

Whether it be the economic state of 19th century Russia, the political havoc, or the social discontent, the state the country was living in made it increasingly suffocating for any peasant or middle-class person who strived for change. From the oppressive Czars to the assassination of Alexander the II, Russia was in a state of turmoil. The last factor that the leaders wanted to face was rebellion; so they quickly began to punish those who were considered responsible for the rebellion: the artists, one of them being the author Leo Tolstoy (and Ivan Turgenev, will be focused on later in the essay). Tolstoy was persecuted for his sincerity and the need to inform the serfs and public majority of the evils committed at the time. His observations from the time period led him to create several of his famous writings; the one I read was *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. This story was remarkably precise and seemingly simple, even though it took on the hefty matter of life and death. Hidden within these themes more prominently and more relevant for my generation, is the theme of detachment—detachment with the government and between generations.

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan had been simply content with his life and rarely questioned his static actions; he lived a monotonous life. As the novella begins, we see his peers react to his death with superficial inquiries about his belongings and insincere words with little remorse. After this, Tolstoy depicts the bleak specifics that made up Ivan's life that eventually led to his philosophical breakthrough. The first being the initial resentment for his job as an upper class judge: "It was while he was a law student that he had indulged himself in things which he had regarded as disgusting before he did them, and which filled him with self loathing at the very time when he was doing them; but subsequently, perceiving that such things were done even by people in the highest positions, and were not considered bad, he himself did not indeed regard them as good, but simply forgot about them altogether, and never worried himself by thinking about them" (13). During Ivan's time period, there were a select few jobs that presented one with a class status, and being a judge was certainly one of them, hence his ambition to become one. Ivan was a man with initially one goal: to become one with the bourgeoisie and live comfortably. But as this quote shows, Ivan displayed two common signs of detachment from his early life: denial and rejection of his current situation. When he first attended law school, he knew that his reasoning for going was solely based on materialistic values for money and status. He had little to no interest in the career, which ultimately set himself up to live an incomplete life. However, he entered the profession for his father, who looked to him for balance, and his wife, who looked for his name in their town; in other words, he entered for everyone but himself. His primary decision for becoming a judge was not pure or just; he had no goal in mind because he was aspiring to be someone who was false to what his soul wanted. As his life continued, he started to become disenchanted with his circumstances, the second clue of an evaporating soul. The moment he thought he sensed his disinterest for life, he began to blame his circumstances and this made him increasingly bitter. What he did not know at first became clear to him the longer he lived: every time he went to work or came home to a dull marriage, he was wasting away his life. His soul was in the wrong, preventing him from living with authenticity.

Ivan gradually became aware of his artificial tendencies from the most surprising of events: he fell and hit his hip (which eventually became the injury that leads to his death). Once he fell, Ivan knew that his process of dying had begun; he grew temperamental towards everyone around him, yelling curtly to his family and friends whenever they approached the sick man. In his days of physical suffering, he had many epiphanies that, ironically, awoke him in his state of decay. The first moment of clarity occurred after his dreaded doctor's visit: "Ivan was firmly and indubitably persuaded that all this was nonsense and pure deceit, but when the doctor, going down on his knees, bent over him and glued his ear to him, now higher up and now lower down, and, with a most important countenance, made various gymnastic evolutions over him, Ivan submitted to it as he had submitted to the speeches of advocates in court, knowing very well all the time that they were lying all the time, and why they were lying" (56). During the dismantled government in St. Petersburg, the people, like Ivan, could easily place the blame on the leaders and the system they were trying to implement. Placing blame was easy. What was anything but easy, especially for a man like Ivan who lived

a predictable and wealthy life, was the ability to admit to your soul in blatant and shameless honesty that actually, more prominently, *he* was the cause of his moral sufferings and unhappiness...himself alone. Once he let this thought resonate, he went crazy because, for the first time, he was forced to learn that he had only himself to trust and rely on. This realization is displayed when he interacts with the doctor; once he allowed his soul to breathe, he sees the doctor as one of the civil servants he used to work with. The reason he was able to recognize the doctor as a deceptive human being was because he used to be one as well; it takes one to know one. Although his job mentally repressed him all his life, he should be thankful for his new insights and how transparently he can see the doctor. Although he is suffering in great depth as he waits for death, he is no longer detached from his life. Ivan is no longer one of the few who is stuck in the living-dead predicament.

