking would put him in a gloomy mood, for which there was no need, as Schwartz's face had clearly demonstrated. Pursuing this line of thought, Pyotr Ivanovich calmed down and began to show a close interest in the details of Ivan Ilyich's death, as if death was a chance experience that may have applied to Ivan Ilyich but certainly didn't apply to him.

Related Characters: Schwartz, Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Pyotr Ivanovich, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Pyotr Ivanovich struggles to keep his fear of death at bay. Frightened by the idea that what happened to Ivan Ilyich could happen to him, he tries to calm himself down by reminding himself that Ivan was the one to die, not him. Of course, this does little to disprove the fact that Pyotr *will* die someday, but it soothes him because it helps him focus on the present instead of obsessing over his fears of what's to come. As he relaxes into this mindset, he recalls the look that Schwartz gave him when he first entered the funeral—a look that communicated an unwillingness to let the depressing proceedings get him down. This, it seems, is how men like Pyotr and Schwartz operate, thinking of themselves as exempt from the very prospect of death. In fact, Pyotr even frames Ivan's death as a "chance experience" that will most likely never befall him. This, in turn, lays the foundation for Tolstoy to narrate the thoughts that Ivan himself had about mortality before his death, since these thoughts were nearly identical to what Pyotr thinks in this moment. In this regard, then, Tolstoy intimates that, though people understand on some level that they will die, not everyone is capable of fully coming to terms with this notion on a practical level.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ In his student days he had done things that at first he thought of as utterly revolting, things that made him feel disgusted with himself even as he was doing them, but in later life, noticing that the same things were being done by people of high standing without a qualm, although he couldn't quite bring himself to think they were good, he did manage to dismiss them, and he felt no pangs of remorse when he recalled them.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

When Ivan is a young man, he goes to law school and starts to prepare for a life as a judge or some other important official. In these beginning stages of his career, he becomes uncomfortable with some of the practices he's required to adopt, and though Tolstoy doesn't specify what these practices are, what's important is that they make Ivan "feel disgusted with himself." This is a rather strong reaction, one that might drive most people to seek a new line of employment. And yet, Ivan simply gets used to this kind of behavior, which is apparently deeply ingrained in his field. To that end, he notices that his superiors have no problems doing the exact things that make him so uncomfortable, so he simply imitates them and stops questioning his behavior. This aligns with Ivan's later idealization of youth and purity, since he eventually looks back on his early days and realizes that he should have acted on his own misgivings instead of blindly moving forward and ultimately corrupting his soul. Because he covets authority and power, though, he pushes all hesitations out of his mind and devotes himself so fully to his career that he can no longer recall why he ever had reservations in the first place.

❝ Far from abusing this power, he did his best to play it down, but his consciousness of that power and the very chance to play it down were what gave his new job its interest and appeal. In the work itself, the process of investigation, Ivan Ilyich soon mastered the technique of distancing himself from all irrelevancies and reducing the most complicated cases to a version that could be set down on paper in objective outline, excluding any personal opinion on his part, while observing all the necessary formalities, which was what mattered most.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of how Ivan Ilyich conducts himself as a newly appointed judge. Above all, he relishes his newfound power, delighting not necessarily in the actual details of his job, but in the fact that he can lord his influence over defendants in court. And yet, he makes sure to underplay this dynamic, finding pleasure in the mere idea of his authority, as if it's enough to just know that he's important, respected, and feared. Furthermore, he learns how to adopt an objective way of looking at the world, a skill that is useful in court but has certain consequences in other areas of life, since this worldview essentially teaches him to distance himself from his emotions, thereby making him considerably less empathetic than he might otherwise be. By outlining this dynamic, Tolstoy draws attention the various ways in which Ivan's careerist, power-hungry mindset corrupts his inherent humanity, which he had when he started his working life but now seems to have obliterated once and for all.

He realized that married life—at least with his wife—didn't always mean enjoyment and decency, but, on the contrary, it often disrupted them, and it was therefore necessary to guard against such disruptions. And Ivan Ilyich began to seek ways of doing this. His work was the one thing that impressed Praskovya, and it was through work and the commitments associated with it that he took on his wife and asserted his own independence.

Related Characters: Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

When Ivan and Praskovya start having children, their relationship takes a turn for the worse. This is perhaps because they married for the wrong reasons, prioritizing wealth and status over true love and mutual affection. Consequently, they're ill-equipped to face the various challenges of married life, which is why it's not altogether that surprising that having children—a rewarding but undeniably fatiguing endeavor—puts a strain on their interpersonal dynamic. In response to this new development, Ivan seeks refuge in his work, where he can revel in his power and authority without having to face Praskovya. In doing so, he uses his career to distract himself from his problems, letting the quality of his home life decline without making a genuine attempt to salvage it. And though this tactic perhaps helps him maintain the appearance of happiness, he will later learn that none of his professional accomplishments will mean anything to him as he lies on his deathbed.

Chapter 3 Quotes

In court he found his mind wandering; he would be miles away, wondering whether to have plain or moulded cornices with his curtains. He became so involved that he often did the work himself, rearranging the furniture and rehanging the curtains. On one occasion, climbing a stepladder to show a dull-witted upholsterer how to hang the draperies, he slipped and fell, though he was strong and agile enough to hold on, and all he did was bump his side on a window-frame knob. The bruised place hurt for a while but it soon passed off. And all this time Ivan Ilyich felt particularly well and in the best of spirits. 'I seem to have shed fifteen years,' he wrote home.

Related Characters: Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

After a period of professional frustration and relational turmoil, Ivan manages to secure a new job as a judge in St. Petersburg. Overjoyed, he moves to the city before his family so that he can set up their apartment. As he does so, he becomes increasingly obsessed with how their living space is decorated. This preoccupation even takes his attention away from his professional life, which is surprising because he usually uses his career to distract himself from other areas of his life. That his interest in outfitting his new apartment to look enviable and fancy eclipses his interest in his work is yet another sign that he doesn't truly care about the actual inner workings of his job, but only cares about the status and power it gives him. Having secured that power, then, he finds himself daydreaming in court about how impressive his apartment will look when he finishes decorating it. When Ivan falls and bruises his side, though, Tolstoy intimates that Ivan's obsession with status and appearances is perhaps detrimental to his overall wellbeing. And though this injury is likely what leads Ivan to develop his fatal illness, he's too concentrated on cultivating his (and his apartment's) image to take stock of how this fixation is taking a toll on him.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The whole thing turned out just as he had expected [...]. He was made to wait, the doctor was full of his own importance—an attitude he was familiar with because it was one that he himself assumed in court—then came all the tapping and listening, the questions with predetermined and obviously superfluous answers, the knowing look that seemed to say, 'Just place yourself in our hands and we'll sort it out, we know what we're doing, there's no doubt about it. We can sort things out the same way as we would for anyone you care to name.' It was just like being in court. The way he looked at the accused in court was exactly the way he was being looked at now by the famous doctor.

Related Characters: Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Mikhail Danilovich (the Doctor), Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan's condition becomes increasingly painful, he takes his discomfort out on Praskovya by arguing with her whenever he has the chance. In response, Praskovya finally urges him to see a doctor, and though he doesn't want to, he agrees. When he arrives, though, he thinks that the doctor is "full of his own importance." This bothers him because he doesn't like being put in a position of vulnerability, and he comes to resent the doctor's authority, especially since he recognizes it as the same kind of authority that he himself has in court. In the doctor's office, Ivan is like any other patient—a sentiment he thinks the doctor's gaze communicates, sensing that the man's look says, "We can sort things out the same way as we would for anyone you care to name." Of course, this sentiment should soothe Ivan because it suggests that he's in good hands, but all he can focus on is his own inferior position in relation to the doctor. In turn, readers see just how important it is for Ivan to not only feel powerful and authoritative, but also in control. Unfortunately for him, though, bodily illnesses tend to transcend this kind of control.

The doctor glared at him through one eye over his glasses as if to say, 'Prisoner in the dock, if you will not confine yourself to answering the questions put to you I shall have to arrange for you to be removed from the courtroom.'

'I have already told you what I consider necessary and appropriate. Anything further will be determined by the tests.' The doctor bowed.

Related Characters: Mikhail Danilovich (the Doctor) (speaker), Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the doctor responds to Ivan's questions about his illness. Ivan has already tried to discern whether or not his condition could be fatal, but the doctor ignored him when he first posed this question, instead focusing on obtuse anatomical matters that elude Ivan's comprehension. Wanting to know just how serious his sickness is, Ivan asks the doctor once more at the end of their session if his illness could lead to death, and this time the doctor looks disapprovingly at him. Once again, Ivan feels vulnerable, as if he's a defendant in court at the mercy of an authoritative judge. This is especially hard for him to swallow because he is usually in the opposite position, doling out condescending instructions to others. But in this context, there's nothing he can do but accept his own inferiority. To make matters worse, the doctor refuses to answer his question, failing to empathize with his fear. From this point on, Ivan has a strained relationship with doctors, constantly suspecting that they aren't focusing on him as a patient—as a *person*—but instead treating him as a mere collection of emotionless organs.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Absorption; the blind gut was curing itself. Then suddenly he could feel the same old dull gnawing pain, quiet, serious, unrelenting. The same nasty taste in his mouth. His heart sank and his head swam. 'O God! O God!' he muttered. 'It's here again, and it's not going away.' And suddenly he saw things from a completely different angle. 'The blind gut! The kidney!' he said to himself. 'It's got nothing to do with the blind gut or the kidney. It's a matter of living or…dying. Yes, I have been alive, and now my life is steadily going away and I can't stop it. No. There's no point in fooling myself. Can't they all see—everybody but me—that I'm dying? It's only a matter of weeks, or days—maybe any minute now. There has been daylight; now there is darkness. I have been *here*; now I'm going *there*. Where?'

