

# TOLSTOY'S USE OF LIGHT AND DARK IMAGERY IN *THE DEATH OF IVAN IL'ICH*

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In a recent study of the aesthetics of Tolstoy, Rimvydas Šilbajoris asserts that an examination of the use of detail in Tolstoy is central to an understanding of his art, writing. "The secret of his power as a writer often resides in his ability to use an artistic language in which each single semiotic sign reveals itself upon observation as a microcosm of the whole text" (Šilbajoris, 109). As Edward Wasiolek has pointed out, the significance of detail increases in the later, shorter works.<sup>1</sup> This paper will formally analyze Tolstoy's use of light and dark imagery in one of his later stories, *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*. It will be shown that more or less conventional images of light and dark serve a narrative function in the text, entering systematically into an extended, figurative motif which comes to reflect the text considered as a whole.

Richard Gustafson has argued that "... parts of [Tolstoy's] fictions ... are not just the components or building blocks of the whole structure. The delineated segments participate in the theme of the whole work" (Gustafson, 206). Detail in Tolstoy's works is emblematic of the work as whole. Similarly, referring specifically to *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, Gary Jahn has maintained that we must read "... the apparently straightforward narrative metaphorically" (Jahn, "Interpretation," 60). The literal, often conventional images of light and dark in the story take on specific meanings in Tolstoy's text. The motif which unites images of light and dark comes to stand as an emblem of Ivan's journey to truth.<sup>2</sup>

The use of light and dark imagery in the text is not random. Whereas light imagery signals necessarily neither truth nor untruth, dark imagery initially tends to be marked for falsity and untruth.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Tolstoy uses light in two distinct senses: there is both true and false light in the story. Moreover, he uses dark imagery to reinforce the falseness of concepts, scenes, and characters. Ivan's journey to the truth, or the true light, is iconically diagrammed in his shift in perspective on the value of these light and dark images. He learns to perceive the superficiality of the false

lights and the meaningless conventionality of the dark images, while, at the same time, he is irreversibly drawn to the manifestations of true light in the narrative. In this way, the light and dark motif functions as a subtext embodying Ivan's transformation from death to spiritual rebirth.

Manifestations of both true light and false light compete with each other in the story. The trope introducing this dual status of light imagery compares Ivan Il'ich to a fly drawn to a source of light: "... он, как муха к свету, тянулся к наивысше поставленным в свете людям" (69).<sup>4</sup> The duality of light is directly stated. The versatility of the Russian *svet* allows for an interpretation compatible either with the light at the end of the black bag, which Tolstoy suggests is the true light, or with high society, which he portrays as a false light.<sup>5</sup> Although his first instincts tell him to condemn the behavior of high society, Ivan Il'ich, the fly, is eventually distracted by this *svet*, this sparkling source of light. The comparison of Ivan to a fly drawn to light is reinforced by an earlier reference to him as "le phénix de la famille" (69), which captures both the aspect of flight and the aspect of ultimate immolation or merging with light.

This key figure frames Ivan's later struggle with his pain and his journey toward self-discovery. His physical struggle is reflected in a mental struggle to differentiate two forms of light: true, inner light and false, superficial displays of light. During Ivan's journey, the displays of false light act as will-o'-the-wisps by distracting him and delaying his confrontation with the truth, or the true light. The deceptive displays of false light fit largely into three categories which correspond to the sectors of Ivan's life: his work as a judge (and the work of the doctors who attend him in his illness), his marriage, and his playing of whist.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see below, superficial light imagery describes each part, and the power of that imagery fades in each case with the progression of Ivan's illness—false light gradually fades out and yields to total darkness.<sup>7</sup>

Both Ivan as a judge and the procession of doctors who later try to ascertain the cause of his illness are explicitly described in the same terms in the text. After one doctor has examined Ivan, the text reads:

Всё это было точь-в-точь то же, что делал тысячу раз сам Иван Ильич над подсудимыми таким блестящим манером. Так же блестяще сделал своё резюме доктор . . . (84).

