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## **Good Pain, Ugly Pain: Picturizing Pain in Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych”**

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### **Abstract:**

*This article examines the depiction of suffering, including societal and bodily aspects, in Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilych. The paper explores the role of pain as a means of communication and reflection of larger societal dynamics, utilizing theoretical frameworks from medical humanities and literary analysis. It explores how the protagonist’s perception of suffering is shaped by the intersection of social and physical pain, drawing on Eisenberger’s concept of pain and Tolstoy’s narrative. In addition, the article examines the doctor-patient relationship and the depiction of medical institutions, uncovering the healthcare system’s deficiencies in meeting patients’ comprehensive needs. This analysis further highlights the complex and diverse nature of pain and its significant consequences on individuals and society. It offers a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between human suffering and societal systems.*

## Introduction

Pain is an essential element of human existence and society. The fundamental nature of pain is based not only on its physiological component but also on the recurrence of psychological and social factors. In her book *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkiller* (2014), Joanna Bourke asks the primary question “What is Pain?”. The Victorian physician Dr Peter Mere Latham offers the most widely accepted response to this question. He says pain is simply “what is spoken about as Pain” (2014, p. 08). Latham’s response highlights two fundamental properties of pain: its communicative nature and its role as a quantitative signifier. Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain* (1987), echoes the former when she writes, “It is pain that has agency, not the person who suffers pain” (Biernoff, 2016, p.165). Pain, as a phenomenon, encompasses many interpretations and discussions, making it a riveting subject for scholars in the field of literary humanities to explore. Emphasizing both aspects of pain, Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes pain as “an interpretation: a compound of body, mind and culture” (Biernoff, 2016, p. 166). The multi-dimensional defining units of pain integrate into the distinct cultural narratives of various social strata and cultural systems.

In the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain*, Jennifer Corns notes, “Answers about the nature of pain that one gives in philosophy purport to tell us what pain is at a rather general, personal level of description. But pains are, of course, not merely of interest to philosophers. There are other levels of description at which we might want to account for pain” (2017, 03). Pain has a profound effect that extends beyond the personal boundaries of the sufferer and affects the lives of others. The multidimensionality of the pain is the core characteristic that percolates through the lives of the sufferer in different chains. Biro defines pain as “an all-consuming internal experience that threatens to destroy everything except itself—family, friends, language, the world, one’s thoughts, and ultimately even one’s self ” (2007, p. 18). Moreover, the depiction of pain does not adhere to any sequential approach. Pain can manifest in multiple forms, including physiological, biochemical, psychological, and social dimensions. To accurately evaluate each aspect of pain, it is essential to consider all hitherto outlined components for a thorough understanding.

In their influential work *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor as “a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding” (2008, p. 36). David Morris argues in his book *The Culture of Pain* that “[t]he vast cultural shift that gives the story of pain its hidden plot centres on the eradication of meaning by late nineteenth-century science . . . [w]e are the heirs of the transformation in

medical thought whereby we think of pain as no more than an electrical impulse speeding along the nerves” (1991, p. 08). This abstraction fails to capture the essence of pain as a subjective experience. Many patients are unaware of the symptoms associated with various diseases and lack the ability to discern them. Some individuals label their conditions using cultural language, while others rely on conjectures. As an instance, consider the metaphor employed by Ivan Ilych to convey his suffering; this will be elaborated upon in the following section of the paper. Ivan Ilych, along with numerous other patients tries to give meaning to their illness in a way adequate to their knowledge and understanding, independent of what science thinks about that illness. However, science and scientific knowledge has neglected this process of meaning generation of disease by the patient prior to consulting a doctor. Sometimes even after consultation, patients could not ascribe meaning to their illness, as happened with Ivan Ilych. However, there exists an alternative perspective within the Slavic Christian tradition. A process of deriving meaning from pain through suffering. According to Christian tradition, “the landscape of Hell is the largest shared construction project in imaginative history [and] if Heaven is spiritual, Hell is oddly fleshly” (Turner, 1995, p. 3). The notion of hell conveys a significance that endorses corporeal agony as punishment, wherein “[water and] fire have been employed to achieve spiritual purity and heaven (Oestigaard, 2015, p. 303). Here, fire symbolizes corporeal suffering to attain salvation. This also contributes to the comprehension of Ivan Ilych’s corporeal suffering. Textbooks that discuss medical history generally highlight that pain encompasses the aspect of emotion, contrasting with the clinical and physiological perspective prevalent in the last three decades. However, exploration of the other components of pain which have played an integral role in disseminating its effect at the physiological, psychological and social level is required. In this way, meaning “generation, assimilation and association” start making sense for both physicians and patients.