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin (speaker), Mikhail Danilovich (the Doctor)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

After deciding to follow the doctor's regimen, Ivan dutifully takes his medicine. After swallowing his medicine one night, he tricks himself into thinking that he feels better, rejoicing in the idea that he will recover if only he follows the doctor's orders. As soon as the pain comes crashing back, though, he finds himself even more defeated and pessimistic than before. In this state of mind, he curses the doctor's focus on his internal organs, deciding that his situation has nothing to do with the kidney or the "blind gut." Instead, it has to do with a simple matter of life and death. However, nobody is willing to admit this except for him, making him feel even more alone with his illness. Worse, he's certain that he's

dying but completely *uncertain* what that actually means—where will he go and what will happen to him? These questions gnaw at him as he struggles with his own mortality.

Chapter 6 Quotes

> All his life the syllogism he had learned from Kiesewetter's logic—Julius Caesar is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caesar is mortal—had always seemed to him to be true only when it applied to Caesar, certainly not to him. There was Caesar the man, and man in general, and it was fair enough for them, but he wasn't Caesar the man and he wasn't man in general, he had always been a special being, totally different from all others, he had been Vanya with his mama and his papa, [...] with all the delights, sorrows and rapture of childhood, boyhood and youth. Did Caesar have anything to do with the smell of that little striped leather ball that Vanya had loved so much? Was it Caesar who had kissed his mother's hand like that, and was it for Caesar that the silken folds of his mother's dress had rustled the way they did?

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan tries to come to terms with the fact that he is going to die, he reflects upon the nature of his death and, more specifically, his conception of mortality. To do so, he turns to a syllogism set forth by a philosopher named Kiesewetter, which showcases the inevitability of death by demonstrating that nobody will live forever, including prominent people like Julius Caesar (it's worth noting here that some translations of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* refer to Caius instead of Caesar). Of course, Ivan has always known that everyone on Earth is fated to die, but fully grasping how this applies to him is an entirely different matter. After all, this syllogism fails to help him conceptualize his own death because it is nothing but logic, and the death of a human—a subjective, sentient, emotional being—is far more complicated than any logical formula, syllogism, or saying can capture. Ivan has gone through his entire life experiencing things that feel incontrovertibly unique and special, like his mother's love or childhood joy. Naturally, then, he is wrapped up in the very act of living, and this makes it all but impossible for him to extricate himself from the richness of life to grasp his own mortality, which only becomes real to him once he's actually experiencing it. In this way, Tolstoy demonstrates how difficult it is to project oneself into the process of dying, illustrating that life is simply too viscerally all-consuming for anyone to conceive of what it must be like to lose it.

> But then suddenly there it was, the pain in his side, irrespective of where they had got to in the proceedings, and it was beginning to gnaw at him. Ivan Ilyich focused on it, drove the thought of it away, but it continued to make itself felt. *It* kept coming back, facing him and looking at him, while he sat there rigid, the fire went out of his eyes and he began to wonder whether *It* was the only truth. And his colleagues and subordinates looked on in distress, amazed that he, a man of such brilliant and subtle judgement, was getting confused and making mistakes.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

As Ivan's illness progresses, he tries to devote himself to his work. He does this because this is what he has always done when something in his life poses a problem. Whenever he and Praskovya fought, for example, he delved into his duties as a judge, finding respite in not only the ins and outs of the court, but also in his power. Indeed, reminding himself that he is an authority figure who commands large amounts of respect has always managed to soothe in the past, but now he finds his post at the courthouse incapable of making him feel better. This is because nothing he does can stop the pain in his side from bothering him. While trying to focus on his cases, this pain calls his attention away and makes him look foolish in front of his peers, not only making it impossible for him to distract himself, but also tarnishing his image as a respectable, powerful judge. Accordingly, he begins to think that perhaps pain is "the only truth" in life, and though this is a rather dismal thought, it is accurate, at least insofar as it helps him see that nothing he has done in his professional life will save him from his inevitable end.

Chapter 7 Quotes

He could see that the awful, terrible act of his dying had been reduced by those around him to the level of an unpleasant incident, something rather indecent (as if they were dealing with someone who had come into the drawing-room and let off a bad smell), and this was done by exploiting the very sense of 'decency' that he had been observing all his life. He could see that no one had any pity for him because no one had the slightest desire to understand his situation.

Related Characters: Liza, Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout his long illness, Ivan finds himself more and more estranged from his loved ones. Of course, he wasn't particularly close with Praskovya to begin with, since they have always fought, but he now feels especially isolated from her and the rest of his family because he senses that they see him as little more than a burden. Needless to say, this makes him feel alone with illness, as if he's dealing with it on his own and without any kind of support. And this *is* what he's doing, at least in an emotional sense. What really stings, though, is that the way his wife and peers treat him is directly in line with the lifestyle that he himself has spent his entire adulthood trying to cultivate. As his health declines, he sees that everyone around him thinks that it would be indecent to fully acknowledge the severity of his illness, so they skirt around the issue and treat him like a strange, pathetic man. Worst of all, he can hardly blame them for this, since it's most likely exactly how he would behave if he were in the same position. Simply put, neither he nor anyone around him is capable of showing true empathy, since everyone is too preoccupied with a strained notion of "decency" that ultimately keeps them from emotionally supporting one another.

Chapter 9 Quotes

He waited only for Gerasim to go out into the next room, and then he could restrain himself no longer: he burst into tears like a child. He was weeping because of his own helpless state, and his loneliness, and other people's cruelty, and God's cruelty, and God's non-existence.

'Why hast Thou done all of this? Why hast Thou brought me to this point? Why oh why dost Thou torture me like this?...'

He was not expecting any answers; he was weeping because there were not and could not be any answers.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin (speaker), Gerasim

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

After Ivan becomes so ill that all he can do is lie down, he begins to question the meaning of life, wondering why he has to suffer so terribly. In a state of hopelessness, he thinks about God, or rather the "non-existence" of God, though he still calls out as if God is listening to him. When he does this, his words echo what Jesus yells out from the cross; "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Needless to say, Ivan is not a Christlike figure, since he is self-centered, greedy, and obsessed with his own power—three things that don't align with the standard Christian values. All the same, this parallel is worth noting because it draws attention to Tolstoy's interest in religion. Although Ivan isn't comparable to Jesus Christ, the fact that he echoes Christ's words suggests that he might be drawn to a certain spirituality, one that will perhaps save him from his suffering. For now, though, he receives no answers. Instead, he's forced to grapple with his pain and sorrow on his own, wondering about the meaning of life and the point of suffering.

But what was strange was that all the best times of his happy life no longer seemed anything like what they had been before. Nothing did—except the first recollections of his childhood. There, in his childhood, there was something truly happy that he could have lived with if it returned. But the person living out that happiness no longer existed; it was like remembering someone quite different.

At the point where he, today's Ivan Ilyich, began to emerge, all the pleasures that had seemed so real melted away now before his eyes and turned into something trivial and often disgusting.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

To take his mind off his pain, Ivan tries to recall a time when he was happy, clearly hoping that delving into his memories will help him overcome his suffering. When he thinks about his past, though, he finds it hard remember a time when he was truly and purely happy. Although he may have *thought* he was happy as a judge with power and wealth, he realizes that this wasn't true contentment. Rather, the last time he was happy was as a child, before he corrupted himself with his greedy desires and his obsession with status. As everything that he once coveted so intensely "melt[s] away," he's forced to admit that he has wasted his life in pursuit of a meaningless and wretched existence. In this way, Tolstoy suggests that just because a certain way of life is widely respected or coveted doesn't mean it actually has any legitimate value.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ 'What is this? Can it really be death?' And an inner voice would reply, 'Yes, that's what it is.' 'What is this torture for?' And the voice would reply, 'It's just there. It's not for anything.' Above and beyond this there was nothing.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ivan has a dialogue with a voice that issues up from the depths of his own soul. Tolstoy never clarifies what, exactly, this voice is, leaving readers to take it at face value: it is the voice of Ivan's soul. And yet, this is a rather strange idea, since the voice appears to possess great existential knowledge that Ivan himself doesn't possess. This, in turn, suggests that there is perhaps something inside of Ivan that can save him from his otherwise meaningless, wretched life, the life he wasted by thinking constantly about money and power. When he asks what his suffering is "for," though, the voice says that it's "not for anything," a depressingly nihilistic response that frames life as meaningless. At the same time, though, this idea also encourages Ivan to simply embrace his lived experience for what it is. All his life, he has tried to superimpose meaning onto his existence by concentrating on work or cultivating his public image. Now, at death's doorstop, he has no choice but to acquiesce and simply let happen what is going to happen. All he needs to do, it seems, is let go and experience this transition from life to death.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ It occurred to him that what had once seemed a total impossibility—that he had not lived his life as he should have done—might actually be true. It occurred to him that the slight stirrings of doubt he had experienced about what was considered good by those in the highest positions, slight stirrings that he had immediately repudiated—that these misgivings might have been true and everything else might have been wrong. His career, the ordering of his life, his family, the things that preoccupied people in society and at work—all of this might have been wrong. He made an attempt at defending these things for himself. And suddenly he sensed the feebleness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

After refusing for a long time to admit that he wasted his life focusing on wealth and status, Ivan finally realizes that he has "not lived his life as he should have." On the verge of death, he finds himself capable of admitting that everything he coveted—his career, his public image, his power—means nothing now that he's about to die. Not only this, but these preoccupations are actively "wrong," an idea that suggests Tolstoy—and, in turn, Ivan—thinks these things are actively corruptive and bad for the soul. Even if Ivan tries to tell himself otherwise, he finds it impossible to defend his former way of life because there is "nothing to defend," thereby indicating that his existence has lacked so much substance that he couldn't make a case for its worth even if he wanted to. This notion sheds light on the hesitation he felt at the beginning of his career, when he was a young man who sometimes felt disgusted by what he was required to do in order to become successful. This mindset, it seems, is exactly the mindset he would have needed to preserve in order to lead a happy and good life. Instead, though, he chased superficial forms of contentment, ultimately leaving him with nothing but regret and misery.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ 'Yes, I'm hurting them,' he thought. 'They feel sorry for me, but they'll be all right when I'm dead.' He wanted to tell them this, but he wasn't strong enough to get the words out. 'Anyway…no good talking. Must *do* something.' He looked at his wife, motioned to their son and said: 'Take him away…sorry for him… and you…' He tried to say, 'Forgive me,' but it came out as, 'For goodness…' Too weak to correct himself, he waved his hand knowing that he who needed to would understand.