The repeated use of the modifier *blestiaschii* or *blestiashe*, here and elsewhere, to describe both judge and doctor connects them unambiguously with superficial, and therefore, false light imagery. The word can be rendered in English as "sparkling, dazzling, or brilliant;" as a light image, it is concerned only with the surface, or the external, and is therefore quite superficial when compared with the connotation of the word *svet* ("inner light"). Ivan is drawn to this superficial display of false light involved in the

practice of law to the same degree that he is drawn to the sparkling pronouncements of the doctors concerning his illness. Neither manifestation of light leads, however, to truth. His work does not result in spiritual life and the doctors' diagnoses invariably prove false.<sup>8</sup>

Ivan's behavior at work mirrors the way in which he must be viewed on a larger scale. At one point, we learn that he observes in his work a certain form ". . . при которой бы дело только внешним образом отражалось на бумаге" (72). Every matter is only represented externally on paper; internal considerations, or spiritual life, are not reflected. Ivan's judicial standards can be applied to his own life. For example, in his conduct, he is merely an external shell of a human. His spiritual life, or inner light, lies dormant. Given this, the use of the term connoting surface brilliance (*blestjaščij*) to describe his manner is apt. Nor is it unexpected when Ivan's brother-in-law comments to Praskovya Fedorovna: "Тебе не видно—он мёртвый человек, посмотри его глаза [: н]ет света" (89). The whole image of a man only in form, lacking spirituality harks back to Tolstoy's *The Confession*, in which the following is written: "Я отрёкся от жизни нашего круга, признав, что это не есть жизнь, а только подобие жизни."<sup>9</sup> It is similar to life only in its external form, and to that extent it is described as *blestjaščij*; there is, however, no spiritual content, no inner light or свет.<sup>10</sup>

The false light of his judicial work is eventually undermined by the pain of his illness. The pain in his side, personified in the text, distracts him in court and the result is described in terms of fading light imagery: "... она . . . смотрела на него, и . . . огонь тух в глазах . . . И товарищи и подчинённые с удивлением и огорчением видели, что он, такой блестящий, тонкий судья . . . делал ошибки" (94). Under these conditions, his work can no longer represent a pleasure to him or a refuge from other difficulties in his life. The pain, which forces Ivan to concentrate on an evaluation of his life, extinguishes this false light.

Ivan's marriage and family life are also described, although less completely, in terms of a false light. On the eve of their marriage, Praskov'ja Fedorovna is ". . . самая привлекательная, умная, блестящая девушка того кружка" (72, my emphasis). Ivan marries her, not because he could count on a "более блестящую партию" (72), but because high society ("svet") approves of the couple.<sup>11</sup> The pleasantness of the union gives way early on to discord and Ivan is forced to wall himself off ("оградить себя" [74]) from his wife and children in much the same way that he will later attempt to put up screens against the intrusion of the pain into his thoughts.

As with his work, eventually the progression of his illness and his continuing devaluation of his own life destroy any pretense he has of loving Praskov'ja Fedorovna. At one point during his illness, the text explicitly speaks of this in terms of light imagery:

Иван Ильич смотрит на неё, разглядывает её всю и в упрёк ставит ей и белизну, пухлость, и чистоту её рук, шеи, глянец её волос и блеск её полных жизни глаз. Он всеми силами души ненавидит её (102).

Despite her superficially shining appearance (or even because of its utter fraudulence), Ivan is no longer drawn to her. The consequences of the pain allow him to see through yet another false light in his life.

Before his illness, Ivan views the game of whist (*vint*) in the following terms: it was "... радость, которая, как свеча, горела перед всеми другими" (82). Whist is compared indirectly to a candle; however, as the pain makes its presence more strongly known, Ivan's impression of playing whist dims. He is no longer capable of concentrating enough to complete a grand slam with his partner. His difficulties weigh upon the other players and the whole effect is described in terms of gloominess:

Все мрачны и молчаливы. Иван Ильич чувствует, что он напустил на них эту мрачность и не может её рассеять (88).

He cannot diffuse or disperse the gloom because he has no light with which to do it. The comparison of whist to an image of a candle, a third false light, is no longer a valid one. Whist becomes another part of Ivan's life which is symbolic of death and stagnation and, therefore, of form without content.