While Ivan awaits his death alone, he is forced to address his future, no matter how brief it may be, "He would not lie in bed, but he lay on the divan. And lying almost the whole time with his face to the wall, he suffered continually in his solitude the same inexplicable thought: 'what is this? Can it be true that this is death? And the inner voice answered: 'Yes, it is true.'- Wherefore these torments?' It is because, not wherefore. Besides and beyond this there was nothing at all" (65). Ivan's ability to creatively connect the life experiences he has had until now gives him the ability to trust his inner voice, or soul. Once he does this, Ivan existentially comes to terms with the fact that his life was not only not lived with hope and passion, but even more depressing, that his life was almost over. How could he continue to live in light of this horrifically depressing reality? Because he now has a soul to allow him to, living out mind over matter to the fullest. Ivan accepts that death is not a question, but an inevitable answer. He once feared death because he knew he had not lived or found reason to live. Once he accepted his moral wrongdoings (such as entering into a lifeless job and marriage), he became interested in life before it was over, and most important, he accepted death as natural process equivalent to living.

The story of Ivan Ilyich is a harrowing one; I became attached to the character and plot line. The sadness of the story and Tolstoy's passion spewed off the page directly into my core. It is a story that every one should read, perhaps every once in a while to keep themselves in check or to find empathy in Ivan's struggles for life. On one hand, the reader can give Ivan full credit to his devotion to finding his free will, but on the other hand, the reader cannot ignore the circumstances set up by the time period in Russia. Understanding the historical context is key, but that being said, Ivan's sufferings were his own. For example, in the 19th century, the leaders in Russia were dated dictators, shown in Alexander the III and the Czars. They ran the country knowing or forcing everyone to be void, like Ivan. Their manipulative ways rooted from a sincere desire to keep Russia traditional, which segregated people based on class. The Slavophiles were Russians who believed in keeping traditional Russian values "Russian," as opposed to those who began to follow German idealism or Hegelism. Most of the time, the Slavophiles were upper-class Russians who did not support the idealism of the incoming generations, the younger radical groups. These idealists were persecuted rapidly by the government who did anything within and outside of their power to keep them from starting a revolution. This was one of the first times that the separation was not only between rich and poor, but elder and younger. They became so disenchanting with the government that this group began to resort to anarchy, which led to mistrusting the authorities, which then led to the development of nihilism as displayed in *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev.

Although the problem of life and death is the main issue discussed in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and it is a haunting one to contemplate, from a youth's point of view, this problem is expressed in a more specific epidemic represented in *Fathers and Sons*: the "no-hope" nihilistic youths. They take on a pessimistic attitude toward living, and purposefully sever off actually living in exchange for the "living dead" syndrome. Bazarov, one of the main characters in the first half *Fathers and Sons*, displays the history of this mentality.

Fathers and Sons is set in 19th century Russia where the traditional Slavophiles and the idealistic German Russians begin to clash. The main factor towards the rebellion of the “sons” is due to the age gap that also translates into the value differences. The “fathers” seek out hope found in religious sayings, while the “sons” reject this authority and find truth in science. Along the way, the younger generations start to feel more accustomed to the proletariat class and use the treatment of the serfs as a metaphor for the class differences. Turgenev uses the radical and self-proclaimed nihilistic Bazarov to articulate his generation’s views on authority. Bazarov is modeled after Turgenev’s close friend, Mikhail Bakunin, the father of anarchy. Bazarov embraces a stoic sense of “anti-everything” almost to the point where he loses compassion as a character. The following is a classic Bazarov quote as he and his close friend, Arkady, get in a philosophical dispute: “What I’m thinking is: here I am, lying under a haystack... The tiny little place I occupy is so small in relation to the rest of space where I am not and where it’s none of my business; and the amount with the eternity where I haven’t been and never will be...and yet in this atom, in this mathematical point, the blood circulates, the brain works and even desires something as well...what sheer ugliness! What sheer nonsense!” (126). What lacked in Bazarov, and nihilistic teenagers, is curiosity and drive; he was so mentally beaten down by the government that all hope was drained from him. Like Ivan Ilyich, they metaphorically “turned their heads to the wall” and resorted to nihilism. Taking the time period into consideration is vital when reading these Russian novels, because their new philosophies such as nihilism—the desire for literally “nothing” as a response to the government. Their rebellion was anything but pointless; in fact, it was essential for progression in Russia. These novels are relevant for today’s society because it appears to me that the “no-hope” terminal nihilistic youth is back with pitiful vengeance as their numbers steadily grow.