Related Characters: Ivan Ilyich Golovin (speaker), Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, Vasya

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Ivan speaks his last words to his family. Just before saying this, he accidentally brushes his son Vasya's head with his hand, at which point Vasya kisses his fingers and looks at him with great emotion in his eyes. This interaction enables Ivan to finally stop resenting his family members, since he now understands how much pain they're experiencing as a result of his illness and suffering. In this sense, he recognizes that he isn't quite as alone in his suffering as he thought. Instead of resenting them for trying to live their lives, he now decides to set them free by dying.

Before doing so, though, he tries to apologize to them, but the words come out wrong. Nonetheless, Ivan decides that "he who need[s] to" will understand what he means—a confusing statement, since it's unclear who, exactly, the "he" is in this sentence. It's possible that this "he" refers to God, though the lack of a capital "H" suggests that this isn't the case. More likely, Ivan is referring to *himself*, noting that he knows that he has asked for his family's forgiveness and can therefore die knowing that he made amends with his loved ones. However, if this is the case, it means that Ivan is still focusing first and foremost on himself, not on his family members, who may or may not understand that he asked for their forgiveness. In fact, whether Ivan thinks that God or he himself understood what he says doesn't quite matter—either way, he isn't thinking about his family, even though they're the ones from whom he's asking for forgiveness. In turn, readers see that he is perhaps not quite as transformed as it might seem.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In a courthouse, Ivan Yegorovich Shebek and Fyodor Vasilyevich argue about a case while Pyotr Ivanovich—another judge—reads the newspaper. Looking up from the pages, he interrupts his colleagues with grave news: one of their fellow judges, Ivan Ilyich Golovin, is dead. As the men crowd around the newspaper, they read the statement, which informs readers that Ivan Ilyich's wife, Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, has announced the death of her husband, along with the details of the upcoming funeral. Ivan's colleagues knew that he had been sick for quite some time, and they reflect upon what his death will mean for the courts. More specifically, each man considers how his own life will be positively impacted by Ivan's passing, though none of them say such thoughts aloud.

Although The Death of Ivan Ilyich *is about the long and painful suffering that Ivan Ilyich undergoes before dying, it begins after he has already died. By focusing on Ivan's colleagues' reaction to his death, Tolstoy draws attention to the ways in which healthy people conceive of mortality. Although Ivan Ilyich's friends act upset, their initial thoughts about his passing have to do with their own lives, as they wonder how his death will impact their daily routines. In this way, Tolstoy demonstrates that people often manage to avoid thinking about profound matters like mortality by focusing on rather trivial, selfish concerns.*

Immediately after hearing the news of Ivan Ilyich's death, Fyodor Vasilyevich thinks about how he'll most likely move into someone else's job during the inevitable reshuffling of positions. This, he knows, will enable him to make even more money. Meanwhile, Pyotr Ivanovich privately thinks about how he will be able to get his brother-in-law a job in the courthouse, pleased that his wife will actually be happy with him for once. Despite these thoughts, though, he notes aloud that Ivan's death is quite sad, and the four men discuss their colleague's illness, talking about how none of the doctors Ivan saw could decide how to help him. They then wonder about the financial state in which Ivan left his family and decide that they will have to go visit Praskovya, his wife.

That each of Ivan's friends think about how they'll benefit from his death illustrates not only that humans often distract themselves from sadness by focusing on comparatively petty matters, but also that Ivan Ilyich surrounded himself with people who are especially interested in power, wealth, and status. Though the men discuss how sad it is that Ivan died and left behind his family, it's clear that they're primarily interested in how this turn of events will improve their own lives, a sign that they care about social and professional advancement above all else.

As Pyotr Ivanovich and his colleagues discuss Ivan Ilyich's death, they find themselves overwhelmingly relieved that they weren't the ones to die. "There you have it," each man thinks. "He's dead, and I'm not." They also consider the fact that they now must go through the motions of meeting certain social expectations like attending Ivan's funeral and visiting Praskovya. Exasperated by this prospect, they dread such "tedious" obligations.

Ivan's colleagues only pay superficial though to the prospect of mortality, as they find a foolish sense of comfort in the idea that Ivan died instead of them. Of course, Ivan didn't die instead *of them, but simply* before *them, but each man is unwilling to grapple with the inevitability of his own death. Consequently, they focus on superficial matters like the social obligations they must now fulfill, once again proving that they're eager to avoid thinking about death and that they don't actually care very much about their friend or his grieving family.*

Of all Ivan's colleagues, Pyotr Ivanovich was his closest friend. After dinner that night, Pyotr regretfully sets out for the funeral. When he enters, he spots another one of his colleagues, a somewhat mischievous man named Schwartz who is always in good humor. Schwartz stands out amongst the other funeralgoers, apparently unaffected by the morose proceedings. He even winks at Pyotr from across the room, as if to say that Ivan Ilyich has really "messed things up" by dying and that he did so in a way that neither Schwartz nor Pyotr would have.

The lack of true empathy amongst Ivan's friends comes to the forefront of the novella in this moment, as Pyotr Ivanovich appreciates Schwartz's irreverent attitude at Ivan's funeral. Although the two men are supposedly there to mourn the loss of their friend, they are completely uninterested in emotionally investing themselves in the ceremony, instead trying to set themselves apart from the sadness swirling all around them. In doing so, they prove how little they care about even those to whom they're closest.

Pyotr Ivanovich hesitantly enters the room that contains the coffin. As he steps inside, he awkwardly crosses himself, thinking that one can never go wrong making the sign of the cross in such situations. Still, he's not sure what he's supposed to do in this context, so he also gives a slight bow. As he does so, he furtively glances around the room, taking stock of who's present. Fully entering the room, he notices Ivan's peasant servant, Gerasim, who is scattering pinches of carbolic on the floor to mask the smell of Ivan's decaying body—a smell Pyotr didn't notice until this moment. Reluctantly, Pyotr makes his way to the coffin and looks at his friend, noting that Ivan's face looks beautiful but also somehow disapproving, serving as a reminder that Pyotr himself will someday die, though Pyotr feels as if this doesn't actually apply to him.

Pyotr is intent upon denying his own mortality. This is why he's so unsure of himself as he enters the room that holds Ivan's coffin, fearing any encounter with death that might force him to contemplate his own inevitable end. That he takes stock of who's in the room as he approaches the coffin is yet another reminder of how he and his colleagues focus on trivial social matters as a way of keeping thoughts about death at bay. And even though Ivan's corpse forces Pyotr to wrestle with the reality of death, he still manages to convince himself that he won't meet the same end as his friend—a sign of his unwillingness to accept his own mortality.

Crossing himself once more, Pyotr Ivanovich hurries out of the room. Again, he sees Schwartz, who is waiting for him in the adjoining room. Schwartz gives him a characteristically playful look, and this makes Pyotr feel better, as he sees that Schwartz refuses to let the funeral depress him. His very way of holding himself communicates that Ivan's death will not keep him from organizing the routine game of **whist** that he, Pyotr, and some other friends had planned on playing that night. Furthermore, Pyotr sees that Schwartz thinks there's no reason why they shouldn't have a grand and enjoyable evening, and Schwartz confirms this by informing him that they will soon be meeting up at Fyodor Vasilyevich's house to play cards.

Pyotr Ivanovich and Schwartz's focus on gambling spotlights their obsession with money, which they see as something that will help distract them from having to struggle with the difficult idea of death and mortality. Their desire to play whist that very evening also underscores their lack of empathy for Ivan and his family, as readers see that they're more interested in having a pleasant evening than expressing their condolences to Praskovya. In turn, it becomes clear that their presence at the funeral is nothing more than an act of social posturing, something intended to maintain their guise of respectability.

Just when Pyotr is about to follow Schwartz out of the funeral, Praskovya intercepts him and leads him into the sitting room to have a discussion about Ivan Ilyich's death. On his way, Pyotr looks sheepishly at Schwartz, whose freedom to leave he suddenly envies. Once in the sitting room, though, he makes sure to seem attentive and sad, listening as Praskovya talks about the terrible suffering Ivan experienced in his final days. As she speaks, Pyotr notices that Praskovya only talks about Ivan's agony in terms of how it affected *her*. Still, she talks about how Ivan screamed without stopping for the last three days of his life, and Pyotr can't help but think about having met Ivan as a schoolmate. His friend's suffering, he realizes, is a sign that he himself could succumb to a similar fate. Once again, though, he assures himself that this won't happen.

When Pyotr's plans to escape the funeral are thwarted, he has no choice but to put on a sympathetic face, trying to convince Praskovya that he's genuinely sad about Ivan's death. However, he soon realizes that she—like him—is mainly interested in herself. After all, she focuses only on how Ivan's suffering impacted her life, not on how he felt while dying. Still, this conversation once more forces Pyotr to consider mortality. Somehow, though, he manages to deny the inevitability of his own death yet again, proving just how determined he is to keep these uncomfortable thoughts at bay.

Praskovya starts talking about her finances, making it clear that she wants to figure out how she can get the government to give her as much money as possible in the aftermath of her husband's death. Pretending to deliberate on this matter for a moment, Pyotr eventually tells her that he can't help, claiming that she most likely won't be able to convince the government to give her more financial assistance. As soon as she sees that Pyotr won't help her wring money out of Ivan's death, Praskovya makes it clear that she has no interest in talking to him, so he gets up and exits the sitting room.

Like Pyotr Ivanovich, Praskovya is primarily interested in how she can benefit from Ivan Ilyich's death. Once again, then, it becomes clear that Ivan was surrounded by people who are greedy and selfish. After all, even his wife doesn't seem to truly care about his death in a genuine, emotional sense.

Pyotr Ivanovich sees Ivan's adult daughter, Liza, who nods at him in a way that makes him feel as if she thinks he's guilty of something. Her fiancé stands behind her and does the same, and just as Pyotr is about to turn away, he sees Ivan's young boy, Vasya, who looks exactly like his father did at that age. The child's teary eyes strike Pyotr as the image of a young person who has suddenly "lost his innocence," and the boy frowns at him as Pyotr quickly nods in his direction before turning around and entering the room with the coffin, where the funeral service has just started.

