

## THE DENSENESS IS THE ABSURD: THE LIFE IN THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH

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### **ABSTRACT**

*It is, perhaps, the problem of the so-called culture, or conventions of the bourgeois life at the heart of Tolstoy's story, which hides "the bitter, useless pain of a failed and ruined life" (Lukács, 1974: 56) from Ivan Ilych's eyes, and the problems aroused through it, encounter Ivan Ilych face to face with the absurdity of life, since "that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd" (Camus, 1991: 11), and which way of life is denser than bourgeois life? However, in Ivan's case, it is his fatal disease that finally opens his eyes to the light which has been covered before. In this study, the researcher tries to investigate the meaning of life and death in Tolstoy's story, *The Death of Ivan Illych*, through Albert Camus' theory of Absurdism, defined in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, alongside three other sources about bourgeois style, one by Vladimir Nabokov, and two by the prominent Marxist thinker Georgy Lukács.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Absurd, Bourgeois, Consciousness, Life, Death, Falsity, Deception*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Georgy Lukács (1885-1971) the Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic, was one of the founders of Western Marxism. He developed the theory of reification, and Karl Marx's theory of class consciousness. In 1911, at the age of 26, he published his first book called *Soul and Form* which "foreshadowed the later development of Existentialism in its concern for authenticity and the philosophy of death" (Feenberg, 1966: 3). His most important book, *History and Class Consciousness*, "perhaps the most valuable contribution to Marxist theory since the time of Marx and Engels themselves" (ibid), was published in 1923. In this book, Lukács "attempted to show the fundamental connection between Marxist theory and the proletarian revolution" (ibid), and defined Bourgeoisie as an obstacle in the way of a radical change in the society. As a literary critic, Lukács was especially influential because of his theoretical developments of realism and of the novel as a literary genre.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), French novelist, philosopher and Existentialist, gives a quite different perspective of philosophy and politics of existentialism from that of other Existentialists, and his "idea of the absurd is closer to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche" (West, 2010: 169) than to Sartre; for him "the absurd is a direct consequence of the absence of God" (ibid). In fact, he "considered the Absurd to be a fundamental and even defining characteristic of the modern human condition" (Simpson, 2016: 1).

By mid-century, he published his two book-length philosophical essays, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. It was "in these works that he introduced and developed the twin philosophical ideas—the concept of the Absurd and the

notion of Revolt” (ibid). The Absurd can be defined as “a metaphysical tension or opposition that results from the presence of human consciousness with its ever-pressing demand for order and meaning in life in an essentially meaningless and indifferent universe” (ibid). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus speaks about Homer’s Myth:

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. (1991: 75)

The notion of Revolt “refers to both a path of resolved action and a state of mind” (Simpson, 2016: 1). It can take “extreme forms such as terrorism or a reckless and unrestrained egoism (both of which are rejected by Camus), but basically, and in simple terms, it consists of an attitude of heroic defiance or resistance to whatever oppresses human beings” (ibid).

And the story of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, which according to Nabokov is “Tolstoy's most artistic, most perfect, and most sophisticated achievement” (1982: 296) begins at the chronological end of the story, right after when Ivan has died. Nobody feels sorry for his loss, since they console themselves by the thought that it is Ivan who has died and not them, the men in the room cannot help thinking about the promotions and transfers that Ivan's death will bring them about, and also Ivan's wife, Praskovya, is only thinking about how to maximize her dead husband's government pension.

The story then shifts more than thirty years into the past and picks up with a description of Ivan’s life which is average and commonplace in all respects. After his marriage, during his wife’s pregnancy, because Praskovya's behavior begins to disrupt the proper and decorous lifestyle cherished by Ivan and approved by society, Ivan increasingly absorbs himself in his official work. Time passes and Ivan moves up in the ranks. He expects to be awarded the post of presiding judge in a University town, but it did not happen. Conscious that his salary cannot cover his family's living expenses, Ivan travels to St. Petersburg to look for a higher paying job. Finally, he is awarded a higher paying position in the city, and informing his family of the good news, Ivan departs alone to buy and furnish a house in preparation for the family's arrival. One day as he is mounting a step-ladder to hang some drapes, he makes a false step and slips, banging his side against the window frame. The injury is not serious, however, and Ivan is quite pleased with the final appearance of the house. He settles into his new life and acquires a love of bridge.