### **Contextualizing pain in the pretext of culture**

Naomi I. Eisenberger (2015), in her paper “Social Pain and the Brain: Controversies, Questions, and Where to Go from Here”, attempts to provide evidence that substantiates the concept that social pain and physical pain have identical neurological and physiological underpinnings. Social pain arises from societal factors. Social pain is a result of negative emotions that are triggered from outside rather than internally by external stimuli. This pain is independent of the bodily malignancies. It is developed as a result of the response to another person’s behaviour, attitude, or action. However, physical pain is entirely intrinsic and arises from the malfunctioning of the body or its organs. People often characterize their adverse social

encounters as distressing and employ terms associated with physical pain or social pain to convey their emotional reactions to the incidents, expressing grievances of heartbreak, emotional distress, or psychological wounds. The physical sensation of pain, which functions to attract our attention and inform us of possible or real damage to our physical bodies, may have been employed by the social bonding system to notify us of potential injury to our social connections (Panksepp, 1967, p. 75). Social pain and physical suffering are distinct experiences, despite the fact that somatic and social pains utilize a portion of the same neural substrates, “hence, people do not confuse a broken heart with a broken bone” (Eisenberger, 2015, p. 621).

In everyday life, pain is both mirrored and produced within ordinary events and actions. Dividing pain into two broad categories, Eisenberger writes that social pain is a psychological experience influenced by focused concentration and eager anticipation. In contrast, physical pain is a biological phenomenon connected to survival in social interactions. Tolstoy employs pain as a semiotic technique to convey and interpret the excruciating experiences of Ivan Ilych at different junctures throughout his life. Pain serves as a powerful tool for Russian writers to delve into the political implications of suffering, operating both overtly and covertly in human existence. Hence, many Russian novelists like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Nikolai Gogol, and Ivan Turgenev extensively utilize the imagery of pain and metaphors in their works to capture the diverse psychological, social, and physiological effects of pain on the individuals experiencing it. The importance of pain in examining the various aspects of life becomes far more incisive and crucial when it enters the realm of human suffering. In his works, Tolstoy explores human suffering through the representation of pain as both physical and social.

Applying the blending of Eisenberg’s notion of pain demonstrates that “a painful stimulus can actually increase the perceived painfulness of a nonpainful or mildly painful stimulus” (2015, p. 618). Accordingly, “physical pain that stems from tissue damage occupies priority in terms of medical treatment goals, whereas pain that does not include tissue damage (e.g., fibromyalgia) is granted less attention, with patients often feeling that their suffering is being questioned” (Eisenberger, 2015, p. 623). Equally important to our discussion is Eisenberg’s notion that “physical pain” and “social pain” coexist in the same neural structures despite being triggered by different actions. This comprehension serves as a new dimension of understanding that aids readers’ comprehension by integrating two distinct suffering experiences. Following Eisenberg’s theory, we attempt to use the two terms to describe how the illness of Ivan Ilych is impacted by two types of pain that are similar in nature but have

distinct origins. We intend to show that Tolstoy's depiction of Ivan Illych's demise is not only attributable to the pain caused by his incurable illness but to the discontent expressed by medical institutes, care faculty, and society as well. We argue that social pain resulting from the early novella's depiction of a dissatisfactory encounter with the physician, his connection with his spouse, and alterations in his social way of life compound the detrimental effects of Ivan Illych's physical pain. In this sense, this perspective of looking at the illness and the pain it generates examines the hidden interplay of emotions discovered by following the cues dispersed within the narrative through "studying the physical-social pain overlap" (Eisenberger, 2015, p. 622) to quantify it in its entirety.

