

Title: The Hesitations of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Il'ich*

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Abstract:

In the 1880's, Tolstoy found himself torn between two visions of love, the warm love his fiction had celebrated up till his crisis in marriages, families, friendships, and human connection generally, and a new colder Christian love he was transitioning to. *Death of Ivan Il'ich* captures this awkward dynamic, projecting two radically different highest ideals at different moments. (In a typical example, the hero's coworkers are savaged by the standards of warm love for taking his death in stride, while Gerasim, the kindly servant held up as their moral counterweight, is admired by the standards of cold love for being equally unperturbed.) The duality arises because although Tolstoyan Christianity reveres selflessness, fiction does not, finding it a lifeless topic. The conventions of narrative demand *serves* to excite us, and Tolstoy's imaginative literature, even on selflessness, bows to them. The story's structure is thus a kind of bait-and-switch, criticizing society and convention by the standards of warm love and compassionate connection, but in the very end rejecting warm love and compassionate connection and endorsing something close to their direct opposite.