Whether or not Liza and Vasya actually look at Pyotr with contempt is unclear, since it's quite possible that Pyotr Ivanovich is projecting his guilt about leaving the funeral onto the way they gaze at him. Either way, this moment frames Pyotr Ivanovich as an unsympathetic man. It also suggests that Ivan Ilyich's family looks upon his colleagues with scorn, perhaps feeling that Ivan's career ruined his life.

Pyotr Ivanovich refuses to look at Ivan Ilyich's body during the ceremony and leaves as soon as he can. On his way out, he encounters Gerasim, who gives him his coat. Knowing that Gerasim was fond of Ivan and stayed with him until the very end of his life, Pyotr asks if he's feeling sad, but Gerasim simply responds, "'Tis God's will, sir. 'Twill come to us all." When Pyotr is finally outside, he's relieved to smell the fresh air, and he hastily makes his way to Fyodor Vasilyevich's house, where he spends a pleasant evening playing **whist** with his friends.

Gerasim's words are worth noting, not only because they suggest that he—unlike Pyotr or any of his colleagues—has accepted the inevitability of death, but also because of his elevated diction. Although Tolstoy has gone out of his way to make it clear that Gerasim is from a peasant family, the young man speaks more eloquently than anyone else in the novella, ultimately signaling the appreciation Tolstoy had for peasants, whom he thought had the purest, most admirable faith and approach to life, unsullied by greed or selfishness. While Gerasim embraces the fundamental truth of mortality, then, Pyotr Ivanovich rushes off to play cards, hoping that this activity will distract him from thoughts about death.

CHAPTER 2

Ivan Ilyich dies at the age of 45, a respected judge on the Court of Justice. He is the son of an important and well-respected man who has risen to prominence in St. Petersburg, Russia despite the fact that Ivan's father rarely does anything notable. Indeed, Ivan's father is the kind of man who works superfluous jobs but earns large amounts of money. Growing up, Ivan is well-liked and stands out amongst his siblings, a precocious and charming young boy. In school and in his subsequent career, he finds himself attracted to authority, imitating important people and learning their ways of moving through the world. When he begins to study law, he has occasional misgivings about some of the things he's required to do, "disgusted with himself" until he realizes that his superiors are behaving in the same way. From this point on, he stops scrutinizing his own actions.

Ivan grows up surrounded by power and influence, no doubt noting his father's prominence and getting used to the idea of upward mobility. For this reason, he finds it relatively easy to ignore his initial misgivings when he's in school, though it's noteworthy that he does stop to consider whether or not he's embarking upon a moral way of life, given than nobody else seems to pay attention to such matters. Nonetheless, though, his desire to emulate authority figures and advance in his career eclipses any concern he might have about how he conducts himself—a sign that his thirst for power is overwhelmingly strong.

After graduating from law school, Ivan becomes an assistant to the governor and moves to one of the provinces surrounding St. Petersburg. Before he leaves, he buys expensive clothing and beautiful luggage, upon which he has the words **Respice finem** embroidered. Once he arrives in the provinces, he excels at his job, becoming reserved and bureaucratic even as he cultivates a certain social charisma that makes it easy to deal with people. During this time, he casually dates a couple of young women, goes out drinking with his friends, and sometimes visits prostitutes. Despite this slightly devilish behavior, though, he maintains a respectable image, and nobody faults him for his youthful antics.

When Ivan buys himself expensive clothing and luggage before starting his new job, readers see the extent to which he wants to cultivate a certain image for himself. To that end, he wants to be seen as a rich, successful, and powerful young man, regardless of what he actually does. And even though he behaves somewhat wildly, he manages to achieve his goal of becoming a respectable figure in society—an indication that status in his social circle has less to do with how a person behaves and more to do with how he or she presents him- or herself.

After five years as the governor's assistant, Ivan starts a new job as an examining magistrate in the courts. This requires him to move to a new province, where he makes more connections and cultivates the respect of his peers. As a judge, he delights in his newfound power, realizing that people are directly at his mercy now. Even if he doesn't subject people to humiliation, he likes to wield his power by behaving kindly to defendants, subtly reminding them that, although he's being nice, he has the ability to make their lives miserable. As he gets used to his work, he gets good at putting objective distance between his judgment and any given case, making decisions based on nothing other than facts and never letting his emotions interfere.

When Ivan becomes a judge, he delights in his newfound power, demonstrating once again that this kind of prominence is exactly what he has always wanted in life. Any misgivings he may have had about his profession or behavior have clearly faded to nothing, as he takes pleasure in the idea that people are at his mercy. Furthermore, the fact that Ivan learns to put objective distance between his emotions and his decisions simply proves that he is becoming less and less connected to his own humanity, prioritizing his career and status over his feelings.

While making friends in high society, Ivan starts playing **whist**, enjoying the card game along with his increased salary and burgeoning reputation. He also begins to see a young woman named Praskovya Fyodorovna. Praskovya is attractive, well-respected, and is a good match for Ivan on the dancefloor, which is where he decides—based on her impressive moves—that it might not be such a bad idea to marry her. Although he has never put much thought into getting married before, he now recognizes that Praskovya is not only beautiful and sought-after, but also comes from a rich family, meaning that she will bring some wealth into their marriage. Thinking this way, he proposes to her.

Ivan getting married has little to do with his actual emotions, since he bases this decision on financial and social concerns. Treating his relationship with Praskovya like a kind of social currency, he proposes to her simply because she will bring him wealth and respect. Once again, then, readers see how invested he is in his reputation and status, prioritizing such matters over his true feelings.

Praskovya and Ivan get married, and at first everything is wonderful. The presents, the furniture, the romance—they all immensely please Ivan. However, things take a turn for the worse around the time that Praskovya becomes pregnant, at which point they begin to argue. Ivan seeks refuge in his work, focusing on his career whenever he and Praskovya launch into an argument. Realizing that his marriage won't always be a source of happiness and agreeability, he applies himself with extra fervor to advancing his career, knowing that this pursuit will ultimately please Praskovya even as it enables him to avoid her. This dynamic only intensifies when Praskovya gives birth to their first child, and it is perhaps because of their strained home life that Ivan gets promoted within three years, so focused has he been on his work.

In this period of his life, Ivan's devotion to his career intensifies because of his inability to address the problems in his life. Rather than working with Praskovya to cultivate a healthier, more agreeable relationship, he distracts himself by focusing on what he has always focused on: power, wealth, and status. Needless to say, none of these things will actually restore the dynamic between him and Praskovya, but he doesn't stop to consider this—or, if he does, he doesn't care.

Praskovya and Ivan have other children, and their strained relational dynamic continues. After seven years, Ivan is transferred to a new province, and though his salary is higher, the family's living costs are also higher. Consequently, he begins to worry about money. To make matters worse, two of his children die, and Praskovya begins to blame him for the family's hardships. However, her scorn doesn't bother him all that much, since he sees it as his role to do whatever he can to distance himself from family life while simultaneously making his loved ones' existence slightly more pleasant by providing for them.

Ivan finds purpose in his role as a provider, insisting to himself that it's all right to withdraw from family life because he's doing so in order to improve his loved ones' lives. In reality, though, it seems rather obvious that he simply wants to distract himself from his unhappiness. After all, he didn't marry for love, so it's unsurprising that his relationship with Praskovya depresses him. For this reason, he devotes himself to his career, using his obsession with authority and wealth to ignore his overall discontent.

CHAPTER 3

Seventeen years after his wedding, Ivan is a senior public prosecutor. In the seven years since moving to a new province, he has declined opportunities to transfer because he thinks he'll soon be promoted. However, he is unexpectedly passed over for promotion, and when he complains, his superiors hardly respond. The following year, he is skipped over once again. Ivan takes these developments as personal insults, feeling his power and influence dwindling. Feeling abandoned, he takes a leave of absence to rest in the countryside at his brother-in-law's house. After just a short time of lounging with the family, though, he decides to make his way directly to St. Petersburg to address the fact that he deserves more respect than he has received. More specifically, he decides that he will take any job—in any capacity—that will pay him 5,000 rubles per year.

Ivan's brief period of misfortune shows him that not everything in life will always work out in his favor. At the same time, though, this is nothing but a minor setback compared to the many travesties that could befall him. Nevertheless, Ivan sees his failure to attain even more upward mobility as a great injustice, apparently blaming his superiors and colleagues instead of himself. In this moment, then, readers see that Ivan tends to lash out at others when things don't go his way. What's more, his decision to find any job that will pay 5,000 rubles underlines the fact that he cares about money more than anything else.

On the train from the countryside to St. Petersburg, Ivan sits next to a colleague who tells him that the entire ministry is about to undergo a great change that will vacate multiple positions. As a result of this conversation, Ivan manages to secure a respected role in the courts in St. Petersburg because he knows an important colleague who has just risen to power. After a week of making arrangements in the city, he sends word to Praskovya and tells her that he will be receiving 5,000 rubles per year in addition to 3,500 to help them move back to the city. When he returns to the countryside, he tells Praskovya everything that happened, and she is just as excited as him, fantasizing about the life they will lead in St. Petersburg. For the first time in a long while, they are at peace with each another.

It's worth noting that Ivan rises to prominence not because of his skill or hard work, but because he knows somebody important. This kind of nepotism perfectly illustrates why he and the people in his social circle care so much about reputation, since the best way to advance in this particular society is by leaning upon one's status and connections. Furthermore, Ivan and Praskovya finally reconcile because they both appreciate wealth and status—a fact that underlines the superficial concerns that hold their relationship together.

Ivan goes to St. Petersburg before the rest of his family in order to begin his job and set up their new apartment. During this period, he throws himself into decorating their new residence, sparing no expense and outfitting it with all the latest styles. He's so absorbed by this task that he daydreams about how beautiful the apartment will look even as he sits in court. One day, he sees an upholsterer hanging the drapes the wrong way, so he tries to show the man how he wants it. While standing on a ladder, he falls and hits his side against the knob on the window frame, leaving a painful **bruise**. However, he brushes this injury off, telling Praskovya in a letter that he feels 15 years younger now that he has the job he's always wanted and lives in a beautiful apartment.