The connection between whist-playing and falseness in terms of light and dark imagery is subtly reinforced by other means. Tolstoy makes use of the verb *vin'tit'* in two senses in the text. In the opening chapter, the verb twice refers to the playing of whist. For instance, on one occasion Schwarz signals to Petr Ivanovič to express the following: "[Шварц], очевидно, хотел сговориться, где повинтить нынче" (63). However, the same verb recurs later in direct connection with an increase in Ivan Il'ich's pain: "Что-то сделалось новое: стало винтить, и стрелять, и сдавливать дыхание" (111). A second meaning, that of "to tighten, to screw down," surfaces in relation to the pain and the duality of meaning serves to associate whist directly with the pain (i.e., spiritual death, a life wrongly lived). This association is made even more explicit when the ominous working of the second use of the verb in the meaning "to play vint" is pointed out: "Но, видно, Петру Ивановичу была не судьба винтить нынче вечером" (64). Seen in terms of the two meanings of the verb, the sentence implies that Petr Ivanovič, like Ivan Il'ich, is equally fated to experience a tightening of pain and that he, too, leads a false life. The direct link with the playing of whist only serves to reinforce the similar connection established through the use of light and dark imagery. What is important in any case is that even whist loses its superficial status as a light in Ivan's life.

The pain which Ivan feels gradually worsens and, in causing the surface displays of false light to dim, plunges his life into darkness. Given this fact, it is significant that the pain, or the consistently italicized personification

which has its origins in the pain<sup>12</sup> ("она," "её"), should be described in the text explicitly in terms of light. For example, Ivan's attempts to screen off the manifestation of the personified pronoun are described in the following terms:

... Иван Ильич искал утешения, других ширм, и другие ширмы являлись и на короткое время как будто спасали его, но тотчас же опять не столько разрушались, сколько просвечивали, как будто она проникала через всё, и ничто не могло заслонить её (94).

Somewhat later *it* returns in a flash: "... и вдруг она мелькнула через ширмы, он увидел её ... [о]на мелькнула" (95). The flashing or gleaming which *it* performs and Ivan's attempts to put up screens, which *it* has the intensity to shine through, all identify the personification as a manifestation of true light.

It might also be pointed out that Ivan's fall, which is the presumed origin of the pain in his side, occurs while he is engaged in hanging curtains. The function of curtains, to block out light, ties in nicely with the intended function of Ivan's screens against the flashing personification.

In a sense, ordinary daylight itself comes to represent a false light for Ivan. Jahn has suggested: "... the usual metaphorical values of 'day' (bright, positive, optimistic, vital) should be understood as their opposites" ("Interpretation," 63). Daylight, representative of Ivan's moribund life (work, marriage, societal duties), becomes emblematic of untruth.

With the progressive dimming of the displays of false light in his life, Ivan finds himself in darkness. Life in blackness is "... a life void of its customary points of reference" (Gutsche, 77). There is a significant passage in which Ivan tries to wish the pain away mentally and the sensation of the pain alternates with the presence of a lit candle and the extinguishing of that candle. In darkness, the pain returns: "Он потушил свечу и лёг на бок ... Слепая кишка исправляется ... Вдруг он почувствовал знакомую ... боль" (91). With the return of the pain, he realizes that his illness is a matter of life and death. He views the progression of his life in the following way: "То свет был, а теперь мрак" (91). Frightened at the thought of death, Ivan tries to relight the candle, but cannot do so. At this point the text reads: "Всё равно—говорил он себе, открытыми глазами глядя в темноту—Смерть. Да, смерть" (91). Although at this juncture Ivan has realized the presence of darkness in his life, he fails to connect the darkness explicitly with his life which has become his death-in-life.<sup>13</sup> For the time being, he remains without a source of light toward which to fly.

If light imagery is ambiguous with respect to truth, dark imagery initially tends to be associated with falseness and untruth. The use of the word "dark" in expressions like "the Dark Ages" or "to be kept in the dark about something" confirms the word's association with ignorance and untruth; the Russian *temnyj* also has a secondary meaning of "ignorant."<sup>14</sup> Of all the dark

images in the text, Ivan's own conceptualization of the black bag or black hole through which he must pass represents the culmination of the theme of darkness as negativity.<sup>15</sup> The blackness of the bag comes to stand for the totality of untruth which was Ivan's life;<sup>16</sup> black becomes an overarching symbol of spiritual death or death-in-life, and darkness becomes emblematic of a life wrongly lived and of the absence of spiritual truth.

