



## IVAN ILYICH: DEATH IS WATCHED BY THE DYING

Rashmi Priya

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, L N Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar,

**ABSTRACT**

Death has always been a common subject of storytelling among all sorts of authors. Russian author Leo Tolstoy took the theme of death in many of his unforgettable stories; one such story is *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

The present article attempts to show the different kinds of thoughts and emotions felt by the protagonist Ivan Ilyich, while he was suffering from a fatal disease. In the journey of his watching death, the reactions of his family, friends and colleagues are also remarkable.

**KEYWORDS :** Death, Leo Tolstoy, Euthanasia, Ivan Ilyich, Mythology,

Death—A word that never comforts us, whether it be the death of someone else or of our own, the very word makes us shiver from top to toe. However, we must accept the certainty of death either willingly or unwillingly.

There are many stories in Hindu mythology that show how important the existence of death is. Many people go for extreme physical and mental torture of themselves so that heaven may bless them with the boon of immortality. But unfortunately because of God's preplanning no one has ever become immortal. There are other views of death also, many people really wish that death would come and they would get salvation. In modern times people also ask for Euthanasia.

Death has always been a remarkable subject of Tolstoy's stories. He has written many memorable stories on this theme, it might be because he closely observed the fear of death, he had been a part of the Crimean war, when he was just twenty three years old. The Death of Ivan Ilyich is one of the novellas known for its briefness and succinct style. The story revolves around the death of a high court judge – Ivan Ilyich. Ivan Ilyich enjoys life lavishly, until he comes to know that he is suffering from a disease and the disease is progressive in nature. It was difficult for him to accept death, as he strongly believed, he could not live if there was death.

Tolstoy had experience of death, as his personal notes and diaries reveal how much it intrigued him. It is suggested from many of Tolstoy's biographies that his own death fears had to be related in the long short story. By the time Tolstoy started writing the novella he had had to face many deaths in his own family and in a real sense, death annoyed him more than saddened him.<sup>1,2</sup>

Although Tolstoy shared many of his personal experiences during describing Ivan Ilyich's character, there is a sharp contrast of nature and temperament between the two. While Tolstoy was a lifelong death watcher death had announced itself to Ivan Ilyich and it was indeed unbelievable for him that death trapped him on some ordinary day when he was busy in decorating a room, making a deal and celebrating parties.

The moment Ivan Ilyich realised that he was no longer the head of the house but a burden to his family he got very depressed. He cried helplessly, never believed that God could be so cruel to him. The next moment he just retained the hope and started thinking that like every nightmare had passed, this would also pass but then finally returned to the bitter fact that he was really going to die and what he could do but only attract the attention of his near and dear ones.

His family members adopted a different attitude towards his illness. In one of the story's touching moments, he himself reserved a box for his family for going to the theatre, even then he was hurt by the sight of his wife's elaborate attire.

“But he concealed his indignation when he remembered that he himself had urged them to reserve a box and go, because the aesthetic enjoyment would be edifying for the

The news of Ivan Ilyich's death in the newspaper reports became the big subject of conversation among his colleagues; typically his death

was taken as a trivial matter. A few voices were interested in knowing the cause of the death but many of them secretly hoped that his death would entail some personal advantages. But, among them one thing was common, everyone was relieved that it was Ivan Ilyich who died not he himself.

One of the important achievements of Tolstoy in the depiction of Ivan Ilyich's death is that fear of death directly comes through his face, one can easily find the sweat of fear from the protagonist's body language. There is no philosophical or abstract terms for death as is usual in Tolstoy's stories, since it has been more than a century when Tolstoy wrote this masterpiece still the story reflects of our own deathliness. It is interesting that we find ourselves sorrowing for a man with whom we are not associated. Turning page by page we become more sympathetic towards Ivan Ilyich.

Tolstoy's own experience with his servant of whom he was particularly fond, resembles that of Ivan Ilyich's assistant Gerasim. Once Tolstoy expressed his views about the servant named Sergey – “I was looking for a seller who was an imbecile with no business sense and it seemed to me that I had found one.” and Tolstoy depicted the character of Sergey as it is in the portrayal of Gerasim. During the last days of Ivan Ilyich's illness, he found himself to be more close with Gerasim than to any of his other family members. In the most moving passages we see this last bonding gives Ivan Ilyich ultimate pleasure, what Gerasim gives him really comes from free will and selflessness.

The narrative has a terrifying directness: Ivan Ilyich struggles to get well, but the disease relentlessly destroys him. The moralistic side of the story strikes us as its greatest weakness. The novella not only shows the horror of Ivan Ilyich's death but also tries to use this horror to force him to confront the mistakes of his past.

Tolstoy's accuracy in the description of Ivan Ilyich's death sometimes strikes us. At one point we think that this was too facile, and that Ivan Ilyich would sentimentalize his life at the time of dying rather than question its value. The rationality of death became the most irrational thing for him and he could not say as Michael Angelo said – “If we have been pleased with life then we should not be displeased with death, since it comes from the hand of the same master.”

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