The presence of teenagers who exchange an education or a potential passion (the key ingredient that is missing) for a hand-rolled cigarette and multiple piercings to symbolize indifference is becoming an epidemic. There are so many young adults who flounce around with no purpose because it is considered a rebellious or “punk” thing to do. It is displayed from just about every angle: on one side of the spectrum we have the kids who never give the world a real chance (maybe for circumstantial reasons or oppression coming from themselves and the adults in their lives). On the other side of the spectrum, we have those who refuse to accept the comfortable privilege of a nice home and organic food on their plates because being apart of the apathetic gang of glamorized misfits is “trendy.” Lastly, we have the kids who were usurped of their potential the moment their pediatrician gave them the latest version of ADHD or bi-polar medication. The theme here is that all these kids are purposefully rejecting their free will as an individual; instead, they have become a part of a group who projects (the sign of insincerity) their own alienation and unique personalities. In reality, unlike Bazarov and Ivan Ilyich, these kids have little to rebel against. “Rebelling” is not the right word, because this denial of clarity only hurts themselves. One day, when the zombielike trance wears off, they will have the same epiphany Ivan did and decide to give life a real chance. There was truth to Bazarov angst, but there is little to no truth in my generation because we constantly try to reincarnate ourselves into the modern Holden Caulfield mixed with a pseudo air of intellect after we read *The Stranger*.

It is admittedly easy to complain, but what is more difficult is finding a solution. There are a few instant solutions that come to mind. There is a lack of creativity rooted by the incapability to think for one’s self. How this problem has become so severe, whether it be the value of consumption and campaign of fear initiated by the media, the school system, or by personal circumstance, I do not know, but we must find a way in order for my generation to progress on our own. There are two ways we can do this: by trial-and-error...the only real way to grow; or, by developing a passion and finding sincerity. Before any of this can be achieved, I strongly believe in finding a sense of self, or believing in the soul, because this is the epitome of truth which *then* leads to sincere interactions with the outside world. Most important, is to gain a sense of *clarity*. To have this, introspection is needed, and one must learn to take responsibility existentially, because

whether one accepts it now like Bazarov or later like Ivan, that is all we ultimately have. This process leads to individuality at heart, but the person or teenager involved can now, finally, interact sincerely with the world. In conclusion, it is easy to become disenchanted with life at any age; sometimes a human's life is actually bad or it appears to be so because we secretly want it to, but despite life's sufferings (there is no way to deny them), our world is beautiful and has so much to offer us if we let it.

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Writer's note:

In the following story, Barbra represents the modern Ivan Ilyich. She is a woman who struggles from the “living dead syndrome” caused by lack of engagement with her soul.

UNHAPPINESS, *concerning Barbra Owens*

Every morning, Barbra Owens awoke at the crack of dawn to watch the sunrise alone; she then showered, made breakfast, and scurried off to work without making a sound. Before she left, she always turned on the heat in her house to make sure her children arose to a warm home where they had little to complain about, her husband always put up a fit, for he claimed it was a waste of money, and that's what coats were for.