### **Paint the pain: An illustration of suffering**

Tolstoy, a Russian writer, was renowned for his authoritative and influential style in addressing matters and dilemmas pertaining to human existence and pain. His novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, explores the life of its protagonist, Ivan Ilych. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* narrates the life and death of Ivan Ilych, a court official who meets his own mortality following an abrupt sickness. Ivan contemplates the excruciating pain he is experiencing and the realization that his death is imminent. Through this, he reflects on the shallowness of his existence and the superficiality of his connections with others. Tolstoy's novel explores philosophical questions, emphasizing Ivan's internal conflict and search for significance in the face of societal conventions. The reactions of Ilych's co-workers and wife to his death, as well as his subsequent reflections, are corroborated by the initial statement in the flashback that recounts his life: "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (Tolstoy and Maude, 1967, p. 255). Tolstoy's narrative brings forth unappreciated and unacknowledged pain to represent the significance of pain. In this way, Tolstoy's story telling becomes an existential testimonial in which humans transform their pain into living experiences.

In Tolstoy's narrative, pain serves as a semiotic technique that not only reflects bodily pain but also reveals the social pain caused by social conventions. Through the narrative of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Tolstoy explores the human relationship with pain – psychologically and socially. He explores the dynamics of human relationships to illustrate the impact of suffering on the sufferer leading to feelings of isolation and powerlessness within the family. The feelings of alienation and subordination are experienced when the desires and choices of the individual experiencing pain or ailment are tightly controlled and restricted. Any breach in regulations set by the caretaker results in punitive actions being taken against them. Tolstoy argues that while

suffering can be limiting and disempowering for humanity, it can also serve as a source of empowerment and liberation. By suffering and bearing pain in an ingenious way, Tolstoy's work redefines the profound association of identity with suffering in order to attain an understanding of "self-awareness, subjectivity, and agency" (Abarca, 2006, p.119). Hence, in Tolstoy's narrative, the relationship between pain and humans is not shown in a simple manner but rather in a subtle and individualized way.

### **Social pain: An illusion of pain**

The main aim of this paper is to establish the link between social pain and physical pain in escalating the malignant impact on the patient. In this vein, "The medical historian Richard Shryock notes that the development of vital statistics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century made possible for the first time a clear demonstration of differential mortality between the poor and the prosperous" (Clausen, 1963, p.139). Hence, this observation suggests that social factors play an essential role in disease formation. We consider disease synonymous with pain and pain with suffering. However, sometimes pain occurs in an individual without causing detectable damage. According to Dubos (1959), such pain can be converted into overt disease by various disturbances, resulting in physiological and mental misery (p. 98). This mental misery is generated not due to any biological disorientation but as a reaction of society toward the physiological disorder. We refer to this as social pain. Social factors are not considered in medical science when determining the cause of a disease, as they are exclusively based on scientific inquiries. As we discussed at the beginning of the paper as well as in the subsequent section where Eisenberg talks about social pain, evaluating pain without considering social factors is incomplete.

On the contrary, Ivan Ilych presents an entirely different scenario. During the time of Tolstoy, medical knowledge was in its nascent stage and continued to develop. Those who suffered during the transitional phase of medical knowledge, however, do so in excruciating pain. Tolstoy adeptly depicts both the private and public spheres of Ivan Ilych. He starts with the life of Ivan Ilych on a light-hearted note. Ivan Ilych possesses everything that a prosperous and contented man could desire. He is well-off, has a lovely wife, and enjoys every luxury. However, Ivan Ilych's life soon exhibits a remarkable progression from contentment to discontentment. The main subset of this paper is to examine the myriad dissatisfactions in his life that likely contribute to the worsening of his illness in the light of Eisenberg's notion of pain. Pachmuss brings a very interesting perspective on Tolstoy, who instilled a deep fear of death in an entire generation;