Ivan's contentment has nothing to do with the particular nature of his new job. Instead of taking delight in his actual role in the courts, he fixates on the many perks that have come along with this position. In keeping with this, he obsesses over his apartment, devoting himself to decorating it. In fact, he applies himself with such fervor to the task of outfitting his living space that he physically harms himself. And though he decides that the bruise he receives while hanging the drapes is nothing to worry about, it serves as an indication that his shortsighted obsession with superficial matters in life may very well take a toll on his wellbeing.

When Praskovya and the children finally come to St. Petersburg, Ivan proudly takes them from room to room and shows them how he's decorated the apartment. As he does so, Praskovya acts impressed even though the decorations are nothing special. In fact, they look exactly like what everyone else has in their homes, but this doesn't bother Ivan or Praskovya. Later, Praskovya asks him about his injury on the ladder, and he makes a joke of it, reenacting the fall and saying that he's lucky he's so athletic, since the accident could have killed a lesser man. Although the **bruise** still hurts, he says, it's improving and is nothing to worry about.

Although both Praskovya and Ivan like the way their new apartment is decorated, Tolstoy indicates that the style is rather unimpressive. That the decorations are the same ones everyone else in their social circle has is unsurprising, considering that Ivan and Praskovya are both so focused on how other people see them and, thus, are quick to conform to whatever styles their peers embrace. In fact, this fixation on earning respect in society eclipses Ivan's concern for his own wellbeing, as evidenced by how little he cares about the injury he sustained while working on his apartment.

Ivan and Praskovya are happy in their new life, though they find that they still don't have quite as much money or space as they'd like. Nonetheless, they both go through their days in a good mood, even if Ivan sometimes gets frustrated when he finds certain things out of order in the apartment. While Ivan spends the majority of his time cultivating an air of emotional detachment in court, Praskovya and their eldest daughter, Liza, busy themselves with social obligations. Like them, Ivan enjoys socializing, taking pride in having dinner and dance parties to show off their apartment. One by one, he and Praskovya stop associating with anyone they think is below their social status. They also encourage Liza's budding relationship with a young man named Petrishchev, who is the only son of an examining magistrate.

During this period, Ivan and Praskovya think only about how to cultivate their reputation as a family, wanting to make the most out of their new social status. This is worth noting, since they have already spent so much time trying to improve their reputation—now that they've attained a new level of respect in society, they don't simply relax into it and enjoy their lives but continue to obsess over their public image. This, in turn, suggests that superficial concerns of this nature persist no matter how much success a person earns.

CHAPTER 4

As life goes on, Ivan experiences an occasional pain in his side and an odd taste in his mouth. However, he doesn't think that these ailments point to anything serious, though the feeling in his side soon intensifies into a bizarre "dragging sensation" that often puts him in a foul mood. As his temperament takes a turn for the worse, so does his everyday life. He starts arguing with Praskovya whenever he gets the chance, criticizing her for even the smallest matters. She, on the other hand, decides that he's cruel and takes pride in restraining herself from saying anything about his unreasonable new attitude. Still, she comes to see him as the root of all her problems. During one particularly nasty argument that ends with Ivan blaming his bad mood on his poor health, she insists that he should see a doctor if he's actually ill.

What stands between Ivan and Praskovya is their shared tendency to blame each other. Instead of recognizing his physical discomfort as the reason for his bad mood, Ivan picks arguments with Praskovya, and instead of sensing that her husband is lashing out because he's in pain, Praskovya decides that he's responsible for everything in her life that makes her unhappy. With this dynamic at play, it's no wonder that they're unable to connect with each other, let alone help each other address the things that are bothering them.

Ivan agrees to visit a doctor, though he dislikes the idea. Just as he feared, the doctor is authoritative and pompous, striding in and speaking to him in the same way that Ivan himself addresses guilty defendants in court. As the doctor goes on about Ivan's kidney and "blind gut," Ivan has trouble understanding him, primarily wanting to know whether or not his life is in danger. At one point, he asks if his condition is life-threatening, but the doctor doesn't answer, instead continuing his long assessment of Ivan's internal organs, speculating that he might have a "floating kidney," though he goes out of his way to add that they'll know more after they receive his test results. Before leaving, Ivan asks again if his condition is life-threatening, but the doctor merely says that he's already delivered his assessment. He then sends Ivan away.

The fact that Ivan is so threatened by his doctor's authority demonstrates once again how much he cares about power. Having spent his entire adult life trying to become an influential and widely respected judge, he dislikes being put in a position of vulnerability, wherein he must defer to the doctor's judgment. Worse, he can't get the doctor to tell him whether or not his condition is life-threatening. For somebody who likes being in control, then, he finds the doctor's unwillingness to reassure him extremely disconcerting.

The way the doctor looked at Ivan when he asked if he might die haunts Ivan on his way home. He feels as if this look communicated that he's doomed, and this thought makes everything on the streets seem miserable and bleak. When he tells Praskovya what the doctor said, though, she replies, "Well, I'm very pleased." She then leaves to get dressed to go out. After this exchange, Ivan supposes that his wife might be right, deciding that there's nothing to worry about yet as long as he takes the medicine the doctor prescribed for him.

It's possible that Ivan is reading too much into what his doctor thinks, but Praskovya's flippant, unbothered response seems out of touch with what her husband is experiencing. After all, the doctor refused to answer whether or not Ivan's condition might lead to his death, indicating that this is indeed a possibility. However, Praskovya is too focused on her social life to pay too much attention to what's going on with Ivan's health. Once more, then, readers see that an obsession with status and social image can interfere with a person's ability to empathize with her loved ones. Furthermore, Ivan's decision to ignore his worst fears suggests that he's eager to recapture the sense of control that has—up until this point—governed his life.

Ivan's medicinal regimen changes after his test results come back, but nothing seems to make him feel better. Worse, the test results themselves are apparently not as conclusive as his doctor suggested, and this causes Ivan to think that the doctor was either mistaken, lying, or hiding the true nature of his illness. Still, though, he decides to keep taking the prescribed medication. During this period, he thinks constantly about illness and the human body, but this doesn't help alleviate his pain, which is only getting worse. Throughout this process, he finds it more frustrating than normal to fight with Praskovya, and every little thing that anyone does to upset him seems to intensify his pain. Accordingly, he gets angry with anyone who causes him trouble, thinking that they're throwing him into a rage and that this rage is what's making him ill.

During this period, Ivan's life is marked by his anger. Indeed, he questions the doctor's authority, blaming the specialist for what's happening to his body. He also continues to fight with Praskovya, and he lashes out at anyone who makes him angry, finding ways to pin his ailments on them. Ironically, he acknowledges his anger and rage, but instead of addressing it, he faults whomever has made him mad. In this way, then, Tolstoy illustrates how unwilling Ivan is to take responsibility for his own feelings, doing anything he can to ignore his fear and uncertainty in this time of hardship.

Ivan's illness gets worse and worse, even as he tries to convince himself that he's getting better. He also consults multiple doctors, and though some of them appear optimistic about his condition, nothing anyone does for him actually makes him feel better. Because of this, he seeks out homeopathy and even entertains the idea of ascribing to non-Christian spiritual beliefs, though this only makes him feel as if his illness is making him crazy. And all the while, his pain intensifies and the taste in his mouth becomes stronger. In keeping with this, he admits to himself that something terrible is happening inside of him, and though he recognizes this, nobody around him appears willing to agree. To his great frustration, everyone else acts like the world is going along like normal.

As Ivan's illness advances, he tries to tell himself that everything will be all right. This effort highlights his desire to be in control of his own life. However, it's not always possible to control what happens, and this is something that Ivan slowly comes to realize as his condition becomes more serious. To make matters worse, the people around him are apparently incapable of empathizing with him because they don't care enough to truly stop to consider his situation. After all, it's easier to simply tell him to maintain hope. In other words, Ivan has surrounded himself with people who only care about the things he himself has always prioritized: money, status, and power. As a result, he has nobody to turn to when he needs emotional support.

What bothers Ivan the most is that Praskovya and Liza hardly seem to care about his illness. They are, he sees, too invested in their social lives to pay attention to his condition. They try to hide this, he knows, but they fail to obscure that they're annoyed by his new burdensome presence. Instead of sympathizing with his discomfort, Praskovya chastises him in front of their friends, saying that he's uncomfortable because he's not taking proper care of himself. His diet and lifestyle, she claims, don't align with his physician's advice, as evidenced by his tendency to stay out late playing **whist** with his friends. And though he argues that this only happened once, Praskovya remains steadfast in her belief that Ivan is to blame for his illness.

Like Ivan, Praskovya blames others for the things in her life that threaten her happiness. In this case, Ivan himself is the person encroaching upon her ability to enjoy life, so she criticizes him and treats him like nothing more than a nuisance. In his illness, then, Ivan gains a new vantage point from which to observe the life he led with Praskovya, realizing that she—like him—has always prioritized social matters over all else.

At work, Ivan senses his colleagues treating him differently because of his condition, and this frustrates him. In particular, he comes to dislike Schwartz's good-natured attitude and respected reputation, both of which remind him of himself as a younger man. When playing **whist**, he begins to make mistakes, but instead of critiquing him, the other players simply ask if he'd like to stop playing because he's too tired. Vehemently refusing to stop, Ivan finishes these games but realizes that his bad attitude has brought the entire mood down, and he feels bad for ruining the night. On his own after such experiences, he feels as if he's alone with his pain and fear.

Having led a life devoted to reputation and social status, Ivan is isolated from his peers now that he can no longer fully participate in the community. Because nobody is interested in empathizing with him, he has to either accept that he's alone with his illness or try to go along like normal—two options that are nearly impossible for him to pursue, since he cares so much about his social life yet can't find the strength to maintain his place in the public eye.

CHAPTER 5

Several months later, Ivan's brother-in-law comes for a visit. Upon setting eyes on Ivan, he can't disguise his horror, gaping at him in a way that confirms Ivan's worst fears about his physical decline. After this interaction, Ivan seeks out a mirror and stares at his gaunt face, comparing what he sees to a photograph of himself and noting the extreme difference. He then pulls up his sleeves and looks at his wrists before covering them once more and saying, "No, no. I mustn't."

