

**The Vision of Death in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*: a Comparative Study**

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(Received: 3th, August, 2016, Accepted: 7th, April, 2017, Date of publication: February, 2019)

It is ironic that at this time of globalization, one can hardly discuss a subject which is not subsequently argued to be local and time-space specific. Nevertheless, one of these exceptions is the reality of death and mortality which has engaged all human beings with its august omnipresence. And the way one looks at it affects one's entire life, not least the culture. Throughout history, such an attitude has rendered an author indefatigable in the face of life's vicissitudes and has been consequently turned into an inspirational force for that person. John Milton and Leo Tolstoy are among these outstanding figures who have enjoyed such a transcendental outlook and have plucked its aesthetic fruits. Considering their seminal positions in Western literature, the present paper is provided with an incentive to have a close examination of how exactly these writers viewed this perennial concern as depicted in their representative works.

***Paradise Lost***

The thematic lynchpin of *Paradise Lost*, that is the Fall, is tied to the concept of death. Ostensibly, the reader might see a contradiction in the way Milton addresses this issue. Thus, in Book 3, God declares that if Adam disobeys His order, "He with

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his whole posterity must die” (209). However, in the last two books of the epic, Milton apparently denied what he had already posited; he expressed that death is not evil but a sort of divine bless. If one examines the text more carefully, it becomes clear that we face a paradox rather than a contradiction.

In his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, Milton enumerates four degrees of death. The first degree “comprehends all those evils which lead to death, and which it is agreed came into the world immediately upon the fall of man.” The second degree of death, Milton continues, is “spiritual death; by which is meant the loss of divine grace, and that of innate righteousness, wherein man in the beginning lived unto God” (Milton, 355). The third degree is “the death of the body” to which the toil and pain prescribed to man is “nothing but the prelude”. By including temporal and eternal death in this category, Milton is responding to those who “maintained that temporal death is the result of natural causes, and that eternal death alone is due to sin” (Milton, 362). No mortal can escape death, and only those already redeemed through the Son’s reversing of the second degree can escape the fourth which is the destination of Satan and ultimately of Death itself: “death eternal, the punishment of the damned” (Milton, 381). Everlasting torment in Hell, the fourth and the last degree of death, is the end of all those who sin against God. These four species of mortality have been illustrated in *Paradise Lost*.

### ***Death of Ivan Ilych***

*Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) belongs to the period after Tolstoy’s religious conversion and a period of anguish by the death of his brother. Trying to give a reason or a source for the fear of death, Tolstoy ascribes it to one’s guilty conscience: “the fear of death is not in reality a fear of death but of false life” (Tolstoy, 114). In the novella, the principles of the protagonist’s life are not based on ethical rightness or wrongness but what people expect him to do. Consequently, Ivan Ilych has deprived himself of any real freedom and has come to slavishly mimic social ‘norms’. He becomes so much plunged in this effete and soulless life that he forgets he is mortal like other people.

Beside the physical death, Tolstoy has depicted death at another level, moral death; the inability to see the real state of life and getting used to escape the thought of death and so entertaining oneself with illusory perspectives. This is revealed in the egotism and general lack of compassion of Ivan Ilych’s colleagues. This attitude

persists till Ivan Ilych's last days when he experiences a turning point. In his deathbed, Ivan Ilych critically ponders his past. He acknowledges that he has not really lived a good life. This is a crucial step in his transformation. The nearer he comes to his physical death, the more he gains a kind of spiritual rebirth. The whole reality of his life now unravels itself before his eyes and he judges himself without any bias.

To recapitulate, the way one perceives death leaves its stamp on every single part of their life; the way one deals with themselves, first of all, and then all other people, how they set lifelong goals, and in short how they spend their days and nights whether in parties, in courts, and in trying to get better houses which eventuates in having them fall from the ladder while hanging curtains. John Milton and Leo Tolstoy broaden their views of death and also its implications. For them, death as a physical change in human body is not as significant as the death of one's soul and the capacity to discern the right from the wrong. The latter they recognize as the true death which if it comes to a person, his or her entire life loses its value and leaves just a living dead walking on two feet in a barren garden or soulless office. In Milton's case, where this spiritual death originates from the Fall, the way out of this wretched state is having faith in the role of Christ as a redemptive force bestowed on man as a divine grace and subsequently to live in the full consciousness of God. As for Tolstoy, this kind of death can be overcome first by releasing oneself from the mundane and egoistic life which has its citizens smothered in their sequestered selves and second by manifesting acts of compassion and empathy with other people and serving them in sincere and unassuming ways.

**Keywords:** Paradise Lost; The Death of Ivan Ilych; Types of Death; Culture; Immortality.