Literary Theory

Biographical Criticism and its Application to Tolstoy

One of the primary functions of literary criticism is to illuminate a reader’s understanding of a text and, in turn, attempt to improve a reader’s understanding of the world. Great writers have the ability to observe and render the world in ways that many readers at first cannot fully understand, while great critics serve readers by giving them a language in which they may explicate meaning in a text. This “language” usually manifests itself in the form of a certain literary concept or theory through which a reader may be able to view the text in a new light or from a new perspective.

One method of interpretation which has long been under debate is the method of biographical reading. Biographical Criticism, as determined by Frank H Ellis involves “the relation between a written work and the biographical experiences of the writer” (Ellis 971). However, one of the common arguments in the past century amongst modern critics and readers alike is that a truly great work must be able to stand alone from the experiences of the author who created it. In essence, biographical knowledge of the author is not necessary to the genuine understanding of a great work. The questions this essay will seek to answer are; to what extent is this assumption true? And can a great work (be it partially or completely, implicitly or explicitly) still be autobiographical in nature? Furthermore, can a biographical understanding of the author help illuminate a reader’s understanding of an author’s work? Using Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich, this essay will argue in favor of biographical reading and its relevance as a form modern literary criticism.

What first must be acknowledged are two fundamental hermeneutic methods to which modern literary criticism abides - intrinsic and extrinsic methods of interpretation. Intrinsic models, like those common to the schools of New Criticism and Formalism, assert that through methods such as “close reading” and strictly textual interpretation, all textual meaning can be explicaded. They believed that meaning could be found independent of authorial intent, reader response, or historical circumstance. Russian Formalist Manfred Kridl argues, “A literary work transcends individual psychology. In the process of objectification the artifact becomes
separated from its creator, acquires life of its own” (Kridl 102). This approach had rapidly gained popularity during the early 20th century and by the middle of the century had become a sort “doctrine” for modern literary criticism. They believed that if context or any other form of external information were required by a reader, it would suggest that either the work was not “good” enough or the reader’s hermeneutic abilities were deficient. As a result, contextual interpretation became viewed by the new critics as a kind of “heresy”.

Aesthetics similarly argue this philosophy demanding that beauty itself be the sole function of art and poetics. Aestheticism urges that as little evidence as possible of the author’s pen or artist’s brush should be found in a great work, and that art and poetry should neither implicitly nor explicitly embody any spiritual, ethical, political, social, or religious meaning. Here, by attempting to eliminate authorial and artistic intent, Aestheticism attempts to eliminate the necessity for context.

In response to the rigid approaches that dominated a large part of the 20th century through the lens of philosophies like Formalism and New Criticism, the 1980’s brought about a reevaluation of extrinsic approaches to interpreting literature. Though New Criticism had all but eliminated any credibility attached to historical or contextual methods of criticism in the academic world, New Historicism and Cultural Criticism attempted to reestablish context as not only an effective means to true interpretation of text, but as one that may be more logical and practical than the methods of the new critics. New Historicism and Cultural Criticism, “seek to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time. New Historicism assumes that every work is a product of the historic moment that created it” (PO). In the case of Biographical Criticism (or, literary biography, Biographism etc…), this theory suggests that a work can be, more specifically, the product of an author’s life experiences and through a better understanding of important details pertaining to these experiences, a reader may better understand the work of an author. I believe A. I. Farkas best articulates the premise of New Historicism and Cultural Criticism when he states,
“the literary text, rather than being a fully autotelic entity that can, and indeed should, be interpreted and/or enjoyed in its solitary self, is something that can fulfill its multiple functions in a rich contextual field defined by such externalities as the reader, the world and last but certainly not least, the writer”. (Farkas 17)

However, opponents of biographical reading have long distorted this premise, and it is evident in their arguments that attack the relevance of literary biography in literary criticism. Questions demanding the significance of biographical details such as, the frequency at which an author dined a certain restaurant, used the bathroom or clipped his/her nails, though irrelevant, very often became the foundation for the arguments made by opponents of biographical reading. This inaccurate opinion towards Biographical Criticism may simply be a reflection of the new critics’ insatiable desire to deconstruct and dissect everything within a text, down to the dots above the i’s and the lower-case j’s. This assumption also failed to distinguish the difference between significant biographical context and the kind of biographical psychoanalysis it pretended to. Providing a brief summary and analysis of essential plot points from *(The Death of) Ivan Ilych* and juxtaposing to the biography of its author Leo Tolstoy, I will demonstrate a case where *significant* biographical context can illuminate a text in a way that strictly textual interpretation may not.

