

# Industrialization and the Conformist Man

Presented to Mr. Leon

The Beacon School

On

June 12, 2009

By I [REDACTED] C [REDACTED]

The arrival of industrialization was without a doubt a clear turning point for mankind, in terms of technological development and in terms of the way mass society subsequently leads everyday life. For Tolstoy, industrialization in Russia came not as an advancement, but a danger to mankind. In The Death of Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy argues through numerous literary devices that modern society lacks an individuality and compassion it once had. The “everyman” character and superficial bourgeois highlighted by Tolstoy’s dispassionate writing style reflect his discontentment with materialistic, post-Industrial Revolution society and the threat it poses to individuality and true sentiment.

Through use of the everyman character, Tolstoy stakes his claim that individuality no longer exists in mass society. Ivan Ilyich exemplifies the everyman because as a member of the bourgeois, he represents the generic “mechanical man” who strives for wealth and social acceptance. “Mechanical man” describes conformist man existing without emotion—essentially, like that of a robot. His desires exist primarily within pursuit of material goods, titles, and fitting in amongst the wealthiest members of society. This without question applies to Ivan Ilyich. “As a student he had done things which, at the time, seemed to him extremely vile and made him feel disgusted with himself, but later, seeing that people of high standing had no qualms about doing these things, he was not quite able to consider them good but managed to dismiss them and not feel the least perturbed when he recalled them.” (Tolstoy 44). In his franticness to achieve “success”, Ilyich gives up his own individuality. His desperation leads him to modify his own character so he can meet the expectations and behaviors of the upper class; even modifying his values. Since his ideal lifestyle would be to live among the upper class, any means by which he can achieve that lifestyle are valid. As Ilyich represents the average man during post-Industrial Revolution Russia, Tolstoy implies all men exist in this way, resulting in an elimination of

identity through the conformist behavior of man. When man aims for material gain, he alters himself in order to better fit in and his main focus becomes material goods. His values are rearranged; tangible objects become priority to abstract emotions.

In addition to the use of the “mechanical man” concept, Tolstoy exaggerates the behaviors of the bourgeois in order to point out society’s skewed values. The bourgeois is marked by materialistic, superficially-centered pursuits. As the upper-middle class, its members aim for the high esteem of wealth, power, and the amassing of material goods. Ivan Ilyich is no exception; his values concern social standing and the appearance of his home rather than his relationships among family and friends: “...the result was stunning—an opinion voiced not only by him but by everyone else who saw the place. In actuality, it was like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich, and therefore end up looking like one another: it had damasks, ebony, plants, carpets, and bronzes—all the effects a certain class of people produce so as to look like people of a certain class.” (Tolstoy 57). Not only does Tolstoy pointedly spend nearly an entire chapter discussing the appearance of Ilyich’s apartment in order to highlight these distorted values, he also points out all of modern mankind subsists in this manner. The discussion of the lack of distinctiveness in Ilyich’s home indicates this. People in society live as clones, and because of this, unique identity and values rearrange in order to fit a singular identity.

The use of indifferent language further accentuates this singular identity; his tone parallels the emotionless day-to-day behaviors of society. His writing style demonstrates every character in the novella: completely devoid of emotion. Ivan Ilyich is no exception; even matters regarding his own family mean very little to him, if anything. “Other children were born. His wife became more and more petulant and irascible, but the attitude Ivan Ilyich had adopted

toward domestic life made him almost impervious to her carping. ...Although his salary was higher, the cost of living was greater; moreover, two of their children had died, and so family life became even more unpleasant for Ivan Ilyich." (Tolstoy 51). The fact that Ivan Ilyich considers the deaths of his children only in passing proves most alarming; the narrative spends more time discussing Ivan Ilyich's interior decoration than his own family. This coupled with the uninterested tone of Ilyich's general thoughts stands out because it underscores the complete lack of emotion, skewed values, and distinct deficit of individuality. Since Tolstoy exaggerates these factors through his writing style, the reader recognizes these behaviors and leaves with a feeling of shock and awe. These characteristics are not only alive in the novella—they also exist in our world today. Tolstoy aims to make the reader aware and introspective as a means to end the vicious cycle mankind lives in.

By using The Death of Ivan Ilyich as a means to make a social commentary, Tolstoy attempts to illustrate to the reader that at some point—most specifically following the Russian Industrial Revolution—mankind lost its individuality. In doing so, it also lost its values and any concept of real emotion; compassion for family and friends being secondary to tangible materials. Tolstoy has every reason to argue the state of modern society—mankind as a whole has replaced what truly matters with temporary satisfactions. This exists in our world as well, and just as in the novella, it will continue to.