
The Metaphorical Devices In Leo Tolstoy's Novel The Death Of Ivan Ilyich

At its heart, Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is concerned with illness and dying within upper-middle class life. In his pursuit of wealth and hypocritical relations, Ivan's terminal illness – read as a form of pancreatic cancer – is a figure for an “unhealthy” upper middle-class life lived at the wrong side emotionally, socially, and physically. When considering the symbolic representation of illness – of cancer in particular – as exemplified in Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor*, Tolstoy's writing implies that it is not his physical illness but rather the artificial life of the aristocracy, with its fixation on appearance, that is the true ailment afflicting Ivan, ultimately resulting in his death.

Throughout the novel, Tolstoy satirizes the lack of authenticity and sincerity as well as the self-interest that characterizes upper-class interactions and reveals them to be inadequate and ultimately unfulfilling. When Ivan's colleagues and friends learn of his death, their first thought is of promotion, not sympathy, grief, or even pity. They talk “of what implications the death might hold for him, what reshufflings it might occasion for him and his colleagues” (Tolstoy 2). Even Peter, who has known Ivan since childhood, “could think only of...the funeral to endure, the visit to pay the widow” (Tolstoy 3). Attending Ivan's funeral and paying condolences to his widow are seen by Ivan's “friends” as obligations of propriety, not as opportunities to pay last respects or comfort the grieving. Even his widow's focus is on maximizing her husband's government pension rather than grieving or seeking comfort. In this lifestyle, materialism supersedes human connection. The members of the aristocratic society care little for authentic human relationships or emotions, desiring only status and pleasure.

This bourgeois materialism particularly manifests itself in Ivan's obsession with decorating his house. He recreates on a splendor that “grew toward the ideal he had set for himself” (Tolstoy 31). His home, a symbol of status, becomes another aspect of his life that must fit the expectations and standards of the members of high society as Ivan reaches the highest rungs of the social ladder. Given his rise in social status, Ivan's near-fall from the stepladder is especially symbolic: “he had stumbled and nearly fallen, but...managed to catch himself and merely knocked his side on a knob on the window frame. The bruise was painful, but it healed quickly” (Tolstoy 32). It is with time that he begins to have a “strange taste” in his mouth and “pain in his side” (Tolstoy 46), although his illness is never defined in the novella. Therefore, the text seems to suggest that his fall is the apparent cause of the illness that leads to his death. However, when reading Ivan's illness as pancreatic cancer, it is clear that a fall would not be the cause behind the judge's sickness and eventual death; instead, by creating the apparent causal link between the fall and subsequent illness, Tolstoy seems to be hinting that Ivan's illness is as metaphorical as it is literal.

Indeed, Ivan's understanding of his illness is indicative of the metaphorical way in which people understand cancer. As his disease progresses, he becomes more aware of “something terrifying, new...was happening within him. And only he himself understood it” (Tolstoy 46). Furthermore, his “gnawing” pain (Tolstoy 48) is described as “poison” penetrating his body (Tolstoy 49). The word “gnawing” indicates a consumption of the body, one where the illness tears the body from the inside, destroying internal tissue relentlessly. Indeed, an early figurative

definition of cancer was: “Anything that frets, corrodes, corrupts, or consumes slowly and secretly” (Sontag 10). Therefore, cancer – a word that comes “from the Greek karkinos and the Latin cancer, both meaning crab” (Sontag 10) – claws at him from the inside, presenting as a problem to his living. Thus, illness becomes a metaphor for the wrong kind of life, one which is artificial and preoccupied with “feigned propriety” and appearance rather than truth and understanding (Tolstoy 82). In this light, Tolstoy presents Ivan’s illness as a punishment for the artificial life he has been leading. Indeed, cancer itself is said to be “a disease of middle-class life, a disease associated with affluence, with excess” (Sontag 15). In this view, the causality between Ivan’s “fall” and his illness implies that the true disease is Ivan’s conformity to the artificiality that characterizes high society. Moreover, considering the terrible pain Ivan experienced prior to his death, cancer is “invariably, excruciatingly painful... a wretched [death]” (Sontag 16). In fact, as dictated by cancer mythology, “it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease” (Sontag 22). It is as if Ivan’s lack of authenticity in his life, his lack of meaningful relationships and truth, brought him his painful illness and eventual death.

It is only when he realizes the falsity of his life and accepts the value of emotion and human connection that Ivan is able to accept death and ease his suffering. Indeed, it is the lies and deception that torture him the most, particularly “the lie – known by everyone to be a lie – that he was merely sick, not dying, and that he needed only bedrest and treatment, and would be fine” (Tolstoy 69). Ivan despairs by the falsehood around him. His illness forces him to reconsider the life he has been leading and reconcile that it is his life that has been wrong, not his body. The pain he feels is that of hiding the death of authenticity and following a false life.

Indeed, Ivan, Praskovya, Peter, and most everyone in Ivan’s company symbolize this materialistic, artificial life with its shallow relationships, self-interest, and materialism. They focus on outward appearance rather than substance, the appearance of truth rather than the actual truth. This false life is countered by Gerasim, who represents the meaningful, authentic life, filled with compassion and even pity and affirming interpersonal contact within human relationships. Gerasim is described as “a clean, fresh-faced young peasant grown chubby on town food. Always cheerful, always bright...clean and dressed in impeccably Russian style (Tolstoy 66). He offers a healthy counterpart for the “sick” life that Ivan led. The juxtaposition of the artificial life of Ivan, which leaves him fearful and alone on the deathbed, with the authentic one of Gerasim emphasizes the sociocultural significance of illness. This, in turn, further condemns the ways of the aristocracy as “unhealthy” and cancer-like.

Ivan comes to realize at the end of his life that his illness has pervaded his entire life and that the disease he suffers from is a manifestation of a general illness that has been growing within him since childhood. He questions the value of propriety and appearance that he has lived by. The true pain, he recognizes, is the artificiality of his own life, the deception he chose to partake in, rather than the deception surrounding him. Ivan notes that when his colleagues, family members, and doctors leave him alone, he “could have sworn he felt better: there was no deception – it had gone out with them – though the pain remained. That unrelenting pain, that unrelenting terror made nothing any harder, nothing any easier. And things were worse all the time” (Tolstoy 83). Though the deceit no longer surrounds him, the pain of his illness fails to disappear. It is as if it is not the façade that the others put on around him but the one he has created of his own life that is responsible for his illness. In fact, upon reflecting on his life, Ivan muses that “In perfectly measured steps I went downhill imagining it was up. That’s just how it was. In public opinion I was on my way up, and the whole time my life was slipping away from under me” (Tolstoy 89). At his moment of illumination, Ivan realizes that although he had

progressed up the social ladder, his achieved status and upper societal life had not brought him fulfillment but rather misery and pretense. Blinded by the values of high society, he has been leading an artificial life rather than an authentic one, and ultimately, that is responsible for his illness. Therefore, Tolstoy makes it clear that Ivan's death is not the result of his physical degradation but of his failure to lead an authentic life, one with substance, truth, and meaningful relationships in reality, not solely appearance.

In the case of Ivan Ilych, illness is a symbol of social disarray and aristocratic artificiality: the disconnection within familial relationships, the concern with propriety, the deadly preoccupation with outward appearances and materialism. When considering that Ivan's illness is a kind of cancer, his illness emerges as a reaction to a diseased social class with false truths and superficial concerns. And while Tolstoy's novella conveys Ivan's authentic cancer-induced pain, the author's criticism of high society provides deeper meaning to bodily disease. Thus, the nature of Ivan's illness is as important as its metaphorical significance, revealing that artificiality is the true disease to combat.

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