The opening chapter of Leo Tolstoy’s 1886 novella is temporally out of order in relation the story in that it begins with the funeral of the protagonist. The colleagues of the recently passed Ivan Ilych are brought the news of his death during an interval of a trial, and it is through their discourse that the reader is first introduced to the character of the protagonist. It becomes clear that of the many men discussing the implications his death would have to the court, only one of them, Peter Ivanovich, appears to have been an actual friend of Ilych. He is the only one who seems to be saddened by the loss of the prominent social figure while the others felt simply that, “it is he who is dead and not I” (Tolstoy). The story follows Ivanovich in his visit to Ilych’s funeral service. Praskovya Fedorovna, Ilych’s widow, greets Ivanovich with compassion and eventually leads him to the room where his former colleague lay. Meanwhile, the rest of his colleagues mingle outside discussing how
soon they may be able to get a card game started. In the time he spends with both Fedorovna and the body of her dead husband, Ivanovich is discomforted by the sadness and gloom he feels. Seeing the face of the man he once knew, he describes its expression as a repelling warning to the living, though he does not believe it is addressed to him. He briefly attempts to comfort the widow who despite her very authentic weeping, seems more concerned with discussing legal matters than actually grieving. Ivanovich then leaves the service momentarily affected by the event, but then resumes his own life without letting his discomfort overcome his social or professional obligations.

Chapters two through three give details of the upbringing, career and family life of the protagonist. He, being the second of three brothers, had been brought up through comfortable financial means and was the son of a prominent figure in the Court of Justice. Success, as he came to know it, would depend entirely on propriety. The narrator describes him in his early youth as, “by nature attracted to people of high station as a fly is drawn to the light, assimilating their views and ways of life and establishing friendly relations with them” (Tolstoy), and so he did. Very rarely did anyone find fault with his actions and should he have committed any minor transgressions or follies, they were soon overlooked, further contributing to his certainty in the manner which he conducted his life.

He married because society indicated that he should, whether or not he was actually in love made little difference, for the marriage was widely considered to be a “pleasant connexion”. He did find happiness in early marriage, primarily through the excitement of purchasing new furniture and decorating a new home. Pregnancy however, he found to be an unpleasant disturbance in the order of his life and he became negligent. Since little pleasure was to be derived from his wife, who had developed an increasingly irritable attitude towards him which he found to be unwarranted - he sought pleasure in his work. The more she resented him, the more ambitious he became and it resulted in increased professional success.

A foreboding incident in the arc of Ivan Ilych occurs soon after the family has moved into the new home. While in a state of irritation over the appearance of the drapery, he dangerously decides to climb a ladder
and demonstrate to the upholsterer what he would like. While doing this he slips but is fortunately able to cling to the ladder in a way that only causes him to heavily bruise his side. He vainly claims that his being such an athlete is the reason he avoided injury and that anyone else could have died. The pain subsided and the incident forgotten.

Chapter IV marks a turning point for the protagonist. What begins as a nagging pain in his side soon becomes the source of incessant discomfort that leads to frequent ill temper. Shortly after the arrival of the pain, his relationship with his wife begins to suffer greatly to the point that they can hardly speak to each other without conflict. During a visit to the doctor, Ivan Ilych has his first insight into the flaws of his existence. The doctor’s impersonal treatment of something as important as his health makes him feel a rush of empathy for any of the accused he may have subjected the same treatment to. He believes the doctor’s dishonesty and indifference may mean that his condition is serious. The self pity he feels is the first sign of humility seen in his character.

As the pain gradually increases, Ivan Ilych struggles to find relief. All of the things that used to so effectively distract him from the unpleasant behavior of his wife, his favorite leisure activities, had a dwindling effect on the pain. He thought perhaps he could seek answers in medical books, but these endeavors succeeded only in increasing his emotional anguish. After visiting several doctors and seeking the opinion of a number of different experts, Ivan Ilych had accepted that he may not recover from his condition. Though he did not know when, he was certain of his impending death. Attempting to make sense of his illness, he remembers the ladder and the trifling task that may have been the cause of his suffering. What he found so incredibly important to his attentions before his suffering became nothing more than meaningless stupidity now.