In this way, Tolstoy uses dark imagery to emphasize the falseness or untruth of whole concepts, scenes, or characters. For instance, the insincere conversation which Ivan's wife initiates with Petr Ivanovič at the death vigil takes place "... в её обит[ой] розовым кретоном гостин[ой] с пасмурной лампой" (65). The effect of the "gloomy lamp" serves to reinforce the obvious falsity of the whole situation.

A more solid example of this concerns the character of Schwarz. Schwarz himself is continually described in terms of his playfulness ("игривость Шварца/игривый взгляд Шварца" [63]). The effect of his playfulness is, however, completely negated by his own name, meaning "black" in German.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when Petr Ivanovič, disturbed by the truthful thought that death will come to him just as it did to Ivan, hurries out of the viewing room, the text reads: "Шварц ждал его в проходной комнате . . . Один взгляд на игривую . . . фигуру Шварца освежил Петра Ивановича" (64). Translating both the Russian and German into English, the whole fragment becomes: "Black(ness) awaited him in the vestibule" or "Black(ness) refreshed Petr Ivanovič." The whole concept of refreshment is annulled; Petr Ivanovič's denial of the universality of death is linked with an atmosphere of darkness and, consequently, of untruth.<sup>18</sup>

The falseness of other characters is also reinforced by their association with dark images. For example, Ivan's daughter is seen by Petr Ivanovič in the following terms: "[Он] увидел знакомую ему красивую барышню . . . Она была вся в чёрном . . . Она имела мрачный . . . вид" (67-8). Gustafson has noted: "Tolstoy uses detail mainly for its symbolic purposes. Clothing becomes emblematic" (Gustafson, 211). A similar treatment of Liza's fiancé appears much later in the text:

Вошёл и Фёдор Петрович во фраке . . . с длинной жилистой шеей, обложенной плотно белым воротничком, с огромной белой грудью и обтянутыми сильными ляжками в узких чёрных штанах . . .<sup>19</sup> (104).

The impression of health conveyed by Fedor Petrovič loses much of its force in the presence of the dark imagery. His strong thighs are encased in "narrow black pants," a word choice which is closely associated with Ivan's frightening image of the "narrow black bag" (105) through which he must pass in his struggle with death. The frivolous nature of these two characters, who insist on preserving social graces in the face of death, is reflected in the darkness of their descriptions.

The description of Ivan's newly decorated home can be viewed in comparable terms. After casting doubt on the uniqueness of the decor, the text lists some of the contents of the room in question: ". . . штофы, чёрное дерево, цветы, ковры и бронзы, тёмное и блестящее" (79). The falseness of the decor, that is, of Ivan's painstaking efforts to decorate in a sparkling manner, is embodied in the use of the dark images. The dark images are used here in combination with the modifier "blestiashchee," an explicit signal of a display of false light.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, it is not insignificant that Ivan identifies the immediate result of his fall from the ladder while hanging curtains as "просто синяк" (80). The Russian word for bruise implies a dark discoloration and it is this bruise which is presumably the source of his later pain and fatal illness. That is, the pain and illness come about as a result of the falseness or the spiritual darkness of his life. Given this, it is not surprising that later in the text he looks into the mirror and we learn: ". . . он . . . стал чернее ночи" (89), the blackness once again illustrates the lack of a spiritual element in his life.

As a result of the initially negative connotation of dark imagery, conventional usages of black take on a new meaning in the text. Šilbajoris remarks: "In Tolstoy, . . . ordinary things lose their inert familiarity and become discoveries of some important truth about one's own inner nature or condition" (Šilbajoris, 251). As a consequence of this, the preponderance of black images at Ivan's death vigil come to represent the falseness of the event. Although the use of black in the description of a death vigil seems only conventional, the images represent more than convention.<sup>21</sup> Blackness at the death vigil is, in fact, underscored by Tolstoy: "две дамы в чёрном снимали шубки" (63), Liza ". . . была вся в чёрном" (67), Praskov'ja Fedorovna is ". . . вся в чёрном" (64). When Praskov'ja Fedorovna catches an article of clothing on the carved edge of a table during her intimate conversation with Petr Ivanovič, the text reads: ". . . вдова зацепилась **чёрным** кружевом **чёрной** мантилии за резьбу стола" (65, my emphasis). Given the occasion, the prevalence of black clothing might well have been assumed and yet Tolstoy, especially in the last example, goes out of his way to introduce the images into the text. In this way, the new meaning associated with dark imagery, that of falseness and denial of the truth (and, ultimately, of spiritual death), is allowed to come to the surface.

