

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



THE **BIG
READ**



LEO TOLSTOY'S

**The Death
of Ivan Ilyich**

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.



The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.



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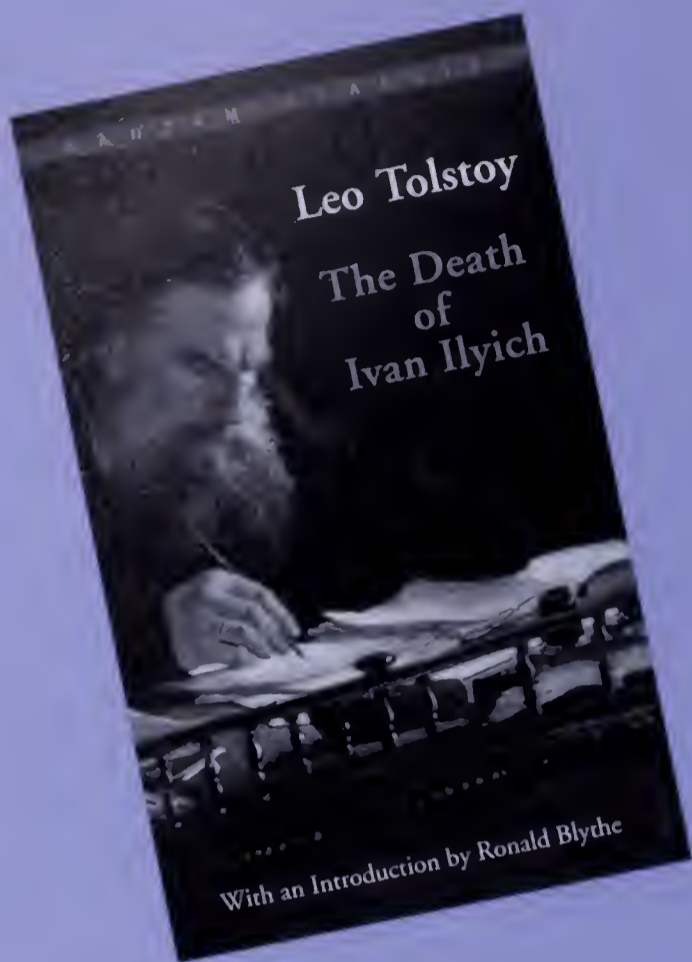
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“The awful, terrible act of his dying was, he could see, reduced by those around him to the level of a casual, unpleasant, almost indecorous incident...and this was done by that very decorum which he had served his whole life long.”

—from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*



Introduction

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Leo Tolstoy's classic novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novella, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the book, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Tolstoy's novella remains so compelling more than a century after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great Russian author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Read Reader's Guide essays. Discuss Tolstoy's preoccupation with death. Write about personal reaction to a death.

Homework: Handouts One and Two. Chapters 1-2 (pp. 31-52).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Discuss the relevance of Tolstoy's social criticism of the bourgeois. Practice patronymics. Write about how Ilyich's willingness to ruin the lives of others might satirize the bourgeois class.

Homework: Chapters 3-4 (pp. 53-72).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Explore possibilities of alternative method of narration. Rewrite a brief encounter in Chapter 1 from another character's point of view.

Homework: Chapters 5-7 (pp. 73-88).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss the issue of conformity in the novella. Write about a foil to the main character.

Homework: Chapters 8-12 (pp. 89-113).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Style and Genre

Activities: Discuss the respective merits of fantasy and realism. Write about whether Gerasim is a realistically portrayed character.

Homework: Examine use of metaphors and symbols in the novella's conclusion.

* Page numbers refer to the Bantam Classics 1981 edition of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in the Lynn Solotaroff translation.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbolism and Figurative Language

Activities: Analyze symbols in the final chapter. Write about use of metaphors in the novella.

Homework: Apply the Kübler-Ross model to Ivan Ilyich.

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Discuss Ivan Ilyich as antihero. Write about Ivan Ilyich's final epiphany.

Homework: List turning points in the plot of the novella.

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Explore possibilities of an alternative plotline. Write about Tolstoy's ability to generate interest and suspense.

Homework: Handout Three. Prepare to defend Tolstoy's achievement.

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novella

Activities: Explore Tolstoy's treatment of the themes of duty, morality, and the purpose of life.

Homework: Prepare outlines and begin essays.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Evaluate the greatness of the novella and its most important themes. Write a defense of the universal relevance of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Homework: Finish essays.