At a certain point, there's only so much Ivan can do to convince himself that he'll be all right. When his brother-in-law reacts so intensely to the way he looks, it becomes impossible for him to deny the toll his illness has taken on him. This leaves him feeling distraught, which is why he gazes at his wrists, apparently considering suicide before deciding that he "mustn't" do such a thing. Although nothing Ivan has done until now has indicated that he's religious, this sense that it would be wrong to kill himself hints that he may harbor certain religious ideas. After all, he stops himself from committing suicide not because he doesn't want *to, but because he thinks he* shouldn't. *Given that suicide is a sin, this suggests that Ivan stops himself for vaguely religious reasons.*

Listening in on a conversation between Praskovya and his brother-in-law, Ivan hears his brother-in-law call him a "dead man," though Praskovya insists that her brother is exaggerating. Withdrawing from the door, Ivan goes to lie down and thinks about the various diagnoses he's received, picturing his kidney floating in his body and trying to imagine fixing it in place. He then springs up and goes to visit his doctor. During this visit, the doctor insists that everything can be fixed inside of Ivan's body simply by following a certain regimen. Filled with newfound optimism, Ivan goes back home and enjoys a pleasant evening with Praskovya and several guests, but he never manages to forget about his condition. Before long, he retires to the single bedroom that he's been sleeping in ever since his illness began.

Only by seeing his brother-in-law's shock is Ivan finally able to realize the true severity of his illness. Because everyone around him is too focused on their own lives and doesn't want to empathize with Ivan, they don't tell him the truth about how he looks. Now, though, Ivan is able to register just how much he has changed. And though he derives a certain amount of comfort from his visit to the doctor, it's not enough to fully push his worries out of his mind. Similarly, even a night of socializing doesn't make him feel better, even though such activities used to bring him comfort.

Lying on his bed, Ivan takes his medicine and thinks about the doctor's advice to simply follow his regimen. As he swallows the prescription, he feels as if he's getting better already, thinking that his pain has actually receded. The next moment, though, the pain comes crashing back and the foul taste returns. Cursing the "blind gut" and the kidney, Ivan thinks that his condition has nothing to do with his internal organs. Rather, he sees it as a plain matter of life and death, believing that his life is "steadily going away" and cannot be helped. He wonders why everyone else won't admit that he's dying, when it's so obvious to him that he only has a little bit of time left on Earth. Thinking this way, he wonders with a jolt what, exactly, will happen when he dies.

Ivan's optimism—fleeting as it is—demonstrates how desperate he is to ignore the serious implications of his illness, wanting badly to go back to living the carefree life that his peers and family are enjoying. However, there's no stopping his pain, which comes back to haunt him as soon as he tricks himself into thinking he's better. When this happens, he bitterly resents everyone around him, cursing them as if it's their fault that he's ill. Once again, then, he lashes out at others in a moment of hardship, proving his vengeful, scornful nature.

Ivan jumps up to light a candle but drops it on the floor and collapses once again on his bed, finding everything pointless. Death, he knows, is coming for him. He is dying and nobody cares. Even though everyone will die, they refuse to admit their own mortality. With this in mind, Ivan sits up and tries to calm himself, reviewing everything that has happened to him. The pain began when he bumped his side, he remembers. Then the pain intensified, he became depressed, and he sought out multiple doctors. And all this time, death has been getting closer and closer while he has foolishly been worrying about his gut and kidney.

As Ivan thinks about the nature of mortality and tries to relate it to his illness, he realizes that he has been ignoring an important fact, which is that he will someday die no matter what he does to prevent it. One of the reasons he feels so alone with his illness is that everyone around him is—like he used to be—unwilling to recognize the inevitably of death. Now, though, Ivan understands that he's destined for death and that this will likely happen sooner rather than later. For this reason, focusing on his internal organs seems futile, as does the social life that Praskovya and Liza continue to lead.

Having heard him drop the candle, Praskovya enters Ivan's room and asks him what's wrong. He tells her that he simply dropped something and that everything is fine, deciding that there's no point talking to her about his condition because she won't understand. Praskovya, for her part, is all too eager to pick up the candle, light it, and rush out of the room. After their guests have departed later that night, she returns and asks if he's feeling even worse, and he admits that he is. Hearing this, she expresses her desire to have a celebrated doctor visit him at home, but he only smiles and says no. As she bends to kiss him on the forehead, he feels nothing but hatred for her—hatred that consumes his entire being.

Praskovya is apparently incapable of empathizing with Ivan. This is most likely because they don't have a legitimate connection, since their marriage is built on little more than a shared interest in money and reputation. As a result, Praskovya finds herself unable to emotionally support her husband through his illness, which causes Ivan to resent her. In turn, Ivan's resentment further estranges him from her, as he conveys nothing but scorn when she tries to reach out to him.

CHAPTER 6

Ivan is certain that he's dying. Not only does this depress him, but it confounds him, too, since he can't quite come to terms with the idea of his own mortality. For his entire life, he has thought about a popular syllogism: "Julius Caesar is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caesar is mortal." This, Ivan has always believed, is true for everyone—including Caesar—but not true for himself. After all, he's not Caesar, and he's not anyone else, either. Instead, he has always been special and unique, has lived an entire life of his own that has been unlike anyone else's experience on earth. Plus, it would simply be too awful for Ivan to die. This, at least, is what he has always thought.

Ivan's conception of mortality is illogical. Although he recognizes that everyone must someday die, he sees himself as exempt from this fate, though he has no legitimate reason to think this. At the same time, though, his unrealistic viewpoint is understandable, since most people find it difficult to fully comprehend their own mortality. For Ivan, death is an abstract concept, not something that actually influences his subjective experience or the way he moves through the world. After all, he has, of course, never died before. And yet, he now finds himself hurtling toward death, completely unable to conceptualize what this means or how it has possibly brought itself to bear on his life.

Despite these preconceptions, Ivan knows he's on his way toward death, and this causes him to wonder about the point of life. To avoid these thoughts, he tries to think about his career, remembering that his work life always took his mind off of unpleasant thoughts. And yet, none of his accomplishments mean anything now that he's about to die, since nothing he did throughout his career can protect him from death. As a result, he now finds himself incapable of ignoring the pain in his side, which twists into him and causes him to question whether or not pain is the only truth in life. In the coming days and weeks, he tries to go to work like normal, but he can't pay attention to his cases because of his pain, making him look foolish in front of his colleagues.

Ivan has devoted his entire life to his career. This is partially because he used it as a way to distract himself from his various discontents, but it's also because he coveted power, status, and control. Now, though, he finds that not even his sterling professional reputation can give him the kind of control he needs in order to keep himself from dying. In fact, nothing at all can give him this kind of control, so he's forced to surrender to the inevitability of death—something he has trouble doing because he's used to manipulating his own authority to protect himself from undesirable situations.

Finding no relief in his work, Ivan sometimes enters the drawing room (where he first hurt himself) and tinkers with the various decorations. One day, though, Praskovya tells him to stop because he might injure himself again, and suddenly his pain flares up before him, and he's unable to ignore it. As he experiences this, he thinks about how he sacrificed his good health for a measly curtain.

For perhaps the first time, Ivan grasps the utter vapidity of everything he used to covet. Now that he's a sick, dying man, drapes and other purely aesthetic items mean very little. And yet, he has devoted his entire life to his public image, wasting his time thinking about the way a curtain hangs instead of thinking about his happiness or overall wellbeing.

CHAPTER 7

As time passes, everyone in Ivan's life understands that the only question regarding his death is how long it will take. He struggles each night to sleep and receives opioid and morphine injections, but none of these remedies make him feel better. He also has to eat specially prepared foods and must go to the bathroom in a chamber pot, which Gerasim empties. Thankfully, though, going to the bathroom also means that he can interact with Gerasim, of whom he has become very fond. Gerasim is a happy and pure young man who has no qualms about cleaning up after Ivan, and he even comes to Ivan's aid when the dying man is incapable of bringing himself to or from the chamber pot.

In this section, Ivan's condition only gets worse. It's important to note that everyone around him has finally accepted this development. However, they continue to avoid acknowledging this in front of Ivan. Indeed, even if it's obvious to them that he's nearing the end of his life, they act like his condition isn't so bad. This, it seems, is most likely because they don't want to fully engage with his process of dying, finding it easier to mostly ignore what's happening to him. The only person who is fully involved in Ivan's demise is Gerasim, who helps him through everyday activities like going to the bathroom. Except for this young man, then, Ivan is alone.

When Gerasim is cleaning up after Ivan one day, Ivan acknowledges that this must not be very pleasant for him. However, Gerasim tells him not to worry, saying, "It's no trouble. You're a sick man." On another occasion, Gerasim lets Ivan rest his legs on his shoulders, putting Ivan's legs in an elevated position that eases his pain. After a while, Ivan tells Gerasim he can go, but the servant insists upon staying. From this point on, Ivan frequently calls for Gerasim so that he can elevate his legs, and he finds pleasure in talking to the young man and admiring the easy, unbegrudging way in which Gerasim behaves. Although Ivan resents other people's healthiness, he finds Gerasim's good health somehow calming and reassuring.

Ivan takes a liking to Gerasim because the young man represents a certain kind of innocence and purity that his own life lacks. This is because Ivan's life has been corrupted by greed. Throughout his life, Ivan has devoted himself to superficial, materialistic modes of existence, all in an attempt to distract himself from his own discontent. Gerasim, on the other hand, has no problem embracing life's difficulties, understanding that everyone will die one day. For this reason, he is happy to help Ivan in a way that nobody in Ivan's social class is willing to do.

What Ivan hates most about his condition is that everyone around him pretends that he'll recover. Ivan, on the other hand, knows he's dying, so he thinks of everyone's optimism as a lie. Even the doctors pretend that they'll be able to help him, but this just enervates Ivan because he wants them to acknowledge his true condition. And yet, he never tells them to stop lying when they examine him and talk about his prospects.

