Simple, Ordinary Logic in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

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According to Roland Barthes, the contemporary literary theorist, "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text."[1] If we follow Barthes' suggestions for reading a text--that is, view the literality of the text as a system like any other--we read actively and objectively, and thus, come to a more comprehensive realization of the multiplicity of interpretations the text contains, come, in Barthes' term, "to appreciate what plural constitutes it" (*S/Z*, p. 5). In our reading, then, we not only become active--we do not displace the text with our personalities, lives, knowledge, nor do we impose a single, restrictive literal interpertation upon that text--but we also become creative--that is, in recognizing how the text carries meaning, we imagine what is beyond the text itself and come to understand the points of connection the text has with other meanings and systems of meaning. By such activity and creativity, Barthes claims, we "continue" the work of the writer. It is precisely such "continuing," by locating and interrelating systems of meaning, which reveals, in Leo Tolstoy's novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a critically neglected, but highly significant point of connection the text has with the system of logic. This connection, I believe, enables the reader to view the work as Tolstoy's attempt to come to terms with the age-old question of the relation of philosophy and life.

We are told by one of Tolstoy's biographers, Ronald Blythe, that *Ivan Ilyich* grew out of the writer's intense obsession with his own death, as well as the second-hand account given him of the last agonizing days of a provincial judge. The majority of Tolstoy's critics, thus, have focused on the novel's detailed analysis of the protagonist's death and attendant mystical experience or on its rather explicit social commentary. While these approaches yield valuable critical insight, a more comprehensive understanding of the novel may be achieved by examining a point of connection which the text itself, structurally and thematically, explicitly points to: the relation of logic to living. Indeed, a Barthesian approach to the novel suggests that *Ivan Ilyich* may be viewed not only as a portrait of a single human being, a portrait of a specific class and society, and a portrait of death, but also as a philosophy of living, hinted at in the syllogistic enigma found in its early pages: "Ivan Ilyich's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."[2]

The novel begins with Ivan's death as *fait accompli*; the first chapter presents his family's, his friends', and his colleagues' reaction to that fact before the author focuses on the character Ivan and his story. The anti-climatic structure shifts the reader's focus from the individual, Ivan, to the society in which he has lived, and thus, accounts for the usual critical examination of the novel's social dimensions. The remainder of the novel recounts, briefly, Ivan's childhood, schooling, marriage, and early professional career before focusing on the petty accident which leads to Ivan's illness and, eventually, his death. It is his illness and growing awareness of impending death that force Ivan to examine and evaluate the quality of his living, and a good two-thirds of the novel concentrates on Ivan's agonizing reflections on whether he has lived as he ought. The statement that "Ivan's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" functions as the first paragraph of the second chapter and is Tolstoy's way of shifting the plot back in time. More importantly, the enthymeme provides both a structural and a thematic reference for the novel, which attests to the author's concern with the relation of philosophy and life.

Thematically, the enthymeme establishes the writer's critical attitude toward Ivan Ilyich and his manner of living. Tolstoy not only introduces the protagonist to the reader by the statement, he also establishes that the subsequent "biography" will illustrate a certain "truth" in regards to "good" and "bad" living. The enthymeme's hidden premise--simple, ordinary living is terrible--poses an interesting question for the reader: What about simple, ordinary living is terrible? The enthymeme has both literary and philosophical implications. The reader is made to realize from the start that the novel presents a life which the author has already judged to be not only typical and representative ("simple" and "ordinary"), but, more importantly, unsatisfactory or wrong ("terrible") as well. Structurally, the enthymeme functions as an organizing element of the text. It alerts the reader to the fact that the author's intent is both literary and philosophical: the unfolding of Ivan's story will compel the developing of the author's philosophy. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* proposes not only to represent reality in its narration of a life, but also to suggest answers to the question about the relation of simplicity and ordinariness of terrible living. Moreover, the enthymeme points the reader toward the essential questions the author posits via his portrait of Ivan's living and dying--What makes a life terrible? What makes a life meaningful?--and, by implication, toward the basic philosophical question with which literature is often concerned: What constitutes "living well"?

