

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE
HEALTH LITERACY
BEING-FOR-ITSELF
DEATH
MEDICAL HUMANITIES
RETHINKING BODY
CONSCIOUSNESS
BAD FAITH
ILLNESS NARRATIVES
LEO TOLSTOY
PALLIATIVE CARE
OLDING
PALLIATIVE CARE
OLDING
WELL-BEING
BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM
DIS-EASE
NOTHINGNESS
MEDICAL HUMANITIES
RETHINKING BODY

VOLUME 6
ISSUE 3

This page has been intentionally left blank.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

EDITORS

Deeksha Suri
Nikita Goel

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Md. Faizan Moquim

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Sharanya DG

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Shreya R

ADVISORY BOARD

Abhishek Sharma, *University of Delhi, India*
Angus McBlane, *Queen's University, Canada*
Craig A. Meyer, *Jackson State University, USA*
Indra Kaul, *University of Delhi, India*
Ipshita Chanda, *EFLU, India*
James S. Baumlin, *Missouri State University, USA*
O. P. Singh, *University of Delhi, India*
Simi Malhotra, *Jamia Millia Islamia, India*
T. S. Satyanath, *University of Delhi, India*
Yvonne Stafford-Mills, *Cerro Coso Community College, USA*



Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (ISSN 2457-0044) is an open access e-journal with a double-blind peer review policy. Hosted at <https://ellids.com/>, it is published under the Continuous Publication Model. *LLIDS* is conceived as a platform to engage with the existing fault lines of standard academic research through perceptive and rigorous enquiry.

Committed to promote the standards of quality research, it provides discursive space for relevant and meaningful investigations in the fields of Humanities and Interdisciplinary research.

LLIDS is published under the aegis of E.L.A. Project, a not-for-profit organization, and is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Issue Publication Date: 24 July, 2025

Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS) is a Diamond Open Access journal which relies on its patrons to continue its publication. The “**Subscribe to Support Diamond OA – ‘Pay What You Can’**” model supports the journal’s Open Access mission—to provide equitable writing and publishing opportunities to everyone. The subscriptions are flexible as per the convenience of the patrons and are acknowledged on our website. Please consider subscribing to show your support – <https://ellids.com/subscribe-to-support-diamond-oa/>.

For any further queries, please write to us at editors@ellids.com.

CONTENTS

Editors' Note | v–viii

Contributors | ix

Rethinking Body in Medical Humanities

Illness and Nothingness of Being in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Nitiksha Tyagi | 1.1–1.11

This page has been intentionally left blank.

EDITORS' NOTE

Faizan Moquim & Nikita Goel

<https://doi.org/10.71106/DIGG8409>

The origin of medical humanities can be traced back to the post-World War II debates on bioethics, with the term being coined by George Sarton in 1948. Yet it would perhaps be misleading to anchor this new field of inquiry in a particular monolithic cultural moment. The emergence of medical humanities is a multi-factorial phenomenon which bridges the clinical divide between medical science and arts/humanities, and thinks through curriculum reforms in medical education, pharmaceutical and technological advances, etc. This field promotes a critical dialogue between biomedical science—particularly the theoretical and practical issues in the domain of medicine, clinical practices, and medical ethics—and humanities as well as social sciences. In the recent decades, medical humanities has grown into an exciting area of interdisciplinary inquiry, allowing an interrogation into a range of concerns around human illness and wellness. In doing so, it deals with pertinent questions about bodily experience of disease, patient-practitioner relationship, health policies and infrastructure, narrative ethics, palliative care, suffering, illness narrative, gerontology, and medical technology.

While disease and illness are often conflated, phenomenological studies differentiate between the two: disease is defined as a physiological dysfunction of the body, a measured deviation from the 'normal,' whereas illness, in contrast, is understood as lived experience of the disease (Aho and Aho 3). Western medical science has over the centuries seen the body as a machine which breaks down. Body is a thing in its material dimensions and molecular configuration in Western medical understanding—an ahistorical and acultural material object¹—"that can be observed, scientifically analysed, and understood exclusively [through a clinical gaze] in terms of its anatomical and physiological properties" (Toombs 5). But this approach divests the body of its humanity. The objectification of the body and its segregation into parts limits our understanding of medical treatments and cures through a negation of the affective self and its role in the functioning of the body as well as our well-being. The journey from experience to education to the ethics of residing in the body opens fresh existential and epistemological enquiries challenging the conception of body as a fixed category. Bioethics can be seen as coming up with a new ecology—through its discourse on medical, political, legal, and environmental ethics—wherein the human can be seen as one with the body. In receiving the critical imaginings of the body, the field of medical humanities is trying to give the body its humanity back.

In the wake of medical humanities, illness narratives and pathographies have garnered renewed attention, fostering vigorous inquiries into the representation of illness, cure, medicine, and health. In addition, it also brings into sharp relief the triangle of patients, medical practitioners, and relatives and friends, who take care of patients. Written accounts of medical professionals, patients, and other forms of life narratives

¹For more information on body being seen as an ahistorical and acultural object, see, Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Allen & Unwin, 1994.

