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*Siddhartha* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*: Existence through Nonexistence

According to Martin Heidegger, a renowned German philosopher, there are two soul sicknesses of mankind: one is unaware of his existence, and one falls into ‘theyself’ living mostly according to what ‘they’ tell him to do, thus leading an inauthentic life. A life in which one runs away from the confrontation with nonexistence, and becomes egoistic, treating all other life as a means rather than an end. Therefore, only a confrontation with death allows one to exist authentically. An existence in which one sees the unity of all life thus overcoming alienation and egoism, making the most of the limited time in one’s life. In Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, both authors portray protagonists who lead lives filled with inauthenticity, living in a state of ‘theyself’, until confronted with death. Through Siddhartha’s desired suicide and Ivan Ilyich’s untimely fatal illness, both Hesse and Tolstoy suggest that one’s confrontation with death makes him realize the inauthenticities of his life, and thus enables one to live authentically.

Siddhartha’s materialistic existence and Ivan Ilyich’s obsession with aristocracy, both exhibit the worthlessness of materialism that often dictates one’s life. After explaining Siddhartha’s materialistic lifestyle, Hesse goes on to describe what Siddhartha still lacks: “But he rarely laughed, and gradually his face assumed the expressions which are so often found among rich people - the expressions of discontent, of sickliness, of displeasure, of idleness, of lovelessness. Slowly the soul sickness of the rich crept over him” (Hesse 78). Often seen as something that will enhance one’s life, Hesse suggests the poisonous nature of the material world and aspirations through Siddhartha’s discontent and sickliness. Furthermore, he speaks about how in pursuing the material world, one does not see this sickness of

discontent and displeasure creeping up until his life becomes insipid and loveless. Similarly, Ivan Ilyich leads an insipid life as his “real pleasures was in little dinners, to which he invited ladies and gentlemen of important social position and passed time similarly to the way such people usually pass the time, just as his drawing room was similar to all other drawing rooms” (Tolstoy 21). Ivan Ilyich works day in and day out only to lead a life mirroring the life of people in the higher society, thus having no uniqueness to his own existence. This desire to mirror the rich did not just consist in his social life, it also consumed his personal life for “he demanded of marital life only those comforts of dinner at home, housekeeping, bed, which it could give him, above all, that decency of external forms which was defined by public opinion” (Tolstoy 14). Ivan Ilyich’s life consists of nothing outside of what is accepted by aristocracy, regardless of whether it seemed right or wrong to him, for he lived his entire life in the name of this ‘decency’ and his ‘comforts’ were only those defined by public opinion. Both Siddhartha and Ivan Ilyich initially lead a lifestyle confined by societal constraints, feeding into the Heideggerian idea of ‘theyself’, thus living an inauthentic life.

Furthermore, both Siddhartha and Ivan Ilych’s incapability to truly love for the majority of their lives fosters inauthenticity. Hesse illustrates love as a missing factor from Siddhartha’s materialistic life as “He envied them the one thing that he lacked and that they had: the sense of importance with which they lived their lives, the depth of their pleasures and sorrows, the anxious but sweet happiness of their continual power to love” (Hesse 77). Though Siddhartha conforms to the lifestyle of these ‘childlike people’ he is still unable to love, one of the driving forces behind filling one’s life with purpose and meaning. Only through love do people experience immense pleasures or sorrows, and the pursuit of that love fills their lives with purpose; however, while living a life engulfed by materialism, Siddhartha only feels his great desire for gambling: “He loved this feeling and continually sought to renew it, to increase

it, to stimulate, for in this feeling alone did he experience some kind of happiness, some kind of excitement, some heightened living in the midst of his satiated, tepid, insipid existence” (Hesse 79). The only time Siddhartha feels any feeling of ‘love’ occurs while gambling for material things or money, rather than feeling any kind of true love, a love that stimulates one’s growth and happiness. Hence this feeling he experiences serves as a compensation for the lack of love in Siddhartha’s hollow life, driving him into despair, as opposed to true love which drives one towards salvation. Similar to Siddhartha’s materialism, Ivan Ilych’s obsession with public image and aristocracy’s principles also breed inauthenticity. Tolstoy comments on his marriage by saying “To say that Ivan Ilych married because he loved his bride and found her sympathetic to his view of life would be as incorrect as to say that he married because people of high society approved of his match” (Tolstoy 13). Marriage, one of the most sacred relationships in one’s life, is born out of true love; however, for Ivan Ilych it seemed necessary to marry solely for the purpose of living up to aristocracy and also because his wife ‘suited him well’. However, laying on his deathbed he comes to the realization that “no one would feel sorry for him, because no one wanted to understand his situation” (Tolstoy 37), that the very people according to whom he accustomed his entire life remained unaffected by his death and rather his death “called up in all those who heard of it, as always, a feeling of joy that it was he who was dead and not I” (Tolstoy 2). He also realizes that he hates his wife “with all the forces of his soul. And her touch makes him suffer from a flood of hatred for her” (Tolstoy 41). Through Siddhartha’s love for money, and Ivan Ilych’s love for societal validation, Hesse and Tolstoy portray the inauthenticity and meaninglessness brought upon one’s life through the absence of true love.

Confrontation with death serves as a catalyst for both Siddhartha and Ivan Ilych to realize their inner voice. Right when Siddhartha is on the verge of committing suicide and ending his life once and

for all, “from a remote part of his soul, from the past of his tired life, he heard a sound... All the torment of these recent times, all the disillusionment, all the despair, had not affected him so much as it did the moment the Om reached his consciousness and he recognized his wretchedness and his crime” (Hesse 89). On the brink of ending his misery rather than facing it, he was ‘awakened’ by the sound of Om, or perfection, from deep within him, thus the consequent realization of his confusion exemplifies Heidegger’s belief that avoiding the concept of nonexistence leads to an unawareness of existence. Therefore, only through facing death does Siddhartha realize what he has become. On the other hand, after being hit with an untimely fatal illness, and becoming aware of his quickly approaching death, Ivan Ilych looks back on the life led by him: “It occurred to him that those barely noticeable impulses he had felt to fight against what highly placed people considered good, barely noticeable impulses which he had immediately driven away - that they might have been the real thing, and all the rest might have been not right” (Tolstoy 50). After having lived a life defined by society, a life filled with inauthenticity, a life of no significance, Ivan Ilych now realizes that the importance of listening to the voice deep within him that he silenced a long time ago, for that voice could have led to an authentic life. Through finally listening to his inner voice he realizes the flaws of his living condition, his work, his family, and all his social interests, and as he tries to defend these things “he suddenly felt all the weakness of what he was defending. And there was nothing to defend” (Tolstoy 52). The consciousness brought upon him through his inner voice leads to the realization that though his life had not been an authentic one, it could still be rectified.

Both Siddhartha and Ivan Ilyich’s confrontation with death allows them both to realize the flaws and inauthenticities of the lives they led, thus enabling them to live authentically. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes “The end of the world – is death. The ‘end’ that belongs to existence limits and defines

the whole of Existence ... death is just a fellow Existence,” further illustrating his point that it is precisely the possibility that death is near which allows one to live authentically. After all, without realizing the transient nature of one’s life, one can always postpone living authentically to some indefinite point in the future, or perhaps get so lost that one loses sight of authenticity, much like Siddhartha and Ivan Ilych. Therefore, Heidegger, Hesse, and Tolstoy all suggest that the time to live authentically, the opportunity to wrench oneself out of lostness and this state of ‘theyself’ is right now, in this present moment, for one’s mortality ensures that no other moments are guaranteed.