That *Ivan Ilyich* traverses two systems or environments--logic (philosophy) and life--is evident not only from the enthymeme by which Tolstoy opens his narration, but also from a later reference to another syllogism, one Ivan recalls after he has finally admitted to himself that he is dying: "Caius is a man, men are mortal; therefore, Caius is mortal." This syllogism sparks Ivan's musings on his own mortality and the injustice of his having to die:

> The syllogism he had learned . . . had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius--man in the abstract--was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others . . . . Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible.
> (*Ivan Ilyich*, p.1113)

The passage is significant because it contains key words which have both literary and philosophical implications. We note that Ivan himself is unable to reconcile logic with life; he considers the logic of Caius' dying "valid," but cannot admit the same in reference to himself because he perceives himself not as an abstraction, but as a "creature" with "thoughts and emotions." In Ivan's logic, the death of a thinking, feeling person is "terrible." While "terrible" refers the reader back to Tolstoy's introductory statement proposing that Ivan's simple, ordinary life has been terrible, "correct" and "right" point to certain seemingly logical judgements made by Ivan about living, as well as to the assumptions upon which these judgments have been rendered. It is these assumptions which Ivan eventually comes to reevaluate as he gropes towards and finally achieves some insight into the meaning of his life. And, it is by his analysis of the assumptions that govern Ivan's living (implicit in his depiction of Ivan's environment and behavior) that Tolstoy connects the novel's realistic protrait of a man and his society to his developing philosophy of "correct" living.

Examining the nature and import of "assumptions" within both the literary and philosophical systems operant in the text, we may affirm the connection of the text's enthymeme and syllogism and the two environments (logic and life) they traverse. Assuming is often a literary convention; a standard theme in Western literature, from *Don Quixote* to the modern novel, has been the discrepancy between what is real and the illusions or assumptions by which we humans live. In his novel, Tolstoy repeatedly notes that Ivan and others in his milieu "assume" or "adopt" certain attitudes toward others. What characterizes Ivan's relations with family, friends, colleagues, and clients throughout his life is a formality adapted from certain assumed attitudes. Gestures, responses, even conversations are formalized by Ivan, according to a pre-established notion of propriety. Ivan says and does what he knows it is proper for one of his profession and social standing to say and do under any given circumstances. In psychological terms, "assuming" is the process of arriving at a conclusion via incomplete knowledge, or non-rational knowing via intuition, supposition, coincidence. Within the system of deductive logic, the word "assumption" (as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) means "the minor premiss of a syllogism."

It is in his depiction of Ivan's examination of the premises/assumptions that have governed his life that Tolstoy reveals the meaning of the hidden premise (simple, ordinary living is terrible) and addresses the question of how one ought to live. The central stumbling block encountered by Ivan as he tries to understand why his life is ending in a painful death, is his certainty that he *has* lived correctly.

> "An explanation would be possible if it could be said that I have not lived as I ought to. But it is impossible to say that," and he remembered all the legality, correctitude, and propriety of his life.
> (*Ivan Ilyich*, p. 1127)

In Ivan's logic, the means do *not* justify the end. Indeed, Ivan's thinking reveals that he has, unconsciously, lived by a very precise--albeit, in Tolstoy's view, faulty--logic. He has done what his society considered correct and proper--he had gone to the proper schools, married the proper woman, composed his home and his family life properly, and behaved in his official capacity as a judge in an absolutely proper manner--and yet, his reward for such propriety is to be an untimely and horribly painful death. To Ivan, such a conclusion to his living is unjust precisely because it is illogical. The problem, of course, as the reader and Ivan come to realize, is not with the conclusion, but with the premises which led to it: the assumptions he made regarding what constitutes proper and correct living were not credible. What Ivan finally sees is that his assumptions have been false. Living as his colleagues, his social milieu, and the other authorities and traditions he chose to recognize have dictated--living the "simple, ordinary" life--has not been "living" at all. In fact, simplicity and ordinariness suddenly reveal themselves as negative qualities in Ivan's living because they are neither natural nor intrinsic to his being; rather, they are assumed. Ivan's life, as he himself eventually realizes, has been almost unconsciously regulated to fit a predetermined, accepted pattern of behavior; thus, his living reflects as extremely artificial and superficial simplicity.