In his journey toward truth, Ivan Il'ich is surrounded by images of untruth (darkness) and led astray by displays of false light. Accepting the dark and the false light images as natural and truthful stalls him on his journey. What Ivan learns is how to distinguish the false from the true and this is reflected in his perception of light and dark images. Gutsche remarks that Ivan ". . . sheds old ways of looking at the world" (Gutsche, 82). Gustafson

writes in reference to *Anna Karenina*: "A change in the way of seeing the world results in a change in the way of being in the world" (Gustafson, 143). The same is true in *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*—Meaning is reinterpretation, seeing things differently. Ivan's perception of the world and therefore his relation to it change.<sup>22</sup> Day becomes night; life becomes death.

As a result of this shift in perspective on the world, darkness takes on new meaning for Ivan. As we saw above, darkness initially stands for all that is false about Ivan's life; he eventually comes to see the value of the darkness as a guide to the true light, just as he learns the value of his suffering ("просто синяк"). Thus, there is a positive element to the black bag: it is a necessary part of Ivan's journey to the light of truth. The reversal in Ivan's powers of perception begins in chapters 7 and 8. As Jahn has noted:

[D]uring the night (chapter 7) Ivan Il'ich is conscious that he faces a question of life and death, but during the following day (chapter 8) he is surrounded by the pretense that the question is one merely of health and sickness. ("Interpretation," 63).

In this context, the doctor's question in chapter 8 "Как вы провели ночь?" (101) is especially to the point: the question is how Ivan lived his life, or, in the author's opinion, his night, his death-in-life. Ivan reclaims his life of darkness and false light by recognizing that he lived it wrongly.<sup>23</sup>

Having learned a new way of looking at the world, Ivan sees through the false lights and moves toward the true light, his new points of reference. The manifestations of true light toward which Ivan eventually does fly are three in number: his servant Gerasim, his childhood, and the light at the end of the black bag. The fact that Ivan does indeed fly toward these lights is reinforced by the periodic reintroduction of the flying motif. For instance, shortly before he reaches the light at the end of the black bag, Ivan imagines his life as a falling rock: "... этот образ камня, летящего вниз с увеличивающейся быстротой" (109). Similarly, he sees the whole process of life in terms of flying and expressly states his participation in that process: "Жизнь, ряд увеличивающихся страданий, летит быстрее и быстрее к концу ... 'Я лечу' " (109). The distinction between false and true directions of flight (or between false and true light) is made explicit when he first discovers the light at the end of the black bag and sees it as his "настоящее направление" (112).

Ivan's servant Gerasim is expressly and almost to the point of absurdity portrayed in terms of light imagery. Gerasim has "... белые, сплошные ... зубы" (68). He is "... чистый, свежий, ... молодой ... [в]сегда весёлый, ясный" (96). He never walks, but jumps like an athlete: "он прыгнул, вскочил" (68). His eyes sparkle: "... Герасим блеснул глазами" (96). He even tries to hold back the "... радость жизни, сияющую на его лице" (96) in order not to offend his sick

master. His light is not only externally generated, but reflects internal truth, "радость жизни." Gerasim is never associated with any dark images. As Gustafson has suggested, his character is close to being "baldly emblematic" (210-11). As one of the main focal points of true light in the story, Gerasim appeals to Ivan even in the grip of death, even as the displays of false light, like Praskov'ja Fedorovna, lose their appeal.

It is, after all, Gerasim to whom Ivan turns for comfort in his illness. More importantly, it is while looking at Gerasim's shining face that Ivan begins to understand that his life was wrong. The text reads: "... глядя на сонное, добродушное . . . лицо Герасима, ему вдруг пришло в голову: . . . вся моя жизнь . . . была 'не то' " (110). The true light emanating from Gerasim draws Ivan in its correct direction.

