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The Death of Ivan Ilyich & Other Stories

LEO TOLSTOY



SELECTED STORIES

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IVAN ILYICH
and Other Stories

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy's great novel about married life, *Anna Karenina*, famously begins with a sentence contrasting happy and unhappy families. His own experience of domesticity, as his biographers have shown us, began relatively happily, but degenerated, both for his wife and himself, into nightmare. Some of the psychological processes that were to help create that nightmare are reflected in the novel, which, as his biographers have shown us, is, in the parts dealing with the life of Levin, closely based on Tolstoy's own early married life.

There is in fact ample evidence in Tolstoy's own non-fictional writings and those of members of his family, including his wife, to show how much of his fiction, from the early trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* onwards, was semi-autobiographical. Similarly, each of the four stories in this volume can be related either to incidents in the author's life or to a stage in the evolution of his thought based on his own experiences. All of them also deal in a variety of ways with relationships between the sexes and their place in the general

context of human life. In writing them he uses, as we shall see, a variety of narrative strategies.

They range from the partly fulfilled hopes of contentment in courtship and marriage explored in 'Family Happiness', published three years before his own marriage in 1862, to the disillusionment and disgust connected with marital and sexual relationships that characterise the four stories from his later years included with it in this volume and written after his two great novels *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877).

The increasing bleakness of Tolstoy's vision of life emerges in the longest and perhaps most remarkable of the stories included here, 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich', in which he focuses all his narrative skills on the situation of a man afflicted with a terminal illness, whose career and social status have been far more important to him than the quality of his marriage and domestic human relationships, and who faces his end in a desert of lovelessness.

In fact from his earliest years Tolstoy's own views on the possibility of genuine love between the sexes and the part which it should play in life were complicated by guilt about his own powerful sexual drive, relieved in the years before his marriage to Sofia Alexandreyevna Behrs by prostitutes, affairs with women in his own social circle and a passionate relationship with a peasant woman, Aksinia, who lived on his own estate at Yasnaya Polyana.

This guilt led him to confess, in a kind of self-purging ritual, the full range of his sexual experiences to his much younger and totally inexperienced bride by making her read his intimate diaries on the eve of their wedding, an episode reprised, almost exactly as it happened, in *Anna Karenina*, Part Four, Chapter 16. It is used again, as we shall see, in 'The Kreutzer Sonata'. Indeed the subsequent strains, suspicions and jealousies that mar the relationship between Tolstoy's alter ego, Levin, in that novel and his young bride Kitty, probably mirror to a great extent the emotional ups and downs that characterised his own marriage at that time. However, as we shall see, even in work published before that marriage, he expresses ideas on male-female relationships that to an enlightened modern reader will seem highly problematic.

Family Happiness

In the first novella in our selection, 'Family Happiness', published in 1859 the narrative voice is that of a seventeen-year-old girl, describing how she fell in love with and ultimately married a family

friend and neighbour, a man in his thirties. The story is split into two parts, the first dealing with the couple's courtship and wedding, the second with the early years of their marriage. At its heart is the conflict between youth and maturity, innocence and experience and, most importantly, masculine and feminine points of view, here, uniquely, seen from the latter.

The story was in fact written at a time when Tolstoy was considering marriage to the young daughter of some neighbours about three years before he settled finally on Sofia Alexandreyevna. It anticipates uncannily some of his own future marital problems, illustrating very clearly his masculist assumptions. Indeed he appears to have written it as a counterblast to the proto-feminist views expressed in Chernyshevsky's widely read novel *What Is To Be Done?*¹

The girl, Masha, is an orphan, having lost her mother on the eve of being launched into St Petersburg society. Initially she sees her mentor as simply a father substitute, since although her dead mother saw him as a possible husband, he hardly matches her romantic expectations:

... the hero of my dreams was utterly different. My hero was delicate, slender, pale and melancholy. Sergey Mihalovich was a man no longer youthful, tall, squarely built, and, as I fancied, always cheerful. [p. 4]

He, on the other hand now sees a 'rose' where six years before he had seen a 'girl-violet', and begins from the outset to assess her. He asks her to play the *adagio* of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, a movement in tune with her adolescent sensibilities. His appreciation of her playing begins to change her view of him too, and she resents the fact that he still regards her as a child.

