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What role does death and pain play in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*?

The themes “death” and “pain” play an extensive role within *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* as they are the primary driving factors towards the existential crisis Ivan faces as he faces his impending death. In, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan suffers extensive pain from his illnesses but not just in physical agony due to the pain but also in mental and emotional turmoil during this trial. He is seen tossing and turning, wrestling with himself, regretting the life he made for himself, wailing out, wishing he had lived a more meaningful life. The unfortunate cause of his death comes through an illness that he suffers as a result of a fall from a ladder where he attempted to show his coworker the way in which one should hang drapes. Towards the end, he passes on from physiological life but in the way in which it allows him to die a fulfilling death, showing love and compassion towards his son, Vasya and his wife, Praskovya as he finally lets go of the hold that the regret has on him. The role of physical pain in the context of this story adds on and contributes significantly to the mental and emotional pain he wars on against due to his impending death. Death and pain work hand-and-hand and simultaneously within this story as death acts as the primary reason for his pain while the pain acts as road which helps lead him into his existential dread and regret. Pain, in like many cases, subsides while the knowledge of his death brings Ivan into a state of self realization which thus brings him into realizing what the true values of life are. Overall, both concepts, “pain” and “death” play a role which brings forth tremendous character development and metamorphosis that occurs within the life of Ivan Ilyich.

Within the overall story itself “death” and “pain” are seen throughout the story in a plethora of literary methods, beautifully executed by author Leo Tolstoy. “Death” and “Pain” are given through the utilization of beautiful, vivid, rich, and emotionally-captivating imagery. Tolstoy paints a vivid picture which is ironic in the way in which “death” and “pain” are things that may be conveyed as “ugly” or “dreading” which are described in such a beautiful manner. An individual may notice through the imagery that death can be just as beautiful as it is frightening in the way it can incite change such as in the life of Ivan. As an example of this imagery within the text, the author states, “And this pain, this dull gnawing ache that never ceased for a second, seemed, when taken in conjunction with the doctor's enigmatical utterances, to have acquired a fresh and far more serious significance. With a new sense of misery, Ivan Ilyich paid constant heed to it.” (Tolstoy 128). In this example we see the author use simple yet effective words to describe his pain, stating he has this never ceasing pain which is “gnawing ache”. The author in this case, utilizes these words in order to portray to the audience, that his pain is not only constant but it also chews away from his joy and will eventually chew away from his which as one will see, will be the ultimate cause of his death. Another example of imagery can be seen when Ivan attempts to take his medicine. The book states “Oh, the medicine. Pyotr, give me my medicine. “Oh well, maybe, medicine may still be some good. He took the spoon, drank it. No, it does no good. It is all rubbish, deception, he decided, as soon as he tasted the familiar, mawkish, hopeless taste.” (Tolstoy 1886) Tolstoy uses the word hopelessness in this context in order to highlight the hopelessness that Ivan sits in as he continues to sit and pain and agony within his illness. The medicine cannot fix the inner regret he faces nor can it heal the illness that he suffers throughout the story.

Death as well fully acts as a metaphor, another literary device that we notice within *The Death*

of *Ivan Ilyich* where we see death act as the primary mover of “old life” into “new life”. The concept, in the context of this metaphor of the knowledge of death, helps transition Ivan into this inner change and conversion throughout the end. A journal article, titled *Experience, Metaphor, and Meaning: "The Death of Ivan Ilych"* gives individuals a look into this specific metaphor where the author, James Onley states that “According to the metaphor of Ivan Ilych, "Death equals conversion." But meaning flows in either direction here, so that our understanding of "death" qualifies or defines our understanding of "conversion" as our understanding of "conversion" qualifies and defines our understanding of "death"-thus: "Death is conversion."” (Onley 6). Death almosts like that of Baptism, providing Ivan with a sense of new life towards the end, converting him from a man who lived a meaningless life, caught up within the successes of his work into a man who loves and shows compassion and sympathy towards his family. As aforementioned, death acts as a conversion factor within *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and as a result one may see the role “life” become present within the text as well. “Life, considered alone, is meaningless; death alone is equally insignificant. Taken together, they point beyond either one to a meaning which embraces and transfigures both. Structurally, as well as thematically, Ivan Ilych is designed to draw life and death together”. (Onley 7). The theme of “Life” comes into play within the themes “Death” and “Pain” where they all work simultaneously together to help one understand what it truly means to live and to live a fulfilling life within the story. A fulfilling life in the context of the life and death of Ivan Ilyich is a life where one does not keep to himself and focus on his own successes but it is a life filled with connection and love towards the people around him. The meaning of life is not found in profession but instead within the people around him or her. Here as the journal article states, through the story, life alone is meaningless and Ivan himself felt there was no meaning nor fulfilling significance towards his life. Here death brings life into meaning rather than a simplistic, nihilistic view through an ironic twist where losing a life comes to eventually save it. The book states, “He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. ‘Where is it? What death?’ There was no fear because there was no death. “In place of death there was light.” (Tolstoy 1887) . In this position we see the evidence of the absence of pain and fear, the embrace of death, and the welcoming into a new life for Ivan, a spiritual, transcendent life where his life becomes fulfilled within the final moments leading up to his death.

In the book, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, we see the themes of “death” and “pain” act as significant factors within the story. “Pain” and “Death” are beautifully imagined through the beautiful use of imagery produced by Leo Tolstoy. It is notable to see that the ugliness of death and pain are portrayed in a beautiful manner which are utilized to describe and highlight the pain and agony of Ivan. The themes of “Death” and “Pain” both act as metaphors which help one understand the overarching theme that shows that death turns into conversion. With knowledge of his own death, which is soon to come, Ivan thus establishes this fulfilling end to his life, converting his life from meaningless to meaningful. Death and pain thus become conversion factors within his own life that set him free from the bonds of regret. Finally, the concept of “life” also becomes a significant theme throughout the story where Ivan succumbs to the realization that life alone thus becomes meaningless. Overall, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a story which helps show strong, slow burning, fulfilling character development. We see how important “Death”, “Pain”, and “Life” all contribute to the inner metamorphosis that occurs within Ivan Ilyich.

Works Cited

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