In the absence of the false light, Ivan is equally drawn to another source of light, namely, his childhood. His childhood is depicted in the following language: "Одна точка светлая там, назади, в начале жизни, а потом всё чернее и чернее и всё быстрее и быстрее" (109). Given this description of childhood, it is not surprising to see Ivan regress as his illness progresses. Childhood represents a time before the introduction of false light of high society (*svet*) into his life. His reflections on life always terminate with visions of his childhood, and his foremost desire is to be treated as a child: "Ему хотелось, чтоб его приласкали . . . как ласкают и утешают детей" (98). The two manifestations of true light of Gerasim and childhood merge to the extent that it is the servant alone who treats Ivan as one would treat a sick child. For Ivan, then, childhood is a stage prior to the introduction of the superficial displays of false light in his life. His progression toward the spiritual rebirth of the light at the end of the black bag can be viewed as a regression toward the only true light in his past—his childhood and, ultimately, his birth.

As much as the darkness of the bag stands as an overarching metaphor for the darkness of Ivan's non-spiritual existence, the light at the end of the black bag represents the quintessential true light toward which Ivan must progress in search of meaning. A more concrete representation of the essence of this true light is the candle. In the realm of objects it is the equivalent of inner light. Playing of whist is like a candle to Ivan, but it is not a candle in any direct sense. It is a candle that Ivan tries to light upon the realization of the darkness in his life, and it is a candle which Praskov'ja Fedorovna brings to him shortly thereafter: "Она подняла, зажгла ему свечу и поспешно ушла" (92). Moreover, during the nights passed by Ivan with his legs on Gerasim's shoulders, the room is lit with candles which the lackey extinguishes in the morning (99). The candle is the concrete reflection of the light at the end of the black bag; it is a fly's most obvious source of light.

How does Ivan attain the light at the end of the black bag? The final

acceptance of the wrongness of his life is sparked by compassionate contact with another human, Ivan's own son. Knowledge of his humanity becomes the means of attaining the light. The text reads:

... гимнастик тихонько прокрался к отцу ... Умирающий всё кричал отчаянно и кидал руками. Рука его попала на голову гимнастика. Гимнастик схватил её, прижал к губам и заплакал. В это самое время Иван Ильич провалился, увидел свет ... (112).

The same type of contact with Gerasim soothed Ivan earlier and, presumably, the same type of contact was being offered by Praskov'ja Fedorovna as she symbolically lit the candle to disperse the darkness surrounding Ivan, a darkness he, by himself, was incapable of diffusing.

In effect, Ivan discovers that compassion and pity for others brings him to the light:

И вдруг ему стало ясно, что то, что томило его и не выходило, что вдруг всё выходит сразу ... Жалко их, надо сделать, чтобы им не больно было (113).

He sees others as special, just as he had once seen himself as special, too special in fact to be subjected to the *Caius* syllogism which states that all men are mortal.

With Ivan's attainment of the true light, the tropological motif made up largely of light and dark imagery reaches fulfillment. Ivan's relearned ability to distinguish false from true light has proven productive. The fly has completed its journey in the correct direction and is immolated like the mythical phoenix. High society is reduced from *svet* to *blesk*. External form (*blestjaščij*) is filled with spiritual content (*svet*), that is, the realization of a life wrongly lived and the need for compassion. The pain no longer troubles Ivan as its function to make him realize the darkness of his existence has been served. Gerasim's view of death is taken to heart and from figurative childhood Ivan progresses (regresses) to spiritual rebirth. The darkness of the black bag explicitly becomes death-in-life and is replaced entirely with inner light: " 'А смерть? Где она?' ... Вместо смерти был свет" (113). Ivan is able to say to himself before his mortal life ends: " 'Кончена смерть, ... [е]ё нет больше' " (113).

For Tolstoy, to live according to social conventions is to live wrongly. Ivan learns that "... any life generally regarded as good must be bad" (Morson, 130). His relation to the world changes as he sees beyond or through the conventional framework: "Recognition of what is really important in life is impossible with conventional perspectives" (Gutsche, 82). Ivan's journey illustrates Gustafon's statement: "A break with convention leads toward the truth" (411).