Despite the rapid deterioration of Ivan Ilych’s health, he was able to find one respite to his suffering through the company of a servant named Gerasim. When Gerasim would hold his legs at a certain height, the pain would temporarily cease. Not only did Ivan Ilych find physical relief from his care, he also believed that
the simple-minded opinion of the peasant contained more truth than he could find anywhere else. He rejects his family’s attempts to comfort him as falsity and falls further into isolation.

Another significant development occurs in chapter nine. Having broken through some spiritual threshold, he addresses God for the first time. Recollection of his life would follow and he now could find nothing pleasant. Even now, realizing that his life may have not been as well spent as he thought, he still desired to live and his question still remained unanswered. It occurs to him later that all for which he had lived had been a terrible deception. Essentially, that he hadn’t put his family before himself. The next time he sees his wife, she suggests that he take communion. He accepts, and receives it in tears.

In the last three days, his suffering reaches its apex. Now, he is in constant agony and cannot control his own screaming. In this time, his son comes to see him. His son then takes his hand, kisses it, and begins to weep. He now understands that it is they who are suffering and that his death has meaning in that it can end it. He then asks the forgiveness of his family. After all of this has happened, all of his pain seems to vanish. He attempts to find his pain again but cannot, and death ceases to loom over him like a predator. He feels comfort instead of darkness and in a few hours he dies peacefully.

Without any prior biographical knowledge of Leo Tolstoy, it is possible interpret *The Death of Ivan Ilych* simply through close reading. As discussed in class, the overlying and universally significant theme throughout the story is the idea of mortality. Another significant aspect of the story is the role of propriety. In his case, Ivan Ilych misunderstood the balance between his professional and domestic life because society led him to believe it was the right way to do things. As the pain worsens, his relationship with his wife worsens. Connecting the two, it can be interpreted that the pain is a metaphor for his mistaken understanding of propriety. The pain in his side initially, was a result of his doing anything it took to maintain the correctness which he believed essential in society. This is evident in the fact that all of the pastimes he enjoyed as distractions from his family now only make the pain worse. It isn’t until he repairs his family deficiency does the pain completely go away.
A certain spiritual aspect can be found in the story as well. Even without any mention of faith for the first half of the novel, it can be determined that by the end Ivan Ilych had died a converted Christian. When he first realizes his condition is serious, he first turns to medicine and medical books. He then tries to seek science and philosophy for an “answer” to his concerns, but it is of no avail. Ivan Ilych’s response to the news about his health is flawed in that he sought to answer the problem of his death rather than comfort it. This is undoubtedly due to his lack of Christian faith, a faith which holds such a high regard for familial love. His “answer” to death’s meaning is found in accepting the comfort of his family and realizing the comfort he still has to offer in passing.

Biographical knowledge, specifically of his spiritual journey, can provide a deeper understanding of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Tolstoy’s life can be divided in two based on his faith. His conversion to Christianity marks the distinction of the two. Born into a wealthy family, he grew up well educated and well supported. He claims in *A Confession*, an autobiographical work published after his conversion, that he remembers believing in God as child. However, with the progression of his studies and knowledge, he officially renounced his faith and was reinforced by his intellectual circle. He describes this period as a time when progress was at the cultural forefront of society. He and his colleagues adopted a new philosophy that designated artists and poets as the leaders of cultural progress. They believed it to be their duty to pass on as much of their knowledge possible through teaching and writing. Tolstoy and others like him profited immensely during this time, though he admits that much of the work published under this pretense was worthless. At the time, he and his colleagues justified their earnings by assuring that they made would support their creativity and in turn, could only benefit culture and progress. Though he had ambivalent feelings towards most of the literary community, he credited much of his popularity to his affiliation with it. He describes this period as being “pleasant and profitable” (Tolstoy 9).

In time he abandoned his affiliation with this philosophy though he maintained that he had much to teach the world. His grievance with his colleagues was in their failure to agree on what should actually be
taught. He still wished to teach, but he too was uncertain as to what should be taught. In the meantime, he also pursued literary perfection. It was during this time that he began to show signs of mental illness which he attributed to the distress his intellectual errands. His marriage in 1862 caused him to abandon writing in order to secure a proper family life. In doing so he found a temporary period of happiness.