Barbra was always first at work because she owned a local bakery, which needed preparation long before it opened; by the time other employees arrived, they had to deal with Barbra's ghostly presence haunting over them. She wasn't an unpleasant human being; she was just sad and everyone felt it. She occasionally cracked a smile here and there when customers came in and gave her many compliments on the baked goods of the day, but for the most part, her face was frozen in a perpetual state of true loneliness. Everyone went about their day, working around Barbra, and not really *with* her. She was too fragile to touch—it was as if her bruised soul was seeping out on display for all to see. No one at work ever pried into her personal life because they got strong vibes that Barbra didn't want to be touched. After her workday was over, she walked back to her house two miles from her job. Local kids, like me, always noticed her on her daily trek, but the less perceptive ones only knew her as the woman who fed us at themed birthday parties.

One thing we did know, was that Barbra wasn't always like this—a corpse of a woman who always tried to make passersby happy with her crooked fleeting smile. Everyone worried, for we knew that Barbra used to be happy. They said she was always laughing until her own body couldn't take it anymore; apparently, she used to personally deliver the baked goods to her customers and always chatted them up, sometimes for so long that her family got worried. When she first moved here, she would seize the day like no one else; she saw beauty in Winesburg that very few did, but more important, she felt it and had an uncanny ability to radiate her happiness to those around her.

But that day we saw her drifting back to her home, it was as if her body, heart, and soul had betrayed her, for she appeared to be deep shades of purple with nuances of deep reds and bittersweet pinks. We thought we were bizarre, but Barbra was leaking. And only one single human being in the town knew why: Peter Crowl, the town's chiropractor.

Mr. Crowl started seeing Barbra for her back and shoulder problems. As a baker who was always standing and lifting heavy trays, she was pretty physically beat up.

“Now, Barb, how have you been? And don't you even think about lying because your bones will catch you. I can tell if you haven't been drinking water, or if you haven't been smiling,” Mr. Crowl said half with a casual sense of humor and half intrigued by her answer.

She hesitated; it was hard for her to voice the words of her soul because she so rarely did, “Oh I feel old! And don't you laugh Peter! This town has got me by the neck and every time I feel like I need some solitude I realize I can't take it. I'm not meant to be alone, or hell, at least I don't want to. My thoughts eat me up; they *scare* me because I know they are right and I know I made a mistake. And I've gotten to a point where I can't even hide it anymore—people, my kids, my husband...they look at me funny, as if they have known long before I have. There's nothing I can do about it either because this is the life that I chose.”

Barbra took a deep breath. That was the most honesty she had spoken in months.

Mr. Cowl's eyes scaled the room and he took a deep sigh as if he knew too. And what could he do but admit she was right? He lit a cigarette and cracked the window to release his thoughts before he spoke, "Don't mind my smoke darling, it helps me think, just like your morning walks and all your delicious recipes do for you. So, what I know here Barb is that you regret. You regret your choices that you made a while ago. Now, maybe I should have pried you open when I first met you. Ever since you first came to me, your body divulged a secret; you have been storing your unhappiness and bitter stone-cold resentment in your joints! And I felt it tingle for some attention as I touched you. Your bones opened up and bit me as hard as they could, because they needed out of your body, and sweetheart, it has been too god-damn long, because now everyone in town knows your secret, even your family...the ones I suspect you have been hiding from the most."

"I guess I have no one to blame but myself, but believe me, I sure as hell want to reach out and blame someone. It further distracts me from truth. But I guess I'm open now, huh? My bones gave me away doc? I guess that's my punishment for internalizing all my pains. But you have to try to understand, I wanted happiness, I am just human! I should have listened to my soul when they said 'don't marry' and 'go back to that city that makes you smile, really smile.' Instead, I am here trudging through a marriage that makes me weep. Everyone claimed that having someone else was going to do the trick, but maybe I made the wrong decision, and there is nothing I can do about it now. But don't get me wrong. I am not filled with hatred and resentment towards my family or co-workers. I'm just mad at myself for carrying on this long. I kept thinking 'next week, next month things will change, maybe the people around me will,' but I stayed the same, everyone kept growing and my determination to settle wouldn't let me move on. So here I am, consistently buying my kids new clothes and new toys and baking my husband new meals in hopes that they smile and smile. I guess I mean 'forget.' Forget that I messed up and maybe they can be temporarily happy."

That day, after Barbra walked out of the doctor's office, she let out a tear, and her tears didn't make her look sad...for once in our adolescent lives, she looked happy.