The literal elements of the narrative must therefore, as Jahn has argued, be read metaphorically: objects, foreign phrases and even words

themselves (Gutsche, 90) take on specific, non-conventional meanings in Tolstoy's text. The same is true of light and dark images. Conventional images of dark symbolize falseness and a life wrongly lived. Conventional images of light are revealed to Ivan as meaningless glimmers, surface luminescence, mere *blesk*. The use of light and dark imagery in *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* therefore exemplifies the essence of Tolstoy's art: the conventional becomes unconventional; the ordinary becomes extraordinary; everyday details, such as the pervasive use of light and dark images in language, come to point beyond themselves within the special context of the narrative.<sup>24</sup>

In this way, the figurative motif made up of light and dark imagery serves as an iconic embodiment of Ivan's journey toward the truth. In reference to *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* Edward Wasiolek has written, "Many of the narrative details function almost as inductive instances of stated generalizations" ("Imperatives," 320). The motif of light and dark imagery inductively maps out Ivan's gradual journey from false conventionality to the truth, from external displays to internal spiritual content. Other textual elements have the same effect. The figurative theme of motion<sup>25</sup> and the overall structure of the story<sup>26</sup> both diagram Ivan's progression from ignorance (darkness and false light/aimless activity/lengthy chapters) to truth (light/directed motion/short chapters). Conventional images of light and dark reveal themselves as metaphors reflecting the inherent meaning in the text as a whole.

Jahn has pointed out that many readers of the text "... question [Tolstoy's] success in portraying the protagonist's last-minute conversion and regard it as inconsistent with other elements in the story" ("Interpretation," 76). He convincingly demonstrates that subtexts embedded in the surface organization of the story largely set the stage for Ivan's conversion. The light and dark tropological motif is another subtext to be added to Jahn's list which aesthetically prepares the way for Ivan's transformation from death into spiritual rebirth.<sup>27</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 "The fictive world is hieroglyphic; sensuous detail so copious in the early works is now sparse and translucent. The details point to things beyond themselves" ("Major Fiction," 166).
- 2 This paper recognizes that light and darkness are primitive elements in human experience and that use of light and dark imagery is pervasive in all styles of language from ordinary communication to literature. The aim here, however, is to show the functional significance or value of light and dark images within the text of *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*. This is more or less independent of the use of the small tropes in other styles of language, in works by other authors, and in other works by Tolstoy. In other instances, the value of light and dark images would be expected to differ from the value of the same images as they are used in the text under consideration here. The light and dark images in *The*

*Death of Ivan Il'ich* which have been cited in the body of this article represent the great majority of all such images in the text.