Only five years later he again became “seduced” by authorship. It was in the years between 1869 and 1873 that he published what are arguably his two greatest works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and incredible literary success soon followed. Despite these incredible achievements, Tolstoy felt the beginnings of what would be a severe moral crisis. Despite having reached the apex of literary success, the feelings of perplexity and dejection he felt prior to his marriage had returned. Success had produced the startling question of what then? And, if there is nothing else, what is it all for? This is when Tolstoy realized that he could no longer find meaning in his life. Despair constantly plaguing him, he soon became suicidal. Writing and reading literature, which had for so long been able to fulfill his intellectual desires failed to provide an adequate source of happiness. He then became obsessed with finding life’s meaning, fearing that failure would result in suicide. He attempted to answer life’s question using every bit of reason he knew existed. First, he sought an answer in the many modern sciences but found only despair. He then looked to philosophy, but determined that philosophy was only able to categorize already existing phenomena by simply giving it a different name. The question was posed differently in all philosophic categories, but to Tolstoy they all shared the same answer - that death was better than life and that he must free himself from his life. Eventually he came to the realization that his life lacked spiritual substance. He was determined that faith was the only solution in searching meaning in his life. His pursuit of faith ultimately kept him from self-destruction.

At this time Tolstoy believed that faith held the answer to his life’s meaning, but he knew that he was far from finding God. In his search for faith he considered nearly all religions but was mostly drawn to the Orthodox Christian faith of his youth. He sought out monks and theologians, determined to find true faith in their profession of doctrine. However, what he found repelled him. He saw people much like himself, interested
in propriety and terrified of death. He claimed that their faith was not real, but “an epicurean consolation in life” (Tolstoy 75). He could not accept a faith so entangled in the same evils that nearly drove him to suicide.

Instead, he turned away from those who lived off the labor of others and began to observe the life of the laboring peasants in Russia. He was astounded to find joy in the people of the working class despite having to spend the majority of their existence in excessive toil. He began to understand the meaning faith brought to their lives, and realized that finding meaning in a life of self-indulgence was impossible. It was not real life. Real life was to be found in those who create rather than consume, and in those who forego all pleasure in devotion to God. He understood himself as having been more of a “parasite” than a person. He must reject all of his former reason, for it was this mistaken reason in which he based his entire life. The meaning of his life would never exist but the meaning of life, real life, was to be found amongst the peasant class. He then decided that he must live and practice faith as they do, and so he did.

It took three years of searching in this manner before Tolstoy found his faith. Having not found a significant answer to his question, he struggled to acknowledge the existence of God. However, one thing had occurred to him; whenever periods in which he believed God to exist occurred, he found happiness and whenever those periods ceased, he found darkness and suffering. He realized that even when he was most certain that God did not exist, there was a feeling that urged him to keep searching. Having no explanation as to the source of this feeling, he considered perhaps it was something beyond his intellect. Furthermore, he now thought that perhaps certain things existed that cannot be explained by even the most intelligent and determined men. He was certain that without God he could find no meaning, and without meaning he could not live. The feeling from an inexplicable source became sufficient evidence of God’s existence, and the source of his faith.

Tolstoy’s writings following his conversion, such as *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, are wrought with allusions to his revelation of faith. The arc of Ivan Ilych’s character closely resembles the arc of Tolstoy himself in his struggle to find God. Like Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy spent a great portion of his life satisfying selfish desires. In his pursuit of literary perfection he had overlooked things of greater importance, like spirituality, marriage and
family. The protagonist in the story represents Tolstoy’s revelation that his life would not have meaning unless it could serve a greater purpose. Tolstoy resolved to continue writing, attempting to convey his idea of true faith with the intention of benefiting humanity.