Ivan begins to experience some discomfort in his left side and an unusual taste in his mouth. The discomfort gradually increases and his physical condition degenerates rapidly. One night while lying alone in the dark, he is visited by his first thoughts of mortality, and they terrify him. He realizes that his illness is not a question of health or disease, but that of life or death. Others do not understand nor wish to understand his plight. He tries to erect screens to block the thought of death from his mind, but death haunts him ceaselessly. In the midst of this suffering, Gerasim, Ivan's peasant servant, enters the scene. He is the only person who does not pretend that Ivan is sick. As others around him continue to pretend that he is only sick and not dying, Ivan feels that he is surrounded by artificiality and falsehood. He lays pondering death and questioning the rationale behind his suffering. As he examines his life, Ivan realizes that the further back he looks, the more joy there is. Then, one night Ivan begins to doubt whether he has lived his life correctly. He realizes that his official life and his family and social relations were all artificial. And he experiences a sense of extreme joy with leaving all those behind. In the middle of a sigh, Ivan stretches out and dies.

## DISCUSSIONS

What happens to Ivan Ilych, the incident which brings him his fatal illness, is an event easily to be granted, but gradually it matters as he soon feels a pain in his body and cannot ignore it. However, according to Camus “all great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning” (Camus, 1991: 10), and this ridiculous beginning finds a “noble” (ibid) importance, since there will be no escape from it, and ought to be considered.

Through ignoring it, Ivan Ilych tries to evade thinking about it. This happens to him because as Camus mentions “we get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking” (ibid: 7), therefore, Ivan immediately rejects thinking about the problem, and in this way he continues to live with deceptions of the life which he has used to it, as he says to himself: “There, I really don’t feel it. It’s much better already”, then “he put out the light” (Tolstoy, 1998: 31). Tolstoy’s metaphorical use of the words is significant, as Nabokov reminds us that “Tolstoy’s style is a marvelously complicated, ponderous instrument” (1982: 296). The word “light” here turns out to express a metaphorical meaning; as Ivan puts out (i.e. kills) the light which can lead him to understanding his own condition. However, as there is no escape from it, he gradually faces the sorrowful consciousness that his judicial labors could not as formerly hide from him what he wanted them to hide, and could not deliver him from It ...to save himself from this condition Ivan Ilych looked for consolations ...but then they immediately fell to pieces or rather became transparent, as if It penetrated them and nothing could veil It ...And what was worst of all was that It drew his attention to itself not in order to make him take some action but only that he should look at It, look it straight in the face: look at it and without doing anything, suffer inexpressibly. (1998: 34)

This It, the horrible and capital It, which bears no name, and there is no escape from it, raises some important questions, but since, according to Camus, “beginning to think is beginning to be undermined, and society has but little connection with such beginnings” (1991: 5), Ivan tries to reject it. Nevertheless, how far could he reject it while “It would come and stand before him and look at him” (Tolstoy, 1998: 34).

What Camus calls the “daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering” (1991: 6), in the case of Ivan makes him question “Why? It can’t be that life is so senseless and horrible. But, if it really has been so horrible and senseless, why must I die and die in agony?” (Tolstoy, 1998: 49). This is the very question; the question which Camus predicts “one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” this is important” (Camus, 1991: 10). What Camus calls the absurd is “the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (ibid: 15). This is the voice of the absurd, it echoes in his heart, he is encountered face to face with the absurd, which “has a chance of going further”, which “must die or else reverberate” (ibid: 20). In fact, he tries hard to kill it, as one way was to “dispute and grow angry” with his wife with no reason (Tolstoy, 1998: 35), just because “then...It was invisible” (ibid). However, despite his efforts, he is not successful as the voice of the absurd gets alive and reverberates in every aspect of his life, and he cannot do anything about it, but only to start thinking and reviewing all his life. He starts the process by saying to himself: “something must be wrong. I must calm myself — must think it all over from the beginning” (ibid: 32). And yes, the beginning is the beginning of his illness (ibid: 32).

Soon he finds himself unable to find an answer to this question, since “there is no explanation! Agony, death What for?” (ibid: 48). Instead, he finds something else: “a sea of despair rages, and always pain; always pain, always despair, and always the same” (ibid: 40). Yet, Camus elevates this despair:

Seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable. If in order to elude the anxious question: “What would life be?” one must, like the donkey, feed on the roses of illusion, then the absurd mind, rather than resigning itself to falsehood, prefers, to adopt fearlessly Kierkegaard’s reply: “despair.” (1991: 28)

Therefore, through rejecting to feed on the roses of illusion, Ivan Ilych puts one step forward and lets his absurd mind rule, excludes the donkey within, and accepts the despair. In this stage, according to Camus, “it awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening” (ibid: 10, emphasis added). Ivan is often seen trying “to get back into the former current of thoughts that had once screened the thought of death from him. But strange to say, all that had formerly shut off, hidden, and destroyed his consciousness of death, no longer had that effect” (Tolstoy, 1998: 33, emphasis added).