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novella. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novella.

Leo Tolstoy was born into an aristocratic family. He lived like many other young men of his class, enjoying the privileges of wealth and rank while indulging in the pleasures of youth. Yet, unlike many others of his class, Tolstoy had a reformer's spirit and a puritan conscience. In the years before he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, his inner tensions led him to a spiritual crisis and belief in a radical form of Christianity. Although Tolstoy does not put forward his religious beliefs in the novella, he does assert his rejection of vanity, worldliness, and materialism. In addition, the frequent strains in Tolstoy's own marriage are echoed in the relationship between Ivan Ilyich and Praskovya Fyodorovna.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Copy and distribute Reader's Guide handouts "Introduction to the Novella," "Leo Tolstoy (1828—1910)," and "Tolstoy and Christianity." Divide your class into groups and assign an essay to each. Have the groups present what they learned about their topic from the essay and the CD. Ask your students why they think Tolstoy was so concerned with death. Why would he choose to write a novella exploring the death process rather than an essay?

Read the first two and half pages in class, ending with "paying the widow a condolence call" in the middle of page 33. What do we learn about Ivan Ilyich in these first few pages? What statement does Tolstoy make about human nature by having the friends react with: "Well he's dead but I'm alive!"?



Writing Exercise

Have your students write about an experience of the death. How closely did their feelings and responses match those of Tolstoy's characters?



Homework

Distribute Handouts One and Two. Read Chapters 1-2 (pp. 31-52). Prepare your students to read approximately 20 pages per night.

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of a work of fiction. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novella.

Ivan Ilyich dies in February 1882 at the age of 45. He would therefore have come of age in the late 1850s, at the beginning of the reign of Czar Alexander II. It was a period that saw several major social reforms, yet life changed very little, if at all, for the vast majority of Russian subjects, and things remained the way they had for centuries.

In 1848, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels' *Communist Manifesto* defined and criticized the "bourgeois" class. This middle class was not part of the ruling aristocracy, yet held power over production and trade. The *Manifesto* argues that the bourgeois gains unjust advantage of the poor or proletariat through financial and material transactions. Recognizing the value of individual liberty, Alexander II abolished serfdom in 1861, providing more wage-earning opportunities for the lower classes. Tolstoy uses Ivan Ilyich's life to explore cultural issues such as economics, civil rights, liberty, and what it means to lead an honorable, worthwhile life.

Discussion Activities

Use Handout One to practice Russian patronymics using your students' names followed by the names of their fathers.

The first two chapters cover Ivan Ilyich's first 17 years of marriage and the advancement of his career. Discuss Handout Two. How might the Code of 1864 change the life of a man like Ivan Ilyich? How would it have affected the lower classes? Identify five "bourgeois" characteristics in Ilyich's life. By portraying Ilyich as bourgeois, is Tolstoy making a statement about this lifestyle? Have the students discuss whether Tolstoy's descriptions in Chapter 2 relate to their own lives and the lives of their family and friends. If so, do they find any validity in Tolstoy's criticism of middle class life?

Writing Exercise

At the end of Chapter 2, Ilyich reflects on a cultivated aloofness, avoiding his family and the importance of his "official duties." Ilyich is proud to be able to "ruin anybody." Write two pages on how this might present a satire of the bourgeois class. Choose examples from the text to support your argument.

Homework

Read Chapters 3-4 (pp. 53-72). What does Ivan Ilyich dislike about the doctors' treatment of him? Does this feeling lead him, at this point, to any deeper insight?

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novella. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novella using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novella. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. As early as the second page, Tolstoy presents the unspoken thoughts of several different characters before focusing on the viewpoint of Pyotr Ivanovich for the rest of the chapter. Thereafter, the focus is on Ivan Ilyich himself, at first from the outside, then increasingly in terms of his own feelings and attitudes. But throughout the book, the narrator shows us the private thoughts and emotions of other characters—especially Ivan Ilyich’s wife—when it suits his larger purposes to do so.

Discussion Activities

The fact that Pyotr Ivanovich is the point-of-view character for so much of the first chapter might make the reader assume that he will be a major figure in the novella, yet after that opening chapter he is given only a few passing mentions. Why does Tolstoy give so much attention to his reactions to Ivan Ilyich’s death? How do his private reactions to the situation help to communicate Tolstoy’s intentions in the novella?