- 3 Other critics have noted the use of light and dark imagery. For example, Jahn writes that in the story "[h]ope is fairly consistently associated with hours of daylight, despair with darkness" ("Ending," 232). To my knowledge, however, a systematic analysis of light and dark in the text has yet to be undertaken.
- 4 L. N. Tolstoy, *Смерть Ивана Ильича*. All other direct references to the text are taken from this source and will be indicated in the body of the paper. Discussing the use of metaphor and figurative motifs in Tolstoy, Šilbajoris remarks, "The initial figure of speech may be quite direct and simple, clear without any subtexts, but then it will go on producing widening circles of associations" (173). This process is exemplified here. Gutsche and Jahn have also pointed out the double meaning of the word *svet* here (Gutsche, 90; Jahn, "Interpretation," 42).
- 5 While in pre-1917 orthography these words differed in the spelling of the vowel, "свет" referring to "high society" and "свѣтъ" referring to "light," they were nevertheless homophonous in the standard pronunciation of Tolstoy's time.
- 6 Note that these three realms of false light are all essential in functioning in high society.
- 7 The false lights are extinguished as Ivan gradually desocializes himself under the influence of the pain. After all, for Tolstoy, "[s]ociety is a construct of artifices, and enculturation consists of learning to perceive these artifices as things natural to our humanity" (Šilbajoris, 150). Ivan regains an ability to perceive social sparkle as artificial.
- 8 When Ivan falsely denies the seriousness of his illness, the feeling he experiences is described as a display of false light: "... то капля надежды блеснет" (100).
- 9 David Matual has even suggested that *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* is "... thematically and stylistically a fictional recasting of *The Confession*" (124). Note that minor details may also have a place in the recasting: the "приторный и безнадежный вкус" (173) and the occasional "капля надежды" (173) connected with manifestations of Ivan's pain call to mind the honey in *The Confession* which the man trapped between two certain forms of death licks away at in desperation.
- 10 Ivan later thinks of his work as an instance of death-in-life: "И эта мёртвая служба . . . И что дальше, то мертвее" (106-7).
- 11 Note the appearance in both examples of the same modifier implying only surface brilliance.
- 12 The introduction of this personification occurs in the following line: "Но вдруг в середине боль в боку [. . .] начинала своё сосущее дело" (94). The word *bol'* is the clear antecedent of the italicized pronoun *svoe*. Others have interpreted the italicizations as referring to "a life (poorly lived)" or "death," both life and death being grammatically feminine in Russian (see, for example, Comstock). Nonetheless, what seems more important is not the direct referent of the italicized pronoun itself, but the pronoun's function in the text. See the cited articles by Kathleen Parthé for a detailed discussion of the representation of death in Tolstoy with specific reference to the use of the pronoun.
- 13 The fading of the false light images forces Ivan to confront the truth of his illness. As the false lights fade, he tries to stop thinking about death and finds that, "... всё то, что прежде заслоняло, скрывало, уничтожало сознание смерти, теперь уже не могло производить этого действия" (93). Without screens or false hopes of recovery, he is forced to confront the truth. As Gutsche has phrased it: "Failing in his flight from the ultimate horror, Ivan must confront it" (77).
- 14 Consider the following sentences: Там царит тьма, Это тёмное место в его книге, Это затемнит смысл фразы (Wolkonsky, 356).
- 15 Note that this bag image is always (and significantly) used in conjunction with the modifier "black."

- 16 Other critics have suggested different interpretations for the symbolism of the black bag. For example, in Sorokin (503–4), the bag is likened to the intestinal tract. It has also been compared to a womb from which Ivan emerges to spiritual rebirth (see Gutsche, 82).
- 17 Boris Sorokin has already commented on the significance of Schwarz's name (488), although not in the general context of the figurative motif under consideration here. Jahn makes a similar reference to Schwarz as blackness ("Chapter One," 39; "Interpretation," 35). For the double meanings of other foreign expressions in the text, see Salys.
- 18 The same process occurs later as Petr Ivanovič is once again falsely refreshed by the playful presence of Schwarz (Blackness): "[...] он поддаётся мрачному настроению, чего не следует делать, как это очевидно было по лицу Шварца" (67).
- 19 Note that Fedor Petrovič's "сильные ляжки" are directly juxtaposed to Ivan Il'ich's own "бессильные ляжки" referred to earlier in the text (96).
- 20 Although it may be true that the style of decoration, as well as the style of dress, in Russia at the time Tolstoy was writing *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* encouraged precisely this use of dark and light coloring, the existence of such a standard of taste is only incidental to the interpretation of the literary text itself. That such was the cultural norm did not force Tolstoy to include specific details of dark and light in the text. The obviously tight structuring of the text as a whole imputes artistic weight to even such minor details as black and white shades in clothing and decoration.
- 21 Alternatively, it could be argued that the very conventionality of the images associates them with the false and corrupt conventions of society which Tolstoy is always so quick to condemn.
- 22 It is interesting that some doctors attribute his illness to a "слепая кишка" (90). The symbolic implication is that Ivan himself is blind to the true nature of his illness and his life. What Ivan discovers therefore is the ability to see the world as it really is.
- 23 For example, when he reviews his life mentally in chapter 9, his most treasured memories seem false and trivial to him (see Jahn, "Interpretation," 67).
- 24 Light and dark imagery therefore also exemplify Tolstoy's technique of остранение or defamiliarization. Conventional images of light and dark, which are hard to avoid even in ordinary language, are made strange by their special function in the narrative as emblems of Ivan's journey to truth.
- 25 See Salys.
- 26 See Jahn, "Ending."
- 27 The author is grateful for the suggestions of *SEEL*'s anonymous readers.

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