Camus mentions that “the return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep, represents the first steps of absurd freedom” (1991: 39), the freedom which “takes the place of the illusions of freedom” (ibid). Ivan’s consciousness finally begins to get awake; although others try to make it sleep again, and bring him back to ignorance: “The same room, the same pictures, curtains, wall-paper, medicine bottles, were all there, and the same aching suffering body, and Ivan Ilych began to moan. They gave him a subcutaneous injection and he sank into oblivion” (Tolstoy, 1998: 42). In fact, it is consciousness of his status in the world, his loneliness, and the absurdity of the life which he has made that cause him pain at this level. Nabokov condemns the “automatic mechanism, the unfeeling vulgarity of the bureaucratic middle-class city life, in which so recently Ivan himself had participated” (Nabokov, 1982: 298) as the main cause of his sufferings. An addition, Camus speaking of Sisyphus says:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. (1991:77)

Obtaining consciousness is a prominent level in order to be equipped with absurd mind and absurd eyes to see and understand the ugly truth of one’s life. To put it in Camus’ words: “thinking is learning all over again how to see, directing one’s consciousness, making of every image a privileged place” (ibid: 29). Indeed, there are several facts Ivan becomes conscious of, and by the help of which he can succeed at viewing the truth of his life in a crystal clear way. First it is “the consciousness of death” (Tolstoy, 1998: 33) and awareness of his mortality as a human being. He was used to not seeing himself mortal, trying “to drive this false, incorrect, morbid thought away and to replace it by other proper and healthy thoughts. But that thought, and not the thought only but the reality itself, seemed to come and confront him” (ibid: 33, emphasis added).

Gradually, Ivan gets aware of his loneliness as well, which first makes him weep: “he wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God” (ibid: 45). But then he gets along with this loneliness in bearing the consequences of this consciousness when his wife asks: “What is it, Jean?” he replies: “No...o...thing”... “Why speak of it? She won’t understand” (ibid: 32). The split which was made by the “conscious of that gnawing pain” (ibid: 28) brought Ivan Ilych to the understanding that he could not confide anybody to speak about what he is viewing now, about this nothing that he is encountered with, as “he saw that his household, especially his wife and daughter, who were in a perfect whirl of visiting, did not understand anything of it” (ibid: 27). At these certain moments of lucidity, he gets to know that “the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them (Camus, 1991: 11) and that the denseness the mask to their

hollowness, and “like all masks it is negative: it is only the opposite of something” (Lukács, 1974: 56). It is not strange to hear from Ivan saying to himself that he has lost his life over those curtains (ibid: 35), since the bourgeois way of life, which he has accepted, says no to life, it is the opposite of life through the mask it wears.

He comes to know that the denseness of the bourgeois life which he has built, and which they “have welcomed with open arms a mechanical existence hostile to life” (Lukács, 1971: 109) is the absurd. In addition, Nabokov mentions “Ivan lived a bad life, and since a bad life is nothing but the death of the soul, then Ivan lived a living death”(1982: 298).

According to Camus, the absurd “mind’s first step is to distinguish what is true from what is false” (Camus, 1991: 13), and through this process of definitive awakening, Ivan comes to see the falsity of the life around him; during medical examinations, “instead of the real question of life and death which now alone confronted him, the question arose of the kidney and appendix” (Tolstoy, 1998: 42). He, who does not wish to hide anything, sees clearly that “it’s not a question of appendix or kidney, but of life and...death” (ibid: 31) it is “death. Yes, death. And none of them knows or wishes to know it” (ibid). Now that he can “distinguish what is true from what is false” (Camus, 1991: 13), he cannot tolerate the falsity around him: “when they had gone it seemed to Ivan Ilych that he felt better; the falsity had gone with them” (Tolstoy, 1998: 44, emphasis added), what now torments Ivan most is not his painful body, but “the deception, the lie” (ibid: 37), and in fact, talking of kidney and appendix instead of the real matter of life and death is an example of the deception:

This deception tortured him their not wishing to admit what they all knew what he knew, but wanting to lie to him concerning his terrible condition, and wishing and forcing him to participate in that lie. (1998: 37)

The bourgeois style of life, which cannot tolerate the burden of reality, reduces reality-here the reality of death-“to the level of a casual, unpleasant, and almost indecorous incident” (ibid: 38). But he, who has uncovered the screens, cannot tolerate the falsehood, and this is why Ivan cannot even tolerate taking his medicines, telling himself: “No, it won’t help. It’s all tomfoolery, all deception” (ibid: 39). This is the absurd mind which cannot stand rejecting the truth.