If in our time people afraid of death, have such a convulsive fear of it, as no one had ever experienced before, if all of us in the depth of our hearts, in our and blood feel this ‘cold tremor’, a chill piercing to the marrow of bones, it is Tolstoy whom we must chiefly thank for this fear. To have no doubt, no hesitation, and no uncertainty about death, that a ‘transition into nothingness,’ a transition devoid of every mystery. His terror was inconsolable, fruitless, senselessly destructive calculated to dry up the very springs of life. (1961, p. 73)

This observation is very interesting when Pachmuss talks about the exaggeration of fear, which dried up the soul of a generation. Nevertheless, she misses the point – this exaggeration (to her) is the result of fear accumulated from physical pain, which ends up in death independent of the psychological fear flared by societal interdependence. Tolstoy *illustrates* Ivan Ilych’s misery: “Anger choked him, and he was agonizingly, unbearably miserable. It is impossible that all men have doomed to suffer this awful horror” (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 32). This suffering profoundly affects his thought process, transforming Ivan Ilych into a fundamentally different person. The word misery is metaphorically used here. It has a much deeper meaning to grasp for the readers as Ivan’s life is in turmoil. His misery is aided by a non-attended job, deteriorating social relations, and loss of physical strength. And these aspects contribute to the social dimension of his pain in escalating his worsening condition. In the words of Camus, “In reality, there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious” (2013, p. 21). The conscious experience of excruciating suffering alters the perception of reality. Ivan Ilych grew resentful toward other persons, “Health, strength and vitality in other people were an offence to him” (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 39). It is not something because of physical pain but of a societal act. It is not a result of any physical symptom but rather a social action. Being an agent of social pain does not require any internal impetus. The very existence of others is inherently the cause of social suffering. In this discussion, we contend that social trauma is the catalyst for individual personality alterations. James Olney points out that “The meaning of Ivan Ilych lies in the equivalence of death and conversion, an equivalence which, in turn, represents the experience and meaning of the life of Leo Tolstoy” (1972, p. 106) while providing a symbolic reading of the novella. However, the conversion he is talking about is not restricted to him (Ivan Ilych). His attitude toward his wife has changed completely: “While she was kissing him, he hated her from the bottom of his soul and with difficulty refrained from pushing her way” (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 33). He also feels “vexed with his daughter and her friend for their untidiness” (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 35). As Camus rightly put it

about the experience of death, Ivan's suffering has its own paraphernalia which is far from the comprehension of his nearest and dearest. The changes in his behaviour are apparently due to the severity of his pain, but while introspecting deeply, the interplay of perceptions and expectations are significant.

But in the third month of Ivan Ilych's illness, his wife, his daughter, his son, his acquaintances, the doctors, the servants, and above all he himself, were aware that the whole interest he had for other people was whether he would soon vacate his place, and at last release the living from the discomfort caused by his presence and be himself released from his suffering. (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 22)

Baruch de Spinoza, in his "Origin and Nature of the Affects" writes, "Our mind acts at times and at times it suffers: in so far as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily acts; and in so far as it has inadequate ideas it necessarily suffers" (1984, p. 99). Ivan Ilych could not grasp the meaning of his illness. He was inadequate in attaching meaning to it. Similarly, "What tormented Ivan Ilych most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and that ... This deception tortured him" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 39). The sociality of his pain is clearly understood from his understanding of other's reaction towards his illness. In other words, he not solely suffers from his physical ailments but rather is affected by how others perceive it. This process of meaning generation sees him distort reality and create his own, owing to which his suffering escalates: "he took a spoonful and swallowed it. 'No, it won't help. It's all tomfoolery, all deception'" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 41).

