

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Death of Ivan Ilych by Leo Tolstoy

- *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* begins with Ivan's funeral. Why do you think Tolstoy starts his story with what would typically be the ending?
- The second chapter states that "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and commonplace—and most horrifying." What do you think the author meant by this?
- How does the change in Ivan Ilych's professional status in midlife (first in terms of being passed over for promotion and then in terms of being granted a new higher position with better pay) affect his sense of self and happiness?
- Why does Ivan Ilych find so much pleasure in playing bridge?
- What do you think about Ivan Ilych's wife? Why is their marriage unhappy? What did you think of their children?
- Why do you think Ivan is comforted by the presence of the peasant, Gerasim? How does his attitude contrast with Ivan's other visitors, especially the doctors? Do you think Gerasim is realistically portrayed?
- After three days of excruciating physical and mental pain, Ivan Ilych realizes that despite a futile life, he can still make amends. Is he right? Does he accomplish this?
- What are the character qualities of Ivan Ilych as a child and school boy? How do these traits shape his adult life and behavior?
- Does Ivan Ilych "learn" from his suffering?
- How do you interpret the light that Ivan sees at the very end? What might this light symbolize or suggest?
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- As Peter Ivanovich views the body in the first chapter, it appears to him that Ivan's face wears a "reproach and a warning to the living." What is the reproach and the warning?
- What does Peter Ivanovich represent in the story?
- Was the life that Ivan Ilych led a good or a bad one? Why?
- Did Ivan Ilych die at peace? Why or why not?
- Do you think there is anything hopeful about the story?



Skokie Public Library

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