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The Death of Ivan Ilyich

Leo Tolstoy · *1886 · Constance Garnett translation (1915)*

A successful judge, having lived a life that looked correct from the outside, falls ill and must face death without the comforts that once screened it. Tolstoy follows Ivan Ilyitch from a funeral notice to a last moment of light, and asks what a life is worth if it has been only ordinary, official, and false. The peasant Gerasim can sit with the dying man; the family cannot.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If a life has been only the approved career—prudent, respectable, and empty—can a man still do the right thing when death comes?

"The previous history of Ivan Ilyitch was the simplest, the most ordinary, and the most awful."
Narrator · Chapter II

Ivan Ilyitch sees, at the last, that it has all been not the right thing—and that he can still do the right thing. Pity for his son and his wife loosens the lie that his life was good. In the place of death there is light; he tells himself that death is over. The book does not flatter the official life. It leaves a door open for repentance at the end.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ivan Ilyitch Golovin
A correct, ambitious judge of the Court of Justice, dying in his forties

Praskovya Fyodorovna
His wife, preoccupied with appearances and the pension

Gerasim
The young peasant servant whose plain, truthful care comforts the dying man

Pyotr Ivanovitch
Colleague and old schoolfellow whose funeral visit opens the story

Shvarts
Colleague who treats the funeral as an obstacle to an evening of whist

The schoolboy son
The child who pities him and kisses his hand at the last

Lizanka
The daughter, impatient with the illness, about to be engaged

THE ORDINARY LIFE, AND THE RIGHT THING STILL TO DO

"The previous history of Ivan Ilyitch was the simplest, the most ordinary, and the most awful."
Narrator · Chapter II

"'Death is over,' he said to himself. 'It's no more.'"
Ivan Ilyitch · Chapter XII

Grades 11–12
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01
A Death in the Law Courts
CHAPTER I

Colleagues hear that Ivan Ilyitch is dead, and think first of promotion.

- During an interval in the Melvinsky case, Pyotr Ivanovitch reads that Ivan Ilyitch Golovin has died on the 4th of February
- Each man in the room thinks of transfers and additional income
- At the funeral, Praskovya Fyodorovna talks of her husband's sufferings and of a government grant; Shvarts is eager for whist
- Only the butler Gerasim seems at ease with death; Pyotr Ivanovitch is glad to escape to cards

> *"Ivan Ilyitch is dead!"*
> **Pyotr Ivanovitch** · Chapter I

02
The Phoenix of the Family
CHAPTERS II–III

A correct career is built: school, marriage, promotion, and a new apartment.

- Ivan Ilyitch, the happy mean of three sons, does his duty as those in authority define it
- He marries Praskovya Fyodorovna because the match is comme il faut, then withdraws into official life as the marriage sours
- A painful year in 1880 is reversed by an unexpected promotion in Petersburg
- Furnishing the new apartment, he knocks his side on a window-knob; the bruise seems nothing

> *"The previous history of Ivan Ilyitch was the simplest, the most ordinary, and the most awful."*
> **Narrator** · Chapter II

03
The Kidney and the Appendix
CHAPTERS IV–VI

Pain grows, doctors disagree, and the syllogism about Caius no longer applies to someone else.

- Ivan Ilyitch's temper and his side worsen; he goes to a celebrated doctor and hears of a loose kidney or an appendix
- The consultation feels like a case in court, with the one question that matters left unanswered
- He sees that he is dying, and that those around him will not admit it
- The old school logic—Caius is a man, men are mortal—fails when the man is himself

04
Gerasim and the Lie
CHAPTERS VII–X

A peasant servant tells the truth with his hands; the family will not.

- Gerasim holds the dying man's legs and does not pretend that he will recover
- Opium, morphine, and special visits cannot cover the lie that this is only a temporary illness
- Ivan Ilyitch feels he has been going steadily downhill while imagining he was going uphill
- The official pleasures that once screened death no longer work

> *"As though I had been going steadily downhill, imagining that I was going uphill."*
> **Ivan Ilyitch** · Chapter IX

05
Not the Right Thing
CHAPTERS XI–XII

Three days of screaming end in pity, light, and a death that is over.

- He sees distinctly that his whole conscious life has been not the right thing: a vast deception hiding life and death
- For three days he struggles in a black sack; what holds him back is the claim that his life was good
- His schoolboy son kisses his hand; he feels sorry for the boy and for his wife, and tries to say forgive
- The terror of death is gone. In the place of death there is light; he tells himself that death is over, and dies

> *"In the place of death there was light."*
> **Narrator** · Chapter XII

Death and Judgment · A False Life · Repentance · Pity · Truth-telling · The Official World

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is Constance Garnett (1915), not the Maude translation once named in the catalogue. The name is spelled Ilyitch.
2. This page hosts The Death of Ivan Ilyitch only, taken from Project Gutenberg #79990. It does not include the other stories in that volume.
3. Chapter I is not Ivan's story yet. The colleagues' first thoughts—promotion, whist, the grant—are the book's picture of the ordinary life before we enter it.
4. Gerasim's service is the book's moral contrast: he can sit with death, and does not lie.
5. "It has all been not the right thing" is not despair only. He adds that he could still do the right thing, and pity for his wife and son opens the way.
6. The last words in this translation are "Death is over" and "It's no more," not the Maude wording "Death is finished."

Quotations are verbatim from the Constance Garnett translation (1915), Project Gutenberg #79990, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-death-of-ivan-ilyich/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.