Writing Exercise

We see Pyotr Ivanovich take leave of Praskovya Fyodorovna (pp. 39-41), and briefly encounter her children. Have students imagine this encounter from the point of view of Ilyich’s wife, daughter, or son. Include the character’s inner feelings as well as his or her perception of Pyotr Ivanovich. To go deeper, write this character’s perspective about the dance (Chapter 3) and as he or she witnesses Ilyich’s deepening illness (Chapter 4).

Homework

Read Chapters 5-7 (pp. 73-88). We are shown more and more of Ivan Ilyich’s interior life as his illness progresses. Ask students to consider whether they find themselves growing more sympathetic to him as the novella proceeds, and to consider the reasons for their responses.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Most of the characters in the novella are, like Ivan Ilyich himself, educated and sophisticated people who profess the same false values he does. The obvious exceptions—and the characters that most clearly represent the work’s positive values of honesty, simplicity, and compassion—are the servant Gerasim and Ivan Ilyich’s son, Vasily Ivanovich.

Tolstoy’s most pointed attacks on conformity take place in Chapters 2-3. In his view, conformity abdicates conscience, moral responsibility, and humane sensitivity. Perhaps the description of Ilyich’s furnishings (pp. 56-58) provides the most stinging critique. Ilyich is so thoroughly commonplace that when he tries to be original, he succeeds in becoming like everyone else.

Discussion Activities

Ilyich’s foiled bridge game, at the end of Chapter 4, results in a sense that his life is “poisoned...and poisoning others...on the brink of disaster.” He begins to be terrified of death. In Chapter 7, “the falsity around him...did more than anything to poison his days.” What is the falsity that poisons Ilyich? Is it the source of his illness? Is the falseness related to conformity? Or is it the dawning knowledge that Ilyich can neither relinquish nor live with his conformist tendencies?

Writing Exercise

As Ivan Ilyich’s illness grows worse, he becomes more and more impatient with people who continue to act as he did when he was well, and finds himself drawn to completely different modes of feeling and behavior. Along these lines, have students describe how either Gerasim or Praskovya Fyodorovna functions as a foil to Ivan Ilyich.

Homework

Read Chapters 8-12 (pp. 89-113). As Ivan Ilyich approaches death, consider whether he seems to react to his situation in the way that a real person would.

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Style and Genre

To fully understand and enjoy a work, it is sometimes helpful to know its historical background and cultural context, including the category or genre to which it belongs, and the rules or conventions that apply to that category. Obviously, it would be inappropriate to dismiss *Animal Farm* on the grounds that pigs can't talk, or to say that *West Side Story* is ridiculous because teenage gang members don't sing and dance down the street.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich belongs to the genre of Realism, which succeeded the Romantic movement that dominated the first part of the 19th century. A heightened style, epic events, and larger-than-life protagonists, as in Goethe's *Faust* or Melville's *Moby-Dick*, often characterized romantic narratives. Fiction in the realistic mode, by contrast, tends to be written in a straightforward and often plain style, to give precise descriptions of the surface of daily life, and to focus on ordinary protagonists confronting the same kinds of problems that we all face. The controlling assumption of Realism is that an accurate depiction of real life is a solid foundation for an exploration of its larger significance.

Discussion Activities

Examining Chapters 8-12, find examples of Realism. Have students break into groups with each group responsible for one chapter. Have them report examples to show where the novella embraces Realism or strays from Realism.

Works of fantasy such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* have gained large audiences. Have students discuss why such books and films acquire such popularity. Can they think of films that embrace the Realism reflected in the novella? What do audiences gain from Realist artworks and what do they gain from non-Realist artworks?

Writing Exercise

Examining Chapters 8-12, determine whether Gerasim is realistically portrayed. Explain and defend your conclusion with specific references to the text.

Homework

Instruct students to pay particular attention to the use of metaphors and symbols (relatively rare in the novella) to try to capture Ivan Ilyich's experience of dying—for example, the "narrow black sack" (p. 99), the "executioner" and "black hole" (p. 111), and the "light" (p. 113). How effective is this technique in creating a sense of that experience?

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbolism and Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object—above and beyond face value. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novella.

Like his great admirer Ernest Hemingway, Tolstoy was renowned for his clear and direct style, which emphasizes straightforwardness over figurative description. Also, when he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, his artistic theories were developing toward simplicity of expression in the service of moralistic themes. Tolstoy is sparing in his use of symbolism, but there are details that function symbolically in the larger context, such as the medallion bearing the inscription *respice finem* (p. 45) or the game of whist (p. 61).

