

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/redemption-at-the-very-end-1486151690>

## MASTERPIECE

# Redemption at the Very End

Leo Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' tells the story of a wasted life capped with a moment of grace.



ILLUSTRATION: RYAN INZANA

By **JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH**

Feb. 3, 2017 2:54 p.m. ET

**In 2004**, Oprah Winfrey selected “Anna Karenina” for her Book Club, making Tolstoy’s 19th-century novel an unlikely best seller in the 21st. At more than 850 pages, “Anna” is a daunting work, presumably still unfinished by many of Oprah’s followers who purchased it. She might have been better off selecting “The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” which is about 75 pages. But “Ilyich” has not been read as widely as “Anna” and “War and Peace,” Tolstoy’s other great novel. That is a shame, because “Ilyich” is every bit their equal, perhaps the greatest novella ever written.

The story is simple: A man on this deathbed realizes he has wasted his life by living badly, and he is terrified of his swiftly approaching death. The plot’s minimalism enables Tolstoy to focus the reader’s attention on Ilyich’s life, illness and spiritual crisis. Though the subject matter mostly ranges from depressing to morbid, “Ilyich” achieves a measure of redemption in the closing lines of the book. In portraying the life and death of a man with such force and clarity, Tolstoy suggests readers should live their own lives in better ways. “Every time I read it, I find my world put under an intense, unforgiving microscope,” the novelist Zadie Smith has said.

Tolstoy’s microscope could indeed be unforgiving. Most of the characters surrounding Ilyich fail to achieve his measure of last-minute grace. The novella opens with Ilyich’s colleagues—he was a judge, which is the spiritual equivalent in Tolstoy’s fiction of being the Russian in a Bond film—learning about his death. Each of them instantly imagines what Ilyich’s death means for his own professional life, and thinks of how grateful he is that it is Ilyich, not he, who has died. The deceased judge’s best friend hurries to his funeral, where he competes with Ilyich’s widow in seeing who can pretend to be devastated more. The mixture of selfishness and disingenuousness on display is contemptible but also extraordinarily recognizable.

“Ivan Ilyich’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible,” reads the opening of the second part of the story. Few other lines in Tolstoy’s oeuvre so well demonstrate his unmatched ability to succinctly, horribly encapsulate a character.

Ilyich is a pleasant, competent fellow who has lived a pleasant, competent life. In his 45 years, he has always aimed to please his social betters, moving up in the world as he did. In exchange for luxury and status, Ilyich sacrificed authenticity and intimacy.

That deal results in a spiritual barrenness that leaves him ill-equipped to deal with the specter of death. As a mysterious illness overcomes him, Ilyich is faced with a mortality he never acknowledged. Exactly like his colleagues, Ilyich had always presumed that death was something reserved for other people. Now he realizes its inescapability, and he is tormented. "Ivan Ilyich, with all my feelings and thoughts—for me it's another matter. And it cannot be that I should die. It would be terrible," he thinks.

All of this might be too morose to be enjoyable were it not for Tolstoy's unmatched skill in rendering lifelike characters and situations. What makes "Ilyich" chill-inducing is its relatability. Avoiding thoughts about death in favor of superficialities is not a flaw reserved for 19th-century Russian magistrates. The sheer horror that merely considering death induces is universal, and it is replicated in this book as in no other.

But while death might be as inevitable as taxation, a poorly lived life is a choice. Ilyich's last days are worsened tremendously by his realization that he has squandered his short time on earth with trivialities. His shallowness is contrasted with that of the servant who attends to him on his deathbed, Gerasim. Gerasim is everything Ilyich is not: humble, poor, devout and selfless. His material poverty contrasts with his spiritual richness. Ilyich finds comfort in his presence as he expires, managing to learn from Gerasim right before his last breath.

The directness, seriousness and plainness of "Ilyich" make it almost a Christian parable. Perhaps if the novella lacked psychological acuity and verisimilitude, it would be too moralizing to be gratifying. Many of Tolstoy's writings from this time are religious parables and essays. After writing "War and Peace" (1869) and "Anna Karenina" (1877), he came to feel that writing anything that didn't spread Christ's message was frivolous. He made something of an exception for "Ilyich," though the book is as religious in its own way, and far more effective in delivering its message, than his parables like, say, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" (1886).

There is drama in seeing Ilyich's life recalled, and though we know from the book's opening lines that he will die, the manner in which his death unfolds is a surprise, as is the ending. And that is what ultimately makes "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" a masterpiece: Ilyich's redemption can be ours, too.

—*Mr. Smith, a writer in New York, has written about Leo Tolstoy for the American Interest and the Weekly Standard.*

Copyright &copy;2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.