Tolstoy ends the first chapter, appropriately set in winter, with an image of the orphaned girl's funereally dark house suddenly being filled with light. The next chapter is set in spring, and is full of natural imagery, with extended passages of lyrical writing setting the scene as seen through a young girl's impressionable eyes, for instance just before Sergei's next visit:

We were sitting in the verandah, just going to have tea. The garden was already all in green, and among the overgrown shrubs the nightingales had been building all through St

1 See Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoy in the Seventies*, p. 95.

Peter's fast. The leafy lilac bushes looked as though they had been sprinkled at the top with something white and lilac, where the flowers were just going to come out. The foliage of the birch avenue was all transparent in the setting sun. It was cool and shady in the verandah. There must have been a heavy evening dew on the grass . . . On the white cloth set before us on the verandah stood the brilliantly polished samovar boiling, cream, and biscuits and cakes. Katya, like a careful housewife, was rinsing the cups with her plump hands. I was hungry after bathing; and without waiting for the tea to be ready, I was eating some bread heaped with thick, fresh cream. I had on a linen blouse with open sleeves, and had tied a kerchief over my wet hair. [p. 89]

Through such paragraphs of intensely evocative descriptive writing Tolstoy slows the narrative down, in this part of the story, and provides a choric background to the developing intimacy of the girl and her potential suitor. She becomes more and more aware of his 'shining eyes', and his sexual interest in her, as he approaches, obliquely, the possibility of marriage. Her response is to try to conform to his expectations and image of her, while noticing, to an extent that foreshadows later difficulties in the relationship, his unwillingness to share with her 'a whole unknown world into which he did not think fit to initiate me'. (p. 13)

Her eagerness to show herself 'worthy' of him and not 'frivolously vain', heightens her awareness of her social environment. She begins to appreciate the self-sacrifice of her ageing companion Katya, and to identify more with the peasants on her estate:

He taught me to look at our people – peasants, house-serfs, and serf-girls – quite differently from how I had done. It sounds an absurd thing to say, but I had grown up to seventeen among these people more remote from them than from people I had never seen. I had never once reflected that these people had their loves, desires, and regrets just as I had. [p. 15]

In these passages we as readers become increasingly aware of the underlying didactic purpose behind the story. Tolstoy is providing his young feminine readers with a role model in his heroine, indicating the values he would like to see inculcated in them, going on to emphasise how far their own independence and aspirations would be sacrificed in any marriage. We can also see here an early indication of the direction in which Tolstoy's thought would

develop, as he came more and more to prefer the philosophy of life of what Lenin called 'the patriarchal naïve peasant'² to the values and concerns of the society in which he had been brought up.

With the third chapter we move into autumn, and more vividly detailed scene-setting. The opening paragraphs evoke the hot afternoon and the sights and sounds of the busy estate with the peasants at work on the harvest 'in the scalding sunshine', while Masha, her younger sister Sonya and Katya enjoy the privileges of their social position. When Sergei Mihalovich arrives and Masha overhears him talking to himself about her in a way that confirms his love for her, she realises that now she has some degree of power over him, that he 'was not now like an old uncle, petting and instructing me, but a man equal with me, who loved and feared me, and whom I feared and loved'. (p. 20)

The ensuing moonlit autumn evening and night are described with an intensity and complexity of lyrical, synaesthetic detail that reflect the extreme happiness of Tolstoy's heroine in her knowledge that 'from that day he was mine, and that now I should not lose him'. It is the climactic scene in this part of the story, and is followed by Masha's spiritual preparations for her marital destiny, as she purges herself of minor 'sins' and tries to treat her social 'inferiors' in a way of which her lover would approve. Having remade herself in his image, she looks forward confidently to their life together:

It seemed to me that we should be so endlessly and calmly happy. And I pictured to myself not tours abroad, not society, and a brilliant life, but something quite different, a quiet family life in the country with continual self-sacrifice, continual love for one another, and a continual sense in all things of a kind and beneficent Providence. [p. 28]

So when Sergey Mihalovich reveals, disingenuously, that he plans to go away to avoid greater intimacy, she is all too ready to confess her own feelings and accept a proposal of marriage.

At this stage she feels entirely on equal terms with him, and it is only when he closes the door of their honeymoon carriage that she realises her power has ended. Sudden feelings of pain and humiliation are, however, quickly dissipated.

2 See P. Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Chapter 19, for a discussion of Lenin's views on Tolstoy, and his Appendix (p. 316) for the passage quoted above.

I felt warm, my eyes sought his in the dusk, and I suddenly felt that I was not afraid of him, that that dread was love, a new and still more tender and passionate love than before. I felt that I was altogether his, and that I was happy in his power over me.