Discussion Activities

Return to the symbols used in the last chapter—the “executioner,” the “black hole,” “the light.” How do these usages serve to reinforce Tolstoy’s spiritual message in the novella? Just how spiritual is *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*?

Writing Exercise

In his manner of handling his official duties, Ivan Ilyich is compared to a musical virtuoso (pp. 59-60), and the “celebrated physician” is compared to a judge addressing a prisoner (pp. 65-66). How do these comparisons serve to illustrate the larger themes of the novella?

Homework

Acquaint your students with Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s “Five Stages of Grief.” Have them apply the Kübler-Ross model to Ivan Ilyich’s experience and judge how closely Tolstoy conforms to—or, more properly, anticipates—her conclusions.

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels and novellas trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

While all the other characters in this novella are static and two-dimensional, Ivan Ilyich himself undergoes as profound a change, or series of changes, as can be imagined. Through most of the book, he is a thoroughly ordinary man. He has no real virtues in any active sense; his positive qualities are merely the absence of negative ones: he does not take bribes; he does not cheat on his wife or mistreat her and their children, etc. Self-centeredness is his most prominent characteristic, which often manifests itself in pettiness and irritability, usually directed at his wife. Until very near the end, the changes he undergoes have less to do with an alteration or enlargement of his character than with his increasing inability to live as he wishes to. When he finally acknowledges that his whole life has been wasted in the pursuit of false and trivial goals (pp. 108-09), his reaction is terror and despair. It is not until the very last chapter that he achieves true grace, and with it understanding and peace of mind.

Discussion Activities

Returning to the terms employed in Lesson Four, generate a class discussion of Ivan Ilyich's role as an "antihero" through most of the novella. Then have the class consider whether or not he has, by the end of the book, achieved the status of "hero."

Writing Exercise

Define the term "epiphany" to your students and give examples from literature. Have them write about Ivan Ilyich's epiphany at the very end of the novella.

Homework

Beginning with Chapter 2, have the students page through the book once again and list as many turning points in the plot as they can find.

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events from beginning to middle to end can make a novella predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*). Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

Discussion Activities

Point out to the class that by taking the first chapter and putting it after the last one, you can give the book a perfectly linear narrative that proceeds from beginning to middle to end. Have the students imagine that the novella is constructed this way. (You might want to read them the last few paragraphs of the last chapter, followed by the first and the last page of the opening chapter.) In what ways is this version a different book from the one Tolstoy published? Is it a better book, or a worse one?

Writing Exercise

Remind your students of the (at that point theoretical) discussion of Lesson One: How can a work generate interest and suspense when its principal character's death is announced in the title? Have them write briefly on this subject in the light of their reading of the book: How successful has Tolstoy been in overcoming the handicaps he placed on himself?

Homework

As Tolstoy himself showed in *What Is Art?*, even the most sublime work can be made to sound insipid or ridiculous by summarizing it in a snide way. In the same fashion, someone might say about *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, "A boring bureaucrat gets sick, feels sorry for himself, and dies. So what?" Students should be prepared to explain why this is an inadequate characterization of Tolstoy's achievement.

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novella

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



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



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

Duty

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

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

Morality

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

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

The Purpose of Life

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



Homework

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

Lesson Ten

FOCUS:
**What Makes
 a Great
 Book?**

Works of fiction illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great book is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.

 **Discussion Activities**

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a book to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? Is this a great book?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Tolstoy create in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*? Does this book speak for more than one man and his personal concerns? What does this voice tell us about the choices and responsibilities of life for a middle-class man in 19th century Russia?

Divide students into groups. Have each group determine the single most important theme of the novella. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

 **Writing Exercise**

Ask students to write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a good book. The student should make an argument that explains why the novella has meaning for all people, even those who have no interest in other times or other places.