In searching for the truth in his life, he also encounters the hard-favored truth that “It alone was true” (ibid: 34), that the absurdity which has shown itself in denseness of his life is the only truth, and everything beside it has been all deceptions, all lies. Then in differentiation between life and death, “he suffered ever the same unceasing agonies and in his loneliness pondered always on the same insoluble question: “What is this? Can it be that it is Death?” And the inner voice answered: “Yes, it is Death” (ibid: 47). And also in reviewing his life he concludes that what he has made around himself is nothing but death, that “hypocrisy”, “that deadly official life”, “those preoccupations about money, a year of it, and two, and ten, and twenty, and always the same thing. And the longer, it lasted the more deadly it becomes” (1998: 46). It should be noted that although Tolstoy’s title of the story is “The Death of Ivan Ilych”, the main focus of the story is on Ivan’s life. Metaphorically speaking, it is Ivan’s physical life which is equal to death, the “living death” (Nabokov, 1982: 298). In another moment of lucidity, he comes to the epiphany that:

“It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death. (1998: 46, emphasis added)

Besides, it is exactly at this moment when Tolstoy challenges the concept of success; Ivan Ilych had always been considered a very successful man, someone who could climb up the step-ladder of success, but Tolstoy threw him down the same step-ladder of bourgeois life. Nabokov reminds us that “As Ivan, with Tolstoy’s assistance, revises his life, he

sees that the culmination of his happiness in that life...was when he got a nice fat official position and rented an expensive bourgeois apartment for himself and his family” (1982: 300). Nabokov continues to say that by bourgeois apartment he means “the kind of apartment that would strike the conventional mind in the eighties as moderately luxurious, with all kinds of knickknacks and ornaments” (ibid), and that “this was the peak of Ivan's philistine happiness, but it was upon this peak that death pounced upon him. In falling from a stepladder when he was hanging a curtain” (ibid, emphasis added). Related to the same subject, Lukács says:

A life is made bourgeois first and foremost through the exercise of a bourgeois profession- a profession in which success, however great, can never enhance the personality by the intoxication it produces, and a decline is noticed by two or three people at the very most. (1974: 56)

Ivan is one of those two or three people who notice the decline. “After seizing the awareness” Camus reminds that “metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience...It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate” (1991: 36).

Understanding that everything around him has been all deception, all lies, and all death, a life devoid of living in any sense, he decides to embrace death, which has turned out to be the only truth of his life. In this case, his death is not the “leap” (ibid: 23). He is the absurd hero in the same sense as Sisyphus was to Camus. Speaking about Sisyphus Camus writes:

He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. (1991: 76)

Accepting death is Ivan's revolt against the falsity of his life, according to Nabokov, “from now on nature, in the disguise of physical disintegration [the imminent death], enters the picture and destroys the automatism of conventional life” (1982: 300). It is embracing the only truth of his life, since this “everlasting nothingness seems the only reality” of his own life (Camus, 1991: 19), he revolts against it by accepting and embracing death.

Camus concludes that “although “The Myth of Sisyphus” poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert” (1991: 3). In embracing the physical death, Ivan shows his passion toward life and his hatred toward the “hateful Death” of his life (Tolstoy, 1998: 39), and as Nabokov mentions “Ivan lived a living death, and since beyond death is God's living light, then Ivan died into new Life — Life with a capital L” (1982: 298). Tolstoy talks again metaphorically when he describes Ivan's physical death:

He fell through the hole and there at the bottom was a light. What had happened to him was like the sensation one sometimes experiences in a railway carriage when one thinks one is going backwards while one is really going forwards and suddenly becomes aware of the real direction. (1998: 51)

It is the same thing as what Nabokov labels “death” and “bad life” as synonymous (1982: 299), and the final inner dialogues of Ivan Ilych before his death are remarkable as well:

“And death...where is it?” 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, 1998: 52)

Therefore, he puts death in chains, as well as Sisyphus who “had put Death in chains” (Camus, 1991: 75), for “Death is finished” (Tolstoy, 1998: 52). In searching for the meaning of life, he, as an absurd man, chooses to revolt against the living death, this revolt matters because it is the revolt which “gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (Camus, 1991: 36). Therefore, Ivan who has been living a dead life, through accepting the only reality and truth of his life, by embracing death, revolts against his bourgeois way of life

## CONCLUSIONS

Tolstoy, at the first step, defines Ivan Ilych’s life as “most ordinary and therefore most terrible” (1998: 10) to make a tragedy of an ordinary man, close to everyone else in the society. In fact, in order to make a generalization, one needs to disobey Aristotle’s prescription of the principles of tragedy, which is specific only to a limited number of people. But, Tolstoy is much more concerned with people than with certain people. Moreover, Tolstoy’s protagonist is not a tragic hero, who brings about our emotions of pity and fear, called catharsis. Instead, Ivan Ilych is an absurd hero who struggles with death, and pays the price of consciousness, and does not arise the feeling of catharsis.

However, since “the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (Camus, 1991: 4), he goes on a quest to find a meaning for his life, even in the midst of meaninglessness. Although he becomes aware that whatever around him “is nonsense and pure deception” (Tolstoy, 1998: 41), he keeps on searching for the meaning, until he reaches this understanding that “all you have lived for and still live for is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you” (ibid: 51). What matters to an absurd hero is the consciousness, which makes the life meaningful, and in fact there is no living without consciousness: “nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious” (Camus, 1991: 12), and “nothing is worth anything except through it” (ibid), and what hides life and death, and impedes consciousness is the way of life Ivan has chosen.

The reason why Tolstoy is that much at odds with bourgeois society could be found through both Lukács and Camus, as these problems lie at the heart of this way of life. Lukács defines bourgeois way of life as “a kind of forced labour, a hateful servitude” (Lukács, 1974: 56), and Camus mentions the same thing. To put it in Camus’ words: “Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time” (1991: 10). It is dangerous because it “really consumes a man’s life, because life should be its very opposite” (Lukács, 1974: 56). It is terrible because it is automatic, trite, and hypocritical (Nabokov, 1982: 300).

Interestingly, Camus speaks of the time “when the stage sets collapse” (1991: 10), and by speaking of the stage sets he talks indirectly of bourgeois way of life, since every single aspect of this way of life is a show on the stage, it needs all those actors and actresses to mask, as the “bourgeois way of life is only a mask, and like all masks it is negative: it is only the opposite of something” (Lukács, 1974: 56), indeed it is the opposite of a “living life” (Lukács, 1971: 110) as long as it can cover life with its own mask. Moreover, bourgeois mentality “demands complete acceptance of all this, complete concentration on matters which may be trivial and insignificant and offer the soul no nourishment” (1974: 56). And the question “why” can never arise in bourgeois life which devours everything, unless the stage sets collapse.

Tolstoy warns against this way of life, which people were getting used to it in those days, and it seems that reading the story in these days can be still a great advantage if only it is being read consciously and wisely, since “only conscious action can count as activity” (Lukács, 1971: 135), and “the hour of consciousness” is of high importance to

Camus as well that make him say “at each of those moments” the absurd man “is superior to his fate” (Camus, 1991: 77).

Camus and Lukács, two great thinkers of the twentieth century, seem not to have anything in common, even their existentialism is different from each other, but investigation of the question “why” and the density of the absurd life could bring them close together, particularly when Camus refers to “that denseness and that strangeness of the world” as the absurd (1991: 11), and Lukács refers to the nothingness of bourgeois life, and talks of it, not as a way of life, but of death, and indeed Tolstoy, the great realist novelist of all ages speaks of Ivan’s death, which has happened in “that drawing-room where he had fallen and for the sake of which (how bitterly ridiculous it seemed) he had sacrificed his life” (1998: 34), they are all speaking of the same thing.

To sum up the whole discussion, absurdity and death lie at the heart of bourgeois life, but lucky the minor ones who can be “conscious of the absurd” (Camus, 1991: 22), in order to seize awareness of the reality of their existence in the world, their loneliness, the deception and falsity of their lives on the stage, to get aware of the illusion of freedom, and finally to consciously revolt against it, so that they can embrace the living life consciously. Those few people who succeed to do so are the real absurd heroes.

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