[p. 39]

The second part of the novella finds Masha adjusting to her new life as mistress of an old-fashioned, highly ordered household, previously presided over by her mother-in-law, still a dominant presence in the house. Predictably, the gloom of midwinter brings loneliness and boredom. Her husband is often away on business, and she feels unfulfilled, with no outlet for her energy. As the confining snow piles up around the house she dreams of another life available to people of her class, knowing that 'far away somewhere, in bright light and noise, crowds of people were in movement, were suffering and rejoicing, without a thought of us and our existence as it passed away'. (p. 46)

She also resents being excluded, as a woman, from the public activities which occupy her husband. When, sensing her need for romance and excitement, he takes her to St Petersburg via Moscow, she enters a brave new world of sophisticated city life and is warmly welcomed as a beautiful newcomer, flattered to find herself the centre of attention in an environment he despises. Her social triumph gives her a new sense of power, and she begins to resent his reservations. Soon an invitation to meet a foreign prince sparks off their first real quarrel and evidence of the husband's apprehensive jealousy:

'I have long been expecting this,' I said; 'say it, say it!'

'I don't know what you've been expecting,' he went on. 'I might well have expected the worst, seeing you every day in the uncleanness and idleness and luxury of this silly society, and I've got it too. I've come to feeling ashamed and sick today, as I have never felt for myself. When your friend with her unclean hands pried into my heart and began talking of jealousy, my jealousy – of whom? – a man whom neither I nor you know. And you, on purpose it seems – refuse to understand me and want to sacrifice to me – what? . . . I'm ashamed of you, ashamed of your degradation! . . . Sacrifice!' he repeated.

'Ah, here we have it, the power of the husband,' I thought, 'to insult and humiliate his wife, who is in no way to blame. These are a husband's rights, but I won't submit to it.'

'No, I won't sacrifice anything to you,' I declared, feeling my

nostrils dilating unnaturally, and the blood deserting my face. 'I'm going to the *soirée* on Saturday; I shall certainly go!'

[p. 56]

Although they make it up, he now seems 'old and disagreeable' and a gulf opens up between them. He has, in Congreve's words, 'dwindled' into an ordinary husband, while she seeks her satisfactions in a society environment ultimately as constricting as the domestic one she had left. Even when she becomes a mother, she is still, defiantly living a society life, significantly wearing her ball gown when she goes to say good-night to her child, but she is increasingly uneasy about her behaviour and conscious of her husband's stern disapproval. The crisis comes when she finds one of her circle, to her horror, sexually attractive. Recalling her past happiness with her husband, she retreats to the country, where 'every board, every wall, every sofa recalled to me what he had been to me, and what I had lost.' (p. 67)

Spring returns to the old house, but the emotional atmosphere has changed irredeemably. Her husband comes in to find her playing the *andante* of the sonata familiar from their courtship, and the stage is set for a sober restoration of harmony, a redefinition of their love, and her final surrender to his values.

Despite its insights and the lyricism of much of the writing, the didacticism marring much of Tolstoy's later fiction is already present in this story, with the husband providing the moral norm by which we are clearly intended to judge Masha's actions, as she does herself. Although Tolstoy identifies to a considerable extent with the girl's frustrated aspirations, there is no doubt where he thinks power should reside. For him already, the key to successful marriage is the husband's taming of the wife's independent spirit – a process in which childbirth plays an important part. In the remaining stories here, written after the extended analysis of different marriages in *Anna Karenina*, we have variations on this theme and a general darkening of tone.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich

The next story in this volume, 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich', was written in 1886, almost a decade after Tolstoy had finished *Anna Karenina*, and seven years after a remarkable non-fiction work, his *Confession* of 1879, which reveals how much more negative his view of life had become since *Anna Karenina*. He was now in his late fifties and his relationship with his wife had steadily deteriorated.

He had become obsessed with thoughts about death, having compared himself in his *Confession* to a traveller clinging to the weakening branch of life above a pit in which the dragon of death awaits him.³ Such thoughts and his marital disillusionments engendered in 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' a story that is Tolstoy's equivalent of a medieval morality play such as *Everyman*.

The *Confession* had signalled the start of the transformation of Tolstoy the admired writer into Tolstoy the revered sage, revealing his increasing concern with religious and spiritual matters. It described how he came to question the doctrines and observances of the Russian Orthodox faith in which he had been brought up and of organised Christianity generally, while always regarding Christ's teachings as paramount. Eventually he would develop a kind of 'religion' of his own, incorporating a rationalisation of his feelings of guilt and disgust at his own and his wife's sexuality. Finally he would come to believe that the ideal life was one of sexual abstinence, and that most human activities and concerns were meaningless when considered in relation to the fact of death.