By this point in the novella, Ivan has accepted his fate but hasn't yet made peace with it. He knows that he's dying, which is why he is so offended by everyone's optimism. And yet, he can't help but listen to his doctors with hope in his heart, wanting to be reassured of a possible recovery. In this way, he both admits and ignores reality, clearly too afraid of death to embrace his inevitable end.

In addition to thinking that everyone is lying to him, Ivan senses that the people around him see him as a burden. Believing that his doctors and loved ones see his dying as little more than a nuisance, he thinks that everyone blames him for acting in some kind of "indecent" manner. Worse, he knows that this very mindset arises from the standards of decency and social charm to which he has devoted his entire life. Knowing what everyone must be thinking, then, he realizes that nobody empathizes with him because they don't want to truly understand his predicament. The only person willing to actually do this, he knows, is Gerasim, who tells him one evening, "We've all got to die one day. Why shouldn't I give you a hand?"

As Ivan slowly dies, he recognizes that the life he lived was largely vapid and superficial, as evidenced by the fact that his peers and loved ones can't be bothered to empathize with him. This, in turn, leads him to the realization that genuine empathy requires a willingness to understand another person's hardships. To that end, people are hesitant to sympathize with Ivan's condition because doing so would mean trying to understand what it would feel like to be dying. Only Gerasim, then, is willing and able to show Ivan empathy, since he's unafraid of acknowledging the inevitability of death.

Privately, Ivan wants people to treat him like a small, ailing child. He knows that this would perhaps embarrass him, but he yearns for this kind of empathy regardless, which is why he takes comfort in his relationship with Gerasim. However, he goes to great lengths to hide this secret wish, as is the case when Shebek comes to visit him and he speaks seriously about a certain court case. It is exactly this kind of lying, though, that plagues Ivan's final days.

Although Ivan has admitted to himself that he's dying, he is still very much attached to his former life. That he speaks with Shebek about a court case illustrates his desire to present himself as unchanged. In reality, though, he has undergone a significant transformation, since becoming ill has forced him to reevaluate what he really cares about. Even if he hasn't yet completely renounced the way he lived his life, it's clear that he's begun to question the point of constantly focusing on power, wealth, and status. And yet, he continues to act like these things are still on his mind—a sign that it's difficult to break free from the lifestyle he's cultivated.

CHAPTER 8

Bedbound, Ivan now only marks the days according to when Gerasim enters and exits his room. His condition only gets worse, reaching a point where he can barely stomach a cup of tea and some medicine. One morning, Gerasim informs him that Praskovya is still in bed but that his doctor is coming to examine him. When the doctor arrives, Ivan can sense how little the man really cares about him. As he takes a moment to warm his hands from the cold, the doctor asks Ivan how he's feeling, and Ivan tells him that he's in constant pain. He then suggests that there must be something the doctor can do, to which the doctor responds, "Yes, it's normal for patients like you to say that sort of thing."

Once again, Ivan must face the fact that very few people truly care about his condition. In the same way that he used to indifferently wield his authority as a judge, the doctor takes a cold, unemotional approach to treating him. This is most evident when he indicates that it's predictable that "patients like [Ivan]" would want to know if there's anything to be done about their discomfort. This is an especially frustrating comment, since it not only fails to give Ivan any information about his prospects, but is also condescending and apathetic, effectively speaking down to Ivan simply for inquiring about his pain.

Having warmed his hands, the doctor begins to examine Ivan. As he does so, Ivan thinks about how ridiculously futile this process is, knowing that the doctor is just keeping up the lie that there's anything he can do to help. At this point, Praskovya enters and, pretending to have been awake, admonishes one of the servants for failing to fetch her when the doctor arrived. When she says this, Ivan glares at her and resents everything about her, including her healthy appearance and her touch, which fills him with hatred.

Gerasim has already informed Ivan that Praskovya was asleep, but now Praskovya tells the doctor that she was awake before he arrived. In doing so, she tries to make herself look like a more involved caretaker than she actually is. Regardless of what she says, though, Ivan knows that she couldn't be bothered to wake up earlier to check on him, and this overall lack of empathy causes him to resent her even more than he already does.

When the doctor finishes his examination, Praskovya tells Ivan that she arranged for yet another doctor to come see him. When he protests, she tells him that she's only doing this for herself, using sarcasm to suggest that she's doing everything on his behalf, even though he knows that, in reality, she truly *is* doing all of this for herself, since she wants to look like a good wife but doesn't actually care about his health. Either way, the new doctor comes, and when Ivan asks him if there's any chance that he could get better, the doctor says that anything is possible. When Praskovya notices that this comment fills her husband with hope, she begins to cry.

Praskovya's comment is interesting because she tries to use sarcasm to indicate that she is a dedicated caretaker who only has Ivan's best interests in mind. Strangely enough, though, her sarcastic remark fails because she actually is *doing everything for herself (to make herself look good), meaning that the comment isn't actually sarcasm at all. Wanting to seem like a diligent wife who is deeply concerned about her husband's illness and discomfort, she misrepresents herself, ultimately hiding the fact that she is more focused on how she appears in society than on Ivan's condition. At the same time, though, it's worth noting that she does seem to genuinely care about Ivan's decline, as evidenced by the fact that she cries when she sees the futile hope he derives from the doctor's altogether unremarkable assessment. In this moment, readers see that she feels sorry for Ivan, even if she is also so concentrated on her own life that she sometimes fails to be a good caretaker.*

Ivan's newfound optimism doesn't last long, as his pain returns and nothing about his situation seems to improve. That evening, Praskovya dresses for an opera that she and Ivan decided to take the family to before he was sick. When she enters his room in her beautiful clothing, she guiltily tells him that she normally wouldn't dream of going out under such circumstances, but that they already purchased the tickets. She also says that Petrishchev will be joining them, adding that the young man wants to enter the sickroom. Ivan agrees, so Liza and Petrishchev come in and start talking about the play. Ivan's young son, Vasya, also comes in, and Ivan thinks about how much he pities the boy, who is forced to watch his father die a painful death. He also feels that Vasya is the only person other Gerasim who really pities him.

In the same way that Ivan appreciates Gerasim's purity, he idealizes Vasya's innocence. In both Gerasim and Vasya, he sees something authentic and admirable, something that hasn't yet been corrupted by the greed or superficiality of bourgeoise society. In contrast, Praskovya, Liza, and Petrishchev are so involved in socializing that they have lost their ability to focus on what really matters in life, as evidenced by the fact that they're going to an opera while Ivan himself lies on his deathbed.

As Ivan's family makes small talk about the opera, Ivan hardly participates. At one point, Petrishchev stops talking and looks at him, and everyone else follows his gaze. They then realize that Ivan has been glaring at them with unconcealed contempt. Silently, everyone stands in the room without knowing what to do. Finally, Liza says that they ought to get going, and they leave Ivan on his own, at which point he begins to feel somewhat better, though his pain remains.

Yet again, Ivan's family's lack of empathy causes him to resent them. As they discuss the upcoming opera, he hates them for going along as usual in their lives. Of course, this is a somewhat selfish outlook, since it's unreasonable to expect people to halt their entire lives when a loved one gets sick. However, what Ivan seems to recognize in this moment is that his family is intent upon living the same kind of life that he himself has spent his entire adulthood trying to live. Now that he's unable to participate in this life, though, he finds it empty of meaning, at least in comparison to his own approaching encounter with death.

CHAPTER 9

Late that night, Ivan has terrible dreams, and his pain consumes him. Gerasim has been with him for the majority of the time, letting him elevate his legs, but now Ivan tells him to leave. As soon as he exits, the dying man bursts into tears. He cries because of his helplessness, because nobody understands what he's going through, because of God's wrath, and, finally, because of God's "non-existence." This last thought prompts him to ask, "Why hast Thou done all of this? Why hast Thou brought me to this point? Why oh why dost Thou torture me like this?..."

In the New Testament's Book of Matthew, Jesus calls out from the cross, saying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Although it's rather clear that Ivan Ilyich isn't a Christ figure, it's worth noting the parallel between Jesus's famous words and Ivan's sudden outburst. In both cases, these are the words of a dying man, regardless of what happens to Jesus after he dies on the cross. Interestingly enough, though, Jesus's question is addressed directly to God, and though Ivan's words also seem to be intended for God, the answers he later receives to the various questions he asks come not from God, but from his own soul. In this way, Ivan's search for meaning has both a religious and a philosophically existential quality, resembling Jesus's last moments while also probing the concept of selfhood in a more secular way.

Ivan knows he won't receive an answer to his questions. When his pain comes in a rush, he gives himself over to it, though he asks, "What is it for?" He then goes quiet and seems to hear a voice not outside of himself, but from within his own soul. The voice asks what he wants, and he answers by saying that he wants his pain to go away and wants to keep living. This doesn't seem to make sense to the voice, which asks how he could possibly stay alive. In response, Ivan says that he wants life to go back to what it used be, when he was happy, but he suddenly feels as if he was *never* happy in life, at least not since he was a boy, before he came of age and devoted himself to the lifestyle he maintained until his illness.

Ivan's dialogue with this unidentified voice symbolizes his search for meaning. Having reached the end of his life, he wants to better understand what everything has been for, including his pain and suffering. He also notes that he wants to go back to his happy lifestyle, but this just causes him to realize that he was never happy in the first place. In this way, his conversation with himself casts a retrospective cloud over his entire existence, urging him to reconsider the very things he has always held dear.

Looking back on his life, Ivan decides that he was happy when he was in law school and had friends. He also has some happy memories about being a young man, but very little after this period resembles true contentment. He then realizes that life has always been receding and that now there is only one thing left for him: death. Once again, then, he asks what life is "for," wondering if he has perhaps lived incorrectly. As soon as he has this thought, though, he takes it back, reminding himself that he always did what he was supposed to do and lived "properly."

Ivan's sense that he was happy as a young man once again aligns with his idealization of youthful purity and innocence. It also suggests that he was right to question his behavior when he first set out on his career path—tragically, though, he set aside such concerns in order to get ahead in life. As a result, he now finds himself questioning the validity of such behavior. Just when he is about to fully admit the error of his ways, though, he reassures himself that he has always done what society expected of him. He then uses this idea to discredit any misgivings he has about the way he's lived his life, a sign that he's still invested in the superficial values that ultimately destroyed the purity and innocence he possessed as a young man.