 **Homework**

Students will finish their essays and present their essay topics and arguments to the class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novella. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. Several times over the course of the novella, we find statements very much like this one: "So that on the whole Ivan Ilyich's life proceeded as he felt it should—pleasantly and properly" (p. 52). One's first, instinctive reaction to such comments might be, "Well, what's wrong with that?" What, according to Tolstoy, is wrong with that?
2. What sort of person is Praskovya Fyodorovna? Why did Ivan Ilyich marry her? How would you characterize their relationship? Does his attitude toward her seem justified by her personality and behavior?
3. At the beginning of Chapter 3, we are told that 1880 was "the most difficult year in Ivan Ilyich's life" (p. 53). What difficulties does he face, and what does he seek by way of a solution to them? How is the situation resolved, and what are his reactions to that resolution? What does this whole experience tell us about Ivan Ilyich's character and his values?
4. Like many people in adverse circumstances, Ivan Ilyich wants to know why he has been afflicted with his illness, what he has done to deserve this cruel fate. Does Tolstoy in fact suggest that there is any cause-and-effect relationship, that his illness is in any way a punishment for the way he has lived? If not, what is the larger thematic function of his illness and suffering?
5. "Ivan Ilyich suffered most of all from the lie, the lie which, for some reason, everyone accepted: that he was not dying, but was simply ill..." (p. 86). Why is this "lie" so disturbing to Ivan Ilyich, and what does he really want from other people? How consistent is this hatred of delicate pretense with his attitudes before his illness? What does this whole experience suggest about Ivan Ilyich's character, and about Tolstoy's view of human nature in general?
6. As Ivan Ilyich's illness progresses toward its inevitable end, his two children have very different attitudes and feelings toward him and his situation. What are the reactions of each of his children toward his suffering and impending death? Each one's feelings align him or her with another, more prominent character. Who are these other characters, and what are the similarities in attitude? Which of these two contrasting responses, the daughter's or the son's, does Tolstoy affirm, and why?
7. Consistent with the omniscient narrative is the tone of the writing, which is authoritative and frequently judgmental. Suppose that, after the first chapter, the authorial voice had confined itself to narration and the omniscience had been limited to Ivan Ilyich himself, with everything presented within the limits of his own perspective. What might have been gained by this approach? What would have been lost?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Have the students create a photo gallery of St. Petersburg in the late 19th century, with both exterior and interior scenes, to give a sense of what the outer circumstances of life were like in the world that Tolstoy is describing. If possible, try to include scenes and persons reflective of the novella: an apartment of a well-to-do family, a law court, a judge in his uniform, and so on. Display the gallery in the classroom or school library.
2. Show your class the DVD of the 1979 British television drama *A Question of Faith*, which draws upon both *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Tolstoy's own life. Following the screening, lead a class discussion to explore the accuracy of the portrayals of the novella and the novellaist, in both detail and spirit.
3. Divide the class into groups, and have each group prepare one of the following: a speech by one of Ivan Ilyich's colleagues at a testimonial dinner for him; a eulogy to be delivered at his funeral; a detailed *New York Times*-style obituary of him. In each instance, the idea is to give a serious and respectful summation of his life and character as he appeared to the outside world, not the private man that Tolstoy portrays for us.
4. Have the students write and stage a skit in which Ivan Ilyich is the judge on a television program along the lines of *Judge Judy* or *The People's Court* (have him portrayed, however, as he is described in the novella, not in the smirking and hectoring manner of many TV judges). The skit should include not only the presentation of the case and the verdict, but also the exit interviews with the winning and losing parties.
5. Have the students draw a series of portraits of Ivan Ilyich at various stages of his life: the happy child; the idealistic adolescent; the young man just embarking on his career and marriage; the prominent and prosperous judge; the middle-aged man troubled by the onset of his illness; the gaunt and agonized sufferer at the point of death; the dead man in his coffin whose expression was "a reproach or a reminder to the living" (p. 35). Display these "Stages of a Life and Death" in the classroom.
6. If your class has previously studied Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, and is familiar with the conventions of the genre, select two teams of three students each and stage a formal debate with the following topic: Resolved, Ivan Ilyich Is a Tragic Hero.

Russian Names

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Code of 1864

On page 46 in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, we are told that Ivan Ilyich “was offered a post as an examining magistrate and he accepted it.” After a lengthy description of his new duties and the manner in which he carried them out, Tolstoy concludes this discussion with the statement: “This type of work was new, and he was one of the first men to give practical application to the judicial reforms instituted by the Code of 1864.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian empire was still a medieval feudal society. The state maintained absolute power, and individual rights were extremely limited. Calls for reform had been increasing for decades. They were intensified by Russia’s stunning defeat by France, England, and the Ottoman Empire in the Crimean War (1853-56), which highlighted the economic and social backwardness of Imperial Russia.

Czar Alexander II, who had assumed power upon the death of his father in 1855, saw that reform was inevitable. He preferred that it come by means of limited and controlled expansion of freedom, instead of by revolution and violent social upheaval. The first and most famous of his major reforms came in 1861 with the emancipation of the serfs. These were millions of rural peasants who were held in bondage to the private landowners on whose property they lived and worked. Reforms were also made in the areas of education, finance, and local government.