'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' (originally entitled 'The Death of a Judge'), perhaps the most powerful story ever written about a life approaching its end, marks a stage in the development of these views. We are now in a very different and much darker world from the subjective one of the heroine of 'Family Happiness'. There is a complete absence in it of the vivid, joyous passages of natural description that lighten the tone of the earlier story. Instead of being made privy to the romantic expectations of a young girl approaching marriage, described in her own voice, we have a detached, rather cold-blooded, grimly amused, omniscient narrator charting the accelerated progress of a man through life to his own death. It is a life in which, largely because of the extreme self-centredness of the central figure, marriage becomes a major source of torment amongst other torments.

The narrator begins, in the longest chapter in the story, with what would chronologically be its end: the aftermath of Ilyich's death. He shows us how swiftly the gap left by the ending of an individual life is filled. With black, and all too truthful, humour, he recounts how Ivan's legal colleagues, acquaintances and family react, with most of them immediately calculating how they benefit from the situation. His closest friend Pyotr Ivanovich is, it is true, worried by the death for a while, nervously crossing himself as he

3 L. N. Tolstoy, *My Confession*, p. 19

reluctantly enters the room where the corpse is laid out and sees the dead man's face:

He was much changed and grown even thinner since Pyotr Ivanovich had last seen him, but, as is always the case with the dead, his face was handsomer and above all more dignified than when he was alive. The expression on the face said that what was necessary had been accomplished, and accomplished rightly. Besides this there was in that expression a reproach and a warning to the living. This warning seemed to Pyotr Ivanovich out of place, or at least not applicable to him. He felt a certain discomfort and so he hurriedly crossed himself once more and turned and went out of the door – too hurriedly and too regardless of propriety, as he himself was aware. [p. 82]

Ironically, unlike his more determinedly frivolous companion, Shvarts, Pyotr Ivanovich cannot completely shrug off the *memento mori* message of their friend's death, a message that as we shall see Ivan himself neglected until he was compelled to take notice of it. Indeed, as the passage shows, Pyotr Ivanovich's chief concern is with those very 'proprieties' which we shall see ruled Ivan's life almost until its end. The main emotion felt by him and his living friends is, in fact, annoyance at the inconvenience of having to leave the 'unsanctified' candles which light their usual card games for the ones which will illuminate the funeral. This satire of all too recognisable human attitudes is enhanced by comic touches such as the description of the ottoman with 'deranged springs' (p. 83) on which Pyotr Ivanovich sits to talk embarrassedly to the widow before rushing off to that delayed game of cards.

Only in the second chapter, almost equally long, do we move to the dead man himself, whose dying screams, lasting three days, have been described to Pyotr Ivanovich by his shattered wife. We learn that his story is one that is 'most ordinary, and the most awful'. (p. 86)⁴ It is 'most ordinary' because it is a familiar one paralleling what happens in a great number of lives, and 'most awful' because all too many of us are likely to face an end similar to that endured by Ivan Ilyich. The story is designed to make us starkly aware of the folly of overvaluing our lifetime achievements and being too worried about external appearances. It demonstrates

4 The translation of the Russian here seems rather unfortunate, since 'awful' has lost its original force in colloquial English. 'Terrible' or even 'terrifying' seems more appropriate.

how irrelevant to others, and insignificant in the general scheme of things, individual lives and their concomitant sufferings and concerns ultimately are.

Tolstoy begins with a detailed and fairly leisurely account of Ivan's life, his marriage and his highly respectable and prominent legal career. He is, in fact, a man for whom his domestic life is a poor second to his public position. Marriage is merely a convenience, in that it helps him maintain his status, comforts and sense of self-importance. When his intelligent and attractive wife begins to make emotional demands on him, his reactions are characteristic:

Very quickly, not more than a year after his wedding, Ivan Ilyich had become aware that conjugal life, though providing certain comforts, was in reality a very intricate and difficult business towards which one must, if one is to do one's duty, that is, lead the decorous life approved by society, work out for oneself a definite line, just as in the government service.