CHAPTER 10

After two more weeks, Ivan still hasn't figured out the reason for his suffering. When he asks the voice deep inside him what all of his horror and pain is for, the voice replies, "It's just there. It's not for anything."

The spiritual or religious element of The Death of Ivan Ilyich *is a difficult component of the novella to understand. Although Ivan eventually undergoes an experience that can be read as something of a spiritual awakening, he also has conversations like this one, in which some force within his soul tells him that suffering and pain isn't "for" anything—a nihilistic idea that challenges the notion that anything in life has an inherent purpose. This could be interpreted as an argument against the existence of God, since an omniscient being would most likely assign purpose to something like suffering. Given this ambiguity, the novella reflects Tolstoy's unique religious views, since the author himself had a complex relationship with Christian faith.*

Reflecting upon his illness, Ivan realizes he has been grasping for hope ever since he learned that he was unwell. Swinging between despair and optimism, he has focused—like his doctors and loved ones—on technical matters having to do with sickness and his internal organs. Now, though, all he can do is dive into his memories, suddenly finding himself reliving certain moments from his past. As he does this, he realizes that everything was better when he was a young man, when there was still a certain kind of "light" in his life. Ever since his youth, that light has been getting steadily dimmer, hurtling toward blackness. And yet, he still refuses to accept that he lived his life improperly, since he always did exactly what he thought he was supposed to do.

It's important to note Tolstoy's use of the word "light" in this moment, since Ivan will later encounter a light that is fraught with meaning. For now, though, the dying man continues his struggle to wring meaning out of his life. What makes this process especially difficult is his unwillingness to accept that he did indeed waste his time focusing on superficial, vain matters. Instead of coming to terms with this, he tries to soothe himself by once again committing to the idea that his lifestyle was not only worthwhile, but respectable and good. This, in turn, only makes it harder for him to make sense of his current discontent.

CHAPTER 11

Yet another two weeks pass. During this time, Petrishchev finally proposes to Liza, but when Praskovya enters Ivan's room to tell him the good news, she discovers that his condition has become even worse overnight, so she doesn't say what she intended to say. Instead, she talks about his medicine until she catches him glaring at her with hatred. "For Christ's sake, let me die in peace!" he exclaims. Just as Praskovya about to leave, Liza enters and begins talking about her father's medicine, but he only gives her the same look and assures her that pretty soon he won't burden them anymore. When Liza and her mother step out of the room, she asks Praskovya what they've done to upset him, saying that she pities Ivan but also doesn't see why she and her mother have to suffer as a result of his illness.

Again, Ivan resents his family members because they fail to show him the kind of empathy he thinks he deserves. In this exchange, it becomes clear that the family's tense relational dynamic is related not just to Praskovya and Liza's insensitivity, but to Ivan's vehemence. After all, his wife and daughter are only talking about his medicine because they want to help him. At the same time, though, he's right to pick up on the fact that they are less concerned than they perhaps could be, as made overwhelmingly apparent when Liza admits to her mother that she doesn't like the strain Ivan's illness has placed upon her otherwise happy life.

Ivan's doctor comes, but Ivan tells him to go away, saying that everyone knows there's nothing that can help him. Outside the bedroom, the doctor tells Praskovya that the only thing he can do is alleviate Ivan's pain by giving him opium. Meanwhile, Ivan continues to contemplate the way he lived his life, finally admitting that he may not have lived so respectably after all. He realizes that the misgivings he had as a young man in law school were perhaps well-founded, and he senses that he has indeed led a wrongheaded life. As if to illustrate this, he can't help but see Praskovya and Liza as embodiments of his wasted life when they visit him the following morning. Looking at them, he understands that everything he cared about in life did nothing but distract him from the most important part of existence: the inevitability of death.

Finally, Ivan allows himself to honestly assess his life. In doing so, he comes to see the superficial lifestyle he led as fleeting, unimportant, and inconsequential. Instead of focusing on his career or his status in society, he realizes, he should have thought about the nature of life. He has spent years trying to distract himself from his discontent, but nothing he has done will save him from death. Having grasped this concept, he sees Praskovya and Liza as manifestations of everything he did wrong in life, since they, too, care about the sort of superficial matters he used to obsess over. In turn, he finds a new reason to resent them, thereby estranging himself even further from his loved ones.

As Ivan looks at Praskovya and Liza, he begins to hate them for representing everything negative about the way he's lived his life. He also begins to groan aloud, so Praskovya urges him to take communion. Too defeated to refuse, he agrees, so Praskovya summons a priest, who hears Ivan's final confession. Afterward, Ivan feels slightly better. Praskovya notices this and points it out, asking him if he truly feels improved. He tells her that he does, but he looks away while saying it, sensing once again that everything about her—her clothing, facial expression, and tone of voice—is "wrong," nothing but "a deception that hides life and death." Thinking this way, his pain returns, though now it's more intense. "Get out!" he screams. "Go away! Leave me alone!"

That Ivan derives momentary relief from taking communion once more hints that he has certain religious proclivities. It also suggests that Tolstoy sees religion as perhaps the only thing capable of soothing a dying man. And yet, this respite from suffering is short-lived, quickly turning into anger and bitterness. Once again, Ivan lashes out at the people around him, yelling at Praskovya because he doesn't know how else to express his anguish. In turn, Tolstoy stops just short of sending a blatantly religious message, instead merely alluding to the fact that religion can bring comfort, ultimately refraining from fully presenting such spirituality as something that will invariably bring people peace.

CHAPTER 12

After Ivan yells at Praskovya, he falls into a constant scream, one that lasts for the final three days of his life. As he shouts, he knows that he's doomed, and he tries to keep himself from falling through to the other side, which he knows is death. Fighting hard, he resists death with all his strength. And yet, he also understands that he's stuck between life and death, and that this is in many ways even worse than embracing his demise. What's keeping him from breaking through, he suddenly understands, is his inability to admit that he led a bad life. As soon as he realizes this, though, a shock strikes him in his chest and in the side of his body, making it hard to breathe. Finally, he knows, he is in the "hole" that leads to death, and there's a "light" shining at the other end.

Once more, Tolstoy draws attention to light, this time offering up what has now become a trope about the transition from life to death—namely, he presents Ivan's death as a progression toward a light at the end of a long tunnel, thereby indicating that his struggle will soon be over. Of course, what's most significant about this specific moment isn't necessarily that Ivan is about to die, but that he lets go of any reservations he has about honestly assessing his life. Finally, he's willing to admit that he led a wrongheaded life, and this realization helps him let go of that life.

As Ivan continues to yell, he swings his arms around and accidentally brushes Vasya, who has snuck into his room. Vasya catches Ivan's hand, holds it to his mouth, kisses his fingers, and begins to cry. Just as he does this, Ivan falls all the way through the "hole" and sees a light, finally admitting to himself that everything in his life has been wrong. However, he tells himself that this doesn't matter because it's still possible for him to "do the right thing," though he doesn't know what, exactly, that is. As he thinks about this, he feels Vasya kissing his hand. When he opens his eyes, he sees his son and pities him, at which point Praskovya approaches with tears on her face, and he feels sorry for her, too.

The realization that Ivan has about living improperly—which takes place at the very beginning of this section—is apparently brought on by this interaction with Vasya. That Ivan's transformation is linked to his son's unbridled love is significant, since the boy's empathy helps him see that the only things that truly matter in life are love, kindness, and affection. Everything else—power, wealth, status—is meaningless. Having finally seen this, Ivan finds himself capable of letting go of his resentment for Praskovya.

Ivan recognizes that his family members pity him and that they're hurt by his suffering. However, he also sees that they will be better when he dies. First, though, he tells Praskovya to send Vasya out of the room, saying that he's sorry for him and for Praskovya herself. Finally, he tries to say, "Forgive me," but because he's so weak, the words sound like, "For goodness." Nonetheless, he decides that "he who need[s] to" will understand what he means.

In this moment, Ivan sees that he is putting his family members through unnecessary hardship and that his death will relieve them. Instead of resenting his loved ones for seeing him as a burden, he understands that he should be kind to them. Accordingly, he tries to apologize, though he's unable to articulate the words. Interestingly enough, though, he decides that "he who need[s] to" will understand—an ambiguous notion. After all, it's unclear whether the "he" in this sentence refers to Ivan himself or to God. And yet, this ambiguity aligns with the fact that Ivan's most religious or spiritual moments have taken place when he's talking to an unidentified voice within his own soul, thereby suggesting that he is perhaps asking for forgiveness from himself and God at the same time.

All of a sudden, Ivan finds clarity, realizing that whatever has been agonizing him is leaving him. He wonders where his pain has gone, and when it rushes back, he doesn't mind its presence. He also wonders where death has gone, surprised that he no longer fears it. In fact, he feels that there's nothing to fear in the first place, because there *is* no death—instead of death, he only experiences light, and this brings him great joy. His body continues to gradually die over the next hour, but this shift in perspective happens in just a moment. Eventually, his breath slows, and someone says, "He's gone!" Hearing this, Ivan tells himself, "Death has gone." He then inhales one last time, stops in the middle of this breath, and dies.

When Ivan tells himself that "death has gone," he perhaps means that the process of dying has finally ended. Now that he's at the end of his life, he no longer has to worry about dying, realizing that he has no control over what happens to him and therefore might as well give himself over to his own mortality. That he feels as if death has turned into light is also noteworthy, as this suggests that he experiences the loss of his life as a blissful, spiritual moment. And though this implies that he has had a certain kind of religious awakening, Tolstoy doesn't elaborate on what happens to Ivan. After all, Ivan is dead, meaning that—as is the case with all dead people—nobody will ever know what has happened to him.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Oct 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*." LitCharts LLC, October 18, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-death-of-ivan-ilyich.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Tolstoy, Leo. The Death of Ivan Ilyich. Penguin. 2008.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tolstoy, Leo. The Death of Ivan Ilyich. London: Penguin. 2008.