Legal reform was brought about by the Code of 1864, which created a total restructuring of the judicial system. Previously, there had been separate, cumbersome legal systems for each of the four estates of society—the nobility, the clergy, those who lived in cities and towns, and the rural peasantry. All of these systems were under the absolute control of the emperor and administered by the official bureaucracy.

Under the Code of 1864, everything was unified into a single system. A bar association was formed. The judiciary became independent of the executive power of the emperor. The principle of the equality of all parties before the law was introduced for the first time. So was trial by jury, with panels of twelve jurors to decide guilt or innocence and three judges to impose sentence. Other reforms included open, public hearings; the right of the accused to be represented by qualified legal counsel; the right of the accused to present evidence favorable to his or her case; and an appeals process. When these reforms were put into practice, there was a sharp increase in the number of not-guilty verdicts in criminal trials.

The Rebirth of Ivan Ilyich

The Death of Ivan Ilyich begins with the death of its main character, a man who is thoroughly unimaginative, small-minded, self-centered, and who has devoted his entire existence to comfort and conformity. How is it that out of such unpromising materials Leo Tolstoy was able to fashion one of the greatest novellas in all of world literature?

In line with Tolstoy's larger purposes, the first chapter does little to prepare us for what is to follow, a powerful examination of the most profound questions of human existence. We smile at the satirical presentation of human nature, as Ivan Ilyich's friends and colleagues, and even his widow, are affected by his death largely in terms of its interference with their pleasures and comforts. There are troubling hints—Ivan Ilyich in his coffin, with his “expression a reproach or a reminder to the living;” Ivan Ilyich's son, whose “eyes were red from crying”—but their significance will not become fully clear until the end of the book.

With the onset of his illness, things begin to change for Ivan Ilyich, but it is a long and painful—and thus very realistically portrayed—process. He notices that the doctors treat him with the same indifference with which he had treated prisoners in court, but his sense of the injustice of his being treated this way does not lead him to re-examine his own previous behavior. He accepts the fact of human mortality in the abstract, as shown in the syllogism of Caius, but he strenuously resists its application to himself. When he does accept the fact that he is dying, he bitterly resents the refusal of his friends and family to openly acknowledge it,

but he cannot see that their attitude proceeds from the very same values that he has lived by all his life and still refuses to reject.

In the brief but devastating final chapter, Ivan Ilyich arrives, both physically and spiritually, at the end of his journey. At the conclusion of the previous chapter, the gnawing voice within him could no longer be denied, and he surrendered to the awareness that he had wasted his life. His first reaction is terror and despair, for now he has nothing—not only nothing to show for his forty-five years upon the earth, but also nothing to sustain him in his final agony. It is only when he feels his son kiss his hand that he fully experiences the true meaning of life—honest emotion and genuine caring for others—and he can triumph over death and fall into the light.

We are never in suspense about what is going to happen. The first page—the title itself—has told us that. But a much more significant suspense has carried us to the end—how (not physically, but emotionally and spiritually) will Ivan Ilyich die, and what will be the meaning of his life and death? In the end, Ivan Ilyich achieves the status of a true Everyman, not only because death will come to us all, but on a much deeper level. As harrowing as the conclusion of the novella is, it is also hopeful: if even so thoroughly commonplace a person as Ivan Ilyich can see the truth at last and find peace and salvation, then there is hope for everyone.

Teaching Resources

Books

Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* 1897.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, Inc., 1997.

Wilson, A. N. *Tolstoy: A Biography*. 1988. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001.

Web sites

<http://www.yasnayapolyana.ru/english/museum/memorial/index.htm>

The website of Leo Tolstoy's home, Yasnaya Polyana. This site contains a history of the house and the works written there.

<http://www.utoronto.ca/tolstoy>

The University of Toronto's *Tolstoy Studies Journal*. Contains a gallery of public domain images taken during Tolstoy's life.

<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org>

The website of the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia is an excellent resource for learning about Russian culture, history, and art.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



**“The goal of the artist is not to solve
a question irrefutably, but to force
people to love life in all its innumerable,
inexhaustible manifestations.”**

—LEO TOLSTOY
in an 1865 letter

**“Ivan Ilyich's life had
been most simple and
commonplace—and
most horrifying.”**

—LEO TOLSTOY

from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

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