### **Seeing the unseen: Visual lens to neglected emotions**

The preface story of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* starts with a brief chorus about the death of Ivan Ilych, a member of the law court serving in a Russian town. The manner in which his death is discussed is fascinating:

"Gentlemen," he said, "Ivan Ilych has died!" "You don't say so!" "Here, read it yourself," replied Peter Ivanovich, handing Fedor Vasilievich the paper still damp from the press. Surrounded by a black border were the words: "Praskovya Fedorovna Golovina, with profound sorrow, informs relatives and friends of the demise of her beloved husband Ivan Ilych Golovin, Member of the Court of Justice, which occurred on February the 4th of this year 1882. The funeral will take place on Friday at one o'clock in the afternoon. (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 28)



Ivan Ilych's affiliation with society as a legal professional is highly significant. All the gentlemen are equally worried upon hearing of the demise of Ivan Ilych. He diligently worked for the betterment of society and "had been a colleague of the gentlemen present and was liked by them all" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 4). Initially, the account portrays him as an individual with intellectual acumen, a sense of humour, and a wealth of information. However, his demise raises several inquiries among the surviving, evoking a series of profound questions, "It's very sad. 'But what really was the matter with him?' 'The doctors couldn't say – at least they could, but each of them said something different'" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 5). Death is not the finality of life; the manner in which it occurs is highly relevant – the cause of a man's death. Whether he died a comfortable or painful death raises numerous questions. The excruciating end of Ivan Ilych, who screams incessantly during the final three days preceding his death, carries a profound symbolic significance. The anguish he endures serves as a purifier to free him from all the transgressions he has committed in his life. He comprehends the meaning of life through the suffering he endures. William Barret likewise expresses a similar viewpoint, "In the end, Ivan Ilych dies content because he has reached the point of knowing that the life he lived was empty, futile, and meaningless" (1966, p. 143).

Tolstoy effectively portrays the psycho-social impact of agony on Ivan Ilych, exploring the interconnectedness of pain, emotions and disease. The manifestation of symptoms of any disease varies across different languages, cultures, and social systems. However, the discomfort experienced by the individual resulting in anguish is the same across various cultural and social systems. Ivan's initial symptoms of decline in health are marked by an unusual taste in his mouth and a sense of soreness in his left side, "he had a queer taste in his mouth and felt some discomfort in his left side" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 24). The use of the terms "queer taste" and "discomfort" is significant since Ivan, without scientific knowledge of the disease, utilizes these cues to articulate his poor state of health. Tolstoy skilfully portrays the psychological state of his characters, who use language as a means to communicate their suffering. However, the issue at hand is whether they can accurately convey the magnitude of the agony through his choice of words. To put it succinctly, patients are also concerned about whether their vocabulary is sufficient to accurately describe the severity of their pain, and so is Ivan Ilych.

Tolstoy raises another relevant concern regarding the doctor-patient relationship. He focuses on this issue from the perspective of patients comprehending their illness. The patient must be aware of his condition and the status of his body. However, due to their lack of expertise in biological systems and computational understanding, they cannot comprehend the nature of

the disease. The healthcare provider needs to explain the patient's ailment clearly and understandably. In the instance of Ivan Ilych:

Doctor said that so-and-so indicated there was so-as-so inside the patient, but if the investigation of so-and-so did not confirm this, then he must assume that and that if he assumes that and that, then...and so on. To Ivan Ilych only one question was important: was his case serious or not? (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 25)

The above quotation serves as an indicator of Tolstoy's enduring excellence and timelessness. Medicine's primary objective is to streamline the intricacies of diseases and present them in an understandable manner. Ivan Ilych's worry was straightforward, but he could not obtain a satisfactory response due to the intricacies and extraneous protocols. Ivan Ilych finds the tension that results from not receiving answers regarding his illness from the most expected source (medical institutions) to be abhorrent. This stress gives rise to psychological suffering that is not directly attributable to a biological cause but rather to social factors. Therefore, a social cause induces psychological anguish that exacerbates his condition and further detracts from his state of health.