And such a line Ivan Ilyich did work out for himself in his married life. He expected from his home life only those comforts – of dinner at home, of housekeeper and bed – which it could give him, and, above all, that perfect propriety in external observances required by public opinion. For the rest he looked for good-humoured pleasantness, and if he found it he was very thankful. If he met with antagonism and querulousness, he promptly retreated into the separate world he had shut off for himself in his official life, and there he found solace. [p. 92]

In a third chapter, roughly equivalent in length to the first two, we see Ivan Ilyich rise, overcoming earlier professional setbacks, to a senior level in the judiciary, always ensuring that as far as his image and his public activities are concerned 'perfect propriety' is observed. Because, however, his wife is someone he cannot exercise power over (as the argument implicit in 'Family Happiness' implies he should), he neglects his marriage and its emotional demands in favour of his power and status as a judge, concentrating instead on the face he presents to the outside world, and enjoying the deference of his junior colleagues and the people attending his court.

Eventually he reaches the summit of his career, acquiring a house and furniture to match his status. His wife, whose main concern is now with their material well-being, since she derives no emotional satisfaction from their marriage, is now less hostile than before. However it is at this point that nemesis strikes, in a bourgeois version of its arrival in Greek tragedy. While busying himself with

the decoration of his new house he receives the injury which, the story implies, leads ultimately to his death.

These two chapters have dealt with events taking place over many years, but the fourth, almost equally long, lingers over a much shorter period, in which we see Ivan's sinister symptoms developing, along with his anxiety, self-pity and sense of isolation, contributed to by his wife's lack of sympathy⁵ and their frequent quarrels.

What light relief there is in the grim and all too predictable narrative is provided by satire of the ignorant knowingness of the various doctors and others who attempt diagnoses right up to the moment when the disease (almost certainly cancer) is recognised as terminal. Ivan is now subjected to their professional power just as the people over whom he exercised his judicial authority had to accept his. At the same time he suddenly realises that death, hitherto an abstract concept only affecting a theoretical Caius in the syllogism 'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal' (p. 110), is about to become the dominant fact in his own life. We see him at work, ravaged by disease but still trying to preserve the appearance of decorous normality in his public duties and trying to fight off the pain.

He drove away the thought of it, but it still did its work, and then *It* came and stood confronting him and looked at him, and he felt turned to stone, and the light died away in his eyes, and he began to ask himself again, 'Can it be that *It* is the only truth?'

[p. 111]

From this point on the chapters, with one exception, become very short, as we accelerate, brief stage by brief stage, to the inevitable end, each one recording a further deterioration in the patient's condition and his morale, and as it were hurrying him deathwards. In them Tolstoy gives us a bleakly economical, psychologically penetrating picture of the isolated suffering of an individual human being with a fatal and horribly painful condition, transforming Ivan Ilyich from a successful lawyer into the Everyman figure suggested above, and the story into a mirror into which all of us can look and see our possible fates reflected.

His family, the doctors and his circle of acquaintances are helpless and useless to him in his crisis. His wife, originally dismissing him as

5 As Wasiolek points out (*Tolstoy's Major Fiction*, p. 176), Ilyich has previously been indifferent to her pain in pregnancy.

a hypochondriac who is failing to follow medical advice, eventually recognises his plight but can offer little in the way of effective comfort or relief, which is unsurprising, considering the nature of their marriage. By the seventh chapter he has accepted that he is dying and his concern with his official life and public image has begun to take second place to his obsession with his physical condition.

The only person who can alleviate his suffering in any way is the simple practical-minded healthy young peasant Gerasim, who accepts the extreme physical unpleasantness involved in nursing the dying man and discovers a practical method of alleviating his pain. Gerasim embodies Tolstoy's enduring belief that the peasantry's uncomplicated faith and stoical acceptance of whatever life inflicted on them were vastly preferable to the sophisticated insincerities, decadent materialism and 'perfected proprieties' of the society into which he had been born. Ilyich's constricting sense of decorum is such that, though he accepts Gerasim's care and longs 'to be petted, kissed, and wept over' (p. 116), when a colleague comes in he reverts to the severe businesslike persona appropriate to a judge.

From now on Tolstoy dwells on the day-to-day detail of Ivan Ilyich's existence, slowing the action down to make us share his agony hour by hour. At times the narration moves from the past into the present tense to increase the immediacy of our involvement. The next chapter, the eighth, the only one that matches the first four chapters in length concentrates on the extent to which the sick man's relationship with his wife and daughter has deteriorated.

What might, in the case of a less self-centred person, have been a consolation, is merely, another source of torment, while his family, all in vigorous good health and enjoying an active social life, regard his suffering with impatience, worrying instead about the economic consequences for them of his death. The only exception to this, we learn later, is Ivan's small son, whose eyes, dark-ringed with grief over his father's suffering, show how the familial world he has spurned in favour of public success might have offered him the love which could alleviate his pain and loneliness.

