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## Leo Tolstoy Biographical Lenses

In *The Death of Ivan Ilych* written by Leo Tolstoy there are many parallels that can be made between the novella and Tolstoy's personal life. Using the biographical critical lens the reader is able to further interpret Tolstoy's novella and see the parallels between the main character, Ivan Ilych, and Tolstoy himself. With the use of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych*, the book *Leo Tolstoy* by Daniel Moulin, and the biographical critical approach the reader is better equipped to further analyze Tolstoy's personal and family life.

The first chapter in Daniel Moulin's *Leo Tolstoy* opens with a background of where and how Tolstoy was raised and grew up. Tolstoy was born high in society similar to the character Ivan Ilych. Ivan aspired above other members of his family. In the novella Ivan is described as, "...the prize of the family" (Tolstoy, 277). Ivan was a public prosecutor and then a member on the Court of Justice. The novella describes Ivan as being very dedicated and prideful in the duties that he performed. In a similar way Moulin says Tolstoy took great pride in his role as an author and that, "...his place in society meant that he had an influential job" (Moulin, 3). From what the reader can see right now is that both of these men were happy with thinking that they were living correctly within the bounds of society. However, both men were eventually awakened when they began contemplating the meaning of life. Moulin writes that, "In the later half of the 1870s and early 1880s, Tolstoy went through his most spiritual search or crisis" (Moulin, 4) During this spiritual search Moulin illustrates that Tolstoy fixated on Christianity and paid special attention to the meaning of the Gospels. Moulin says that this became his greatest source of inspiration for Tolstoy. Unfortunately for Ivan the fear of death after he fell of the ladder is what forced him to confront life's important questions. It was after these experiences that both men were able to see the true nature of society.

Tolstoy now looked at the world as hypocritical and corrupt, especially in its religious and political ideologies. He denounced the church and this caused him to be excommunicated by the church and society. Tolstoy's disdain for the hypocrisy of the church resembles Ivan's hatred for the hypocrisy that he went through in the days leading up to his death. In *The Death of Ivan Ilych* Tolstoy reveals the cold heart that society has while it tries to show a warm smile towards Ivan. "Those lies-enacted over him on the eve of his death and destined to degrade this awful, solemn act to the level of their visitings, their curtains, their surgeon for dinner- were a terrible agony for Ivan Ilych" (Tolstoy, 296). Tolstoy realized his life was heading in the wrong direction and decided to reject his life as a fictional writer and to promote a life of following Christianity. Tolstoy attempted to live out the message of the Gospels as he understood them and this led him to seek a life of simplicity. He gave up drinking, smoking, and dressed in peasant clothes. Ivan's realization, however, came too late. Like Tolstoy he did realize that he had been living for all the wrong reasons and also with Tolstoy's experience with the peasants, Ivan found comfort being with his servant, turned friend, Gerasim. In the novella it says that Gerasim was the only person Ivan felt that sympathized with him and he admired Gerasim. Tolstoy had a chance to turn his life around, Ivan however, did not. Towards the very end of the story Ivan is finally able to see the light and decides to stop feeling sorry for himself. At the very end he did find peace and "...there was no fear because there was no death. In place there was light" (Tolstoy, 302). The reader can see the similarities in the early part of the life of Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Ilych are very much present but the differences come up from their

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life changing experiences that made them different people towards the end of their lives.

Looking into the family life of both Tolstoy and Ilych it can be said that both men's relationship with his family was not the worst, but also was not the best. From the very beginning of the novella, where Ivan has already died, the reader can see that Ivan's wife, Praskovya, is selfish to say the least. Praskovya is speaking to one of Ivan's former co workers and she does not appear to be very sincere. Soon it becomes very clear that all she is worried about is the inheritance that she will gain from her late husband's death. Later in the novella the reader can almost begin to see why Praskovya would have a negative attitude towards her husband. "With the birth of their child, the attempts to feed it and the various failures in doing so, and the real and imaginary illnesses of mother and child, in which Ivan Ilych's sympathy was demanded but about which he understood nothing, the need of securing himself an existence outside his family life became still more imperative (Tolstoy, 280). In the eyes of Ivan his newborn child is more like a nuisance than anything else and all his wife wants is some support however Ivan does not give her any. Instead he actually wants to separate himself from them because they interfere with his pleasant life.