> It occured to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediatley suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. (*Ivan Ilyich*, p. 1128).

In short, Ivan realizes that he has not been "living" at all, and his impending physical demise seems a kind of logical outcome of his life-long intellectual and emotional death-in-life. As he observes the family members and friends who now surround him, he suddenly, with newly enlightened vision, "saw himself--all that for which he had lived--and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death" (*Ivan Ilyich*, p. 1128).

To further reinforce the immensity of the deception Ivan comes to recognize as his living, Tolstoy presents a contrasting character, the peasant Gerasim, who serves as catalyst for Ivan's change in thinking. He is a cheerful, robust, simple peasant lad, in whose presence Ivan comes to feel some relief from his suffering. Indeed, it is Gerasim's cheerful willingness to aid Ivan in his misery, his recognition of Ivan as a real person and his ability to sympathize with him, as well as his straightforward manner toward both living and dying that compels Ivan to wonder whether his life had indeed been lived incorrectly. Gerasim's life has also been as is "most simple and ordinary," but unlike Ivan's, Tolstoy implies, *not* terrible. The kind of living Gerasim represents seems to defy the logic that Tolstoy indicates had been operant in Ivan's life. Thus, the text suggests that there are two possible conclusions to simple, ordinary living--one is "terrible," one is not. The difference, which points to the validity of the initial syllogism in Ivan's case, and its invalidity in Gerasim's, has to do, as is logical, with the credibility of the premises. The simplicity and ordinariness characterizing Gerasim's living are positive qualities because they emanate from a natural order. While Ivan's attitudes and assumptions are artifically engendered, Gerasim's spring spontaneously and intuitively from his sense of his own humanity and mortality. When Ivan asks Gerasim if he is bothered by having to care for a dying man, Gerasim responds, "We shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble?" (*Ivan Ilyich*, p. 1117). Unlike Ivan, Gerasim intuitively understands the logic of the classic syllogism about Caius.

The turning point in Ivan's coming to terms with illogicality of his own living occurs when he is able, in a simple, ordinary manner, to confront his environment as Gerasim has confronted his--with spontaneous and genuine emotion. This occurs when Ivan suddenly realizes his young son (whose behavior has not yet fallen into the predetermined pattern characteristic of his family and society) has been at his bedside, kissing his hand and weeping profusely. Ivan looks at the boy and suddenly feels sorrow, not for himself, but for his family and friends. "He was sorry for them, he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. 'How good and how simple!' he thought" (*Ivan Ilyich*, p. 1131).

With this document, Tolstoy provides an answer to the novel's central question--how should one live? When Ivan is finally able to feel compassion for others, he becomes truly human, he begins, ironically, to live. Admitting his own mortality enables him to perceive the mortality of those around him, who, as he has, must some day come to terms with their own lives and deaths. In recognizing the shallowness of his life--the terribleness of a simplicity that derives from a dehumanized, mechanized response to others--Ivan achieves a liberation from a life that has been, as he had viewed Caius' life, an abstraction, indeed, a death.

Tolstoy's use of the enthymeme and syllogism as structural and thematic devices in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, as well as his analysis of the premises/assumptions which govern the protagonist's living, illustrates his concern with basic philosophical problems. Rather than viewing the novel only in terms of its realistic portrayal of the life and death of a modern "Everyman," as it has traditionally been viewed, we may also read it with an awareness of the author's desire to reconcile logic with life. Indeed, the novel itself can be viewed as a hypothetical syllogism; that is, it entertains the premises that simplicity emanating from unexamined living, and orinariness evolving from unquestioned conformity, will yield a living that is not only shallow, artificial and inhumane, but also, in its betrayal of the deeply felt impulses that Tolstoy sees as the vital expression of individual aliveness, a living that is deeply and deplorably "terrible".

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

2. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, Vol. II, 4th Ed., (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956), p. 1091. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.