The final four chapters, all extremely brief, take us swiftly to the conclusion. In the ninth Tolstoy introduces the terrifying, claustrophobic image of the dark sack into which Ivan feels he is being thrust, struggling helplessly like a trapped animal. Protesting at his treatment by a cruel God he thinks back over his past life. He remembers his childhood and early education and begins at last to question the values he has since come to live by, disgusted even with

the marriage he entered into for the wrong reasons. Vivid memories of the distant past flood into his mind in the tenth chapter but he still obstinately refuses to question his values as he tries to find some explanation for his situation:

'It could be explained if one were to say that I hadn't lived as I ought. But that can't be alleged,' he said to himself, thinking of all the regularity, correctness, and propriety of his life. 'That really can't be admitted . . .'

[p. 126]

So obsessed is he with this question, with his pain, and with the possibility that the principles he has been living by might have been false ones, that he brutally rebuffs his wife and daughter when they bring him news of the latter's engagement. He, the judge, finds he cannot defend the beliefs that have dictated his behaviour all his life, and consequently he endures still more violent agonies, only briefly relieved by a sacramental visit from a priest invited by his wife, and intensified rather than assuaged by the latter's concern.

The outward sign of these is the scream, lasting for three days, that she described at the beginning of the story. It accompanies his final struggles in the dark sack, as he tries, even at the point of death, to deny that all his life he has been in the wrong. Only at the last minute does he give up fighting, symbolically 'seeing the light', at the moment when his grief-stricken young son's hand touches his. Then, finally aware of the boy's love and his family's distress, he is able to become a complete human being and surrender to his own mortality. His last words to them are a stifled plea for forgiveness as he surrenders to the inevitable and accepts release in death.

The Kreutzer Sonata

In 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich', the protagonist's unsatisfactory domestic life is only one element in a story written to explore far wider issues, though the failure of his marriage is surely intended by Tolstoy to be due to that same self-centredness and failure in personal relationships that make Ivan's death even more terrifying than it might otherwise have been. His self-centredness can be seen as a negative version of the self-sufficiency and self-awareness that John Bayley has identified as important positives in Tolstoy's thought.⁶

The mutual dislike that makes Ivan Ilyich's marriage so bleak becomes homicidal hatred in the next, highly controversial story,

'The Kreutzer Sonata', published in 1889. It is probably the story in which Tolstoy's writing is closest to Dostoevsky's in its tone and in its exploration of abnormal states of mind.

The story was written at a time when relations between Tolstoy and his wife were disastrously bad. His life was now dominated by his relations with his handsome young assistant Chertkov, which his wife in the end suspected, almost certainly without foundation, of having a sexual basis.⁷ (It is possible, however, that the character of Ivan Ilyich's male nurse Gerasim in the earlier story, as well as representing Tolstoy's trust in the peasantry, was partly a covert allusion to Chertkov's moral support in his war with his wife.)

Whereas in 'Family Happiness', Tolstoy uses a deeply involved young first-person female narrator and in 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' a detached and rather dry commentator of indeterminate sex, in 'The Kreutzer Sonata' he effectively has two first-person narratives, the initial one framing and occasionally interrupting the main autobiographical story told by the murderer Pózdnyshév. The first narration is initially uninvolved and a little amused, later withdrawing into the background, except for a few comments resembling stage directions; the second is urgent and later hysterical in tone. The story was originally circulated in a lithographed version, in which many of Pózdnyshév's arguments are expanded, but they add little of real substance to the revised published version.

The action begins in a railway carriage with a representative group of middle-class passengers discussing contemporary social issues, in particular changing attitudes to marriage. They range from an elderly merchant, who believes in the dying custom of arranged marriages and whose views on marital relationships and duties are firmly based on the Bible, to those who support the more modern 'European' view that one should only marry someone one loves. The most vociferous supporter of the modern position is a woman wearing, significantly, a 'mannish' coat. The debate is listened to by a 'nervous man with glittering eyes', who intervenes in the discussion to question the whole idea of marriage for love, and finally reveals that he has killed his own wife.

He is left with the original narrator when the other passengers leave, driven away by the violence of his tirade against marriage, which he regards as a form of sanctioned prostitution of women, and thereafter tells his own story, only occasionally interrupted by his

7 See A. N. Wilson on the relationship, *Tolstoy*, p. 353, and on Sofia's later suspicions, p. 494.