The persistent agony he suffers results in substantial alterations in his conduct. Previously, he would contemplate his social connections, occupation, and wife and children. However, these luxuries have now been substituted with concern for his suffering. Following his consultation with the doctor, throughout his journey home, he meticulously analyses the doctor's words, "trying to translate those complicated, obscure, scientific phrases into plain language and find in them an answer to the question: 'Is my condition bad? Is it very bad? Or is there as yet nothing much wrong'" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 25). It is imperative to "integrate physiological and psychological mechanisms of pain" (Asmundson and Wright, 2004, p. 35) to evaluate the severity of pain. The evaluation of the damage (read: pain) caused by the disease, specifically the pain experienced, cannot be determined exclusively through scientific and computational assessments; the psycho-social dimension must also be considered. Numerous scholars have undertaken the allegorical interpretation of the mortality of Ivan Ilych, delving into the theme of mortality. Some have even ascribed to it an autobiographical element reminiscent of Tolstoy's life. In a similar vein, John Olney examines, "the centre of meaning in Ivan Ilych, the generating emotion and the culminating experience of the tale, is not death (which is seen finally as a mere physical and incidental fact, a literal metaphor for a state of the soul) but spiritual conversion" (1972, p. 105). However, literary scholars do not prioritize

investigating the cause of death while considering the holistic biopsychosocial factors that contributed to his demise.

Tolstoy ridicules the medical system and attempts to identify the failure of medical knowledge in his works of fiction, all the while conveying Ivan Ilych's dissatisfaction with medicine. The predicament of Ivan Ilych intensifies when "it happened that there was a contradiction between the indication drawn from the examination of the urine and the symptoms that showed themselves" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 26). Following the asynchronous information provided by science and symptoms, the physician told him "he had either forgotten or blundered or hidden something from him" (Tolstoy, 1960, p. 26). These events played a pivotal role in establishing a fear of death. For Ivan, death is not the end of life but an unaware or unidentifiable life in him. This dissatisfied bond with medicine serves as a denominator for the social pain which exacerbates his suffering. The consideration of social pain as experienced through his unsatisfactory social relations with his wife, children or his colleagues and his discontentedness with the healthcare system are the main architect of the social pain in the case of Ivan Ilych, which leads to his death.

Societal distress plays an essential role in Ivan Ilych's death, a factor that should not be overlooked. The appearance of the malignancy in his body is the cause of his incurable condition. However, a human being is not solely comprised of a physical body, but also possesses a mind and soul. Regarding Ivan Ilych, we presented multiple instances where social behaviours contribute to worsening his predicament. In the preceding section, Eisenberg expresses that the impact of suffering is equivalent, regardless of whether it is social or physical in nature, in a straightforward manner. The source of pain is inconsequential, but its essence is paramount. Therefore, Ivan Ilych's death is not exclusively attributed to his illness, but rather to his dissatisfaction with societal factors, which ultimately leads to emotional suffering and contributing equally in meeting his destined fate.

## **Conclusion**

In *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Tolstoy depicts pain as a complex and diverse phenomenon that extends beyond physical suffering to include social, psychological, and existential aspects. Tolstoy's narrative explores both physical and social pain, revealing the significant impact of suffering on the human spirit, not only as a biological occurrence but as a phenomenon intricately linked to societal interaction and personal identity. Ivan Ilych's experience of suffering exposes the alienation and isolation caused not only by his terminal condition but also by the apathy of a culture fixated on superficiality and norms. His pain serves as a lens for

analysing the intricacies of human connections and the superficiality of social constructions. This study aligns Eisenberger's theory of social pain with Tolstoy's depiction, highlighting the intersection of bodily and social suffering as a formidable force that dismantles Ivan's prior identity, urging him to confront the emptiness of his life. Tolstoy's examination of Ivan Ilych's death serves as a profound critique of a society that disregards the comprehensive experience of pain and suffering. Ivan's metamorphosis through pain exemplifies the unyielding connection between the corporeal and the mental, showcasing how suffering may serve as a conduit for self-awareness and, ironically, for illumination. The story posits that genuine comprehension of pain – and of existence – necessitates the amalgamation of the physical and the social, acknowledging the unseen injuries imposed by societal norms and interpersonal estrangements.

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