An aspect of the story that is nearly impossible to explicate without thorough biographical knowledge is Tolstoy’s underlying censure of modern reason. Like Tolstoy, one of Ivan Ilych’s major revelations was his accepting his entire life as a lie. His thinking was not wrong in that it acted in accordance with the demands of his life, but his life itself was founded and dictated by erroneous social reason. This, according to Tolstoy was the very foundation of the evils that were his own parasitic self-indulgence. Reason justified everything that caused Ilych to become injured, ill, and eventually suffer tremendously. Furthermore, it is evident in the text that the increased pain felt by the protagonist directly corresponded to his increase in self-indulgence. Ilych’s life epitomized the flawed and faithless existence of those who can only consume and Ilych’s suffering symbolizes Tolstoy’s struggle with meaninglessness in his own flawed and faithless existence. Tolstoy explains that for him to have found meaning he had to seek faith, and the only way he could do so was to renounce all reason. It is only when Ilych understood the falsity of his life, did he realize how to rectify his errors. Tolstoy testifies in his autobiography that the life he led, the life of the leisure class, was not “real” and though every bit of his former reason would disagree with this assertion, he believed that leading a “real” life among the laboring class was the only way to rectify his previous errors. Tolstoy eventually found faith and meaning in his attempt to benefit the working class. Ilych renounced his entire existence and sought redemption from his family. His former thinking caused him to fear death and desire life, but in foregoing this reasoning he found meaning in death. To die and end the suffering of those he loves would have gone against everything his life represented, but that life had only led to suffering. When accepted the meaning in his death, his pain disappeared and he died in peace.

It is clear that Tolstoy’s representation of Ivan Ilych’s life was meant to call attention to the flaws of the leisure class that he once himself was a part of, but it is also possible that Tolstoy wished to acknowledge the
greater spiritual flaw of society implicit in the narrative. From the beginning of the story, evidence of this is found in the reactions of Ilych’s colleagues when they hear news of his death. Their concerns were immediately turned inward, speculating how his loss will affect the manner in which promotions may be given and how the funeral service may negatively affect their social engagements. Peter Ivanovich’s behavior at the funeral also exemplifies an apparent spiritual detachment. When he tried to cross himself before entering the room where the deceased Ilych lay, he could not remember how to do it. Tolstoy discusses this in A Confession. He observed that the majority of the upper class who claimed to be believers exercised what he called a “simulation” of faith. Whether Ilych went to church or not, he lacked what Tolstoy considered to be “true faith”. Instead, he lived a life of superfluity similar to what Tolstoy saw in the pseudo-believers and non-believers of the upper class.

Ilych instinctively overlooked the guidance of spirituality in his search to understand why he was dying. His life of error and flawed instinct were a product of the upper class way of life that valued propriety and viewed faith as an obligation. He states, “I am seeking faith, the power of life; and they are seeking to fulfill in the eyes of men certain human obligations” (Tolstoy 80). Ilych’s reluctance to take communion further suggests that his life had exemplified the faithlessness Tolstoy describes.

One of the more peculiar aspects of the story relates to the nature of Ivan Ilych’s relationship with his servant Gerasim. Gerasim represents what in Tolstoy’s day would have been a working class peasant. Initially, it is hard to make any reasonable connection within the narrative for the comfort Ilych felt when being aided by Gerasim. Ivan Ilych claims in chapter 7 that “Health, strength, and vitality in other people were offensive to him, but Gerasim’s strength and vitality did not mortify but soothed him” (Tolstoy). He goes on to say that “Gerasim alone did not lie” and, “in his attitude towards him there was something akin to what he wished for, and so that attitude comforted him” (Tolstoy). There is little else the reader can use to explain his fascination with someone of the lower class. However, considering the role those of the laboring class had in Tolstoy’s pursuit of faith, it is clear that he is honorably alluding to them through the character of Gerasim. They, like Gerasim were the only thing that relieved the suffering Tolstoy experienced in his search for meaning. Gerasim represents what Tolstoy referred to in his autobiography as “real life” and the one thing he hoped to attain by
living among the laboring class. The truth Ilych saw in Gerasim’s humility and joy in life can only be understood through the lens of Tolstoy’s spiritual connection with the laboring class. It was because of them that he was able to recognize his faults in life. He claimed that his experience with the laboring class was essential to finding meaning and comfort in life through faith. In this personal spiritual context, Gerasim becomes one of the more profound characters in the story, representing essentially what it means to be good.

Without knowledge of Tolstoy’s experience with peasant class and its spiritual significance, it is impossible for a reader to completely understand Gerasim’s peculiar ability to comfort Ivan Ilych.
Works Cited