allow medical humanities scholars to tease out the complexity of human experience and thereby generate intersubjective knowledge where biomedicine and humanities cross-pollinate each other. The need of humanities, its intellectual and imaginative resources, to explore the practices and perspectives of interrelation between the cultural and the clinical is at the forefront of medical humanities. Broadening our interpretation of disease procedures such as counselling, therapy, and fitness have further granted new accounts of the self and personhood in philosophical investigations. Collaborative cross-disciplinary work has increasingly positioned itself to map the understanding of health practices beyond biological essentialism. The traditional repertoire of humanities like language competence, understanding of narrative, metaphors, etc. play a crucial role in enabling more caring professionals and finely tuned health practices. Medical humanities in this purview is but a burgeoning field that is poised at the intersection of culture and community specific discourse. The dynamics of the personhood of patients, while focusing on their resilience to fight illness, also invites reflections on the need for care-centred approaches towards ailments, diagnoses, treatments, and healing that take into account not just the physical body but most importantly the whole person. For it matters that *whose* body and *whose* disease the medical professionals attend to. In this regard, Eric J. Cassel maintains that it is persons who suffer and not the bodies (v). Medical humanities intervention has underscored how the practices involving human touch, love, music, storytelling, and generating narratives, among others, contribute to recovery procedures. The incursion of creative practices in patient care, informal group support, value education, and therapeutic practices have reordered the core areas that need attention in addressing health challenges. These debates underscore the transformative effect of/on caregiving individuals and communities, aiming to restore and enhance the well-being through their concern for the ailing person.

This Issue invokes Humanities to explore the practices and perspectives in the healthcare field which remains at the forefront of medical humanities, as well their intersections with the concept of self, being, care, and death. Nitiksha Tyagi, in her essay “Illness and Nothingness of Being in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*,” reflects upon Ivan Ilyich’s reconciliation with his impending death as well as his life, reading it through Satre’s *Being and Nothingness*. As is customary at LLIDS, this volume was conceived through four consecutive Issues which explore varied perspectives on Body Studies. However, all publications under the Forum Section—which go beyond academic discourse to include self-reflective narratives on the praxis and pedagogy of the subject—are published under the last Issue of the Volume; in this case Volume 6 Issue 4. Three of the Forum pieces then which come under the theme “Rethinking Body in Medical Humanities” have been published in the next Issue. There, Rosalynn A. Vega presents her digital-autoethnographic work with functional medicine, and narrates her experience of illness and recovery in “Reversing Chronic Disease through Functional Medicine: Acknowledging Privilege and Seeking Justice.” In “Medical Humanities Pedagogy: Beyond Ethics, Towards Empathy,” Samantha Allen Wright argues that medical humanities does not just mean adding humanities to a medical classroom and advocates for health literacy beyond medical science curriculums. Joanna Latimer reminisces on her journey from helping in a nursing home as a child to working as a nurse in hospitals, to then becoming a Social Scientist, and brings up with the concept of ‘Olding’ to signify

the deeply embodied and situated nature of ageing in “Autoethnographic Reflections on Ageing, Bodies, and Olding as Ontology of Care.”

We receive a trove of submissions for each of our Issues and we learn from all of them, but only a handful of them reach publication. We would like to express our gratitude to our published authors as well as those who dwelt upon this topic and gave us the honour of reading their work. We would also like to thank everyone who contributed to the making of this Issue—our advisory team, peer reviewers, and you—our readers.

Works Cited

Aho, James, and Kevin Aho. *Body Matters: A Phenomenology of Sickness, Disease, and Illness*. Lexington Books, 2008.

Cassel, Eric. *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 2004.

Toombs, S. Kay, editor. *Handbook of Phenomenology and Medicine*. Springer, 2001.

CONTRIBUTORS

Nitiksha Tyagi (nitikshatyagi013@gmail.com) completed her Master's in English Literature from the University of Delhi in 2024. An aspiring Ph.D. candidate, her research interests lie in postwar literature, trauma studies, narrative psychology, and contemporary fiction. She approaches her research with an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating psychological and anthropological frameworks to find fresh perspectives to interpret a text. By combining insights from multiple disciplines, she seeks to explore the intersections of narrative, identity, and human experience in literature.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

Illness and Nothingness of Being in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Nitiksha Tyagi | Independent Researcher

<https://doi.org/10.71106/SIWI3986>

Abstract | Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is the story of a man who reconciles with his deteriorating self as sickness besets him and catches him unaware in a materially satisfying life. This paper studies the constitution of self and how it transforms as one actively grapples with imminent death. It further explores Ilyich's reconciliation with his end to go beyond his perceived conscious reality to realize the totality of self which allows no dualities. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) asserts that nothingness haunts being at all times. Nothingness is always a part of being but the values of the time one lives in preclude this unison with a totality of self in the moment. He calls this living in bad faith.

In this context, this paper studies Ivan Ilyich's illness as the articulation of the 'nothingness' of his being which eventually helps him understand not just his death but also his life hitherto. I assert that the first section of the story is an articulation of living in bad faith and that the discovery of the totality of self is attained by Ivan Ilyich in the second part, on his deathbed. His transcendence is not so much a product of an impending death but the retrospective acceptance of its ubiquity, which placates him. The protagonist dies announcing, "death is finished." This is read and analyzed as a declaration of him having transcended into the realm of nothingness to reconcile with his complete self. The completeness of the self comes with the acknowledgment of its various possibilities but it is precluded because of the way the for-itself works: "The possible is the something which the for-itself lacks in order to be itself" (Sartre 102). By extension, it can be said that Ilyich's journey is read as overcoming the deceptive force of the for-itself. In the moments of reconciliation, death and life become coextensive. This facilitates the acceptance of death as a permanent part of life such that it ends with life itself.

Keywords | Death, Illness, Consciousness, Self, Nothingness, Bad Faith, Being, Being-For-Itself, Being-In-Itself, Jean-Paul Sartre, Leo Tolstoy

The world does not disclose its non-beings to one who has not first posited them as possibilities.

– Jean Paul Sartre (7)

Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a narrative about a man's journey towards his end. The text lays out its protagonist's trajectory which necessitates an expansion of his understanding of himself to be able to reconcile with his ultimate (un)becoming in death. This process of reconciling ontological dilemmas is similar to Sartre's theory wherein one has to constantly acknowledge the coexistence of opposite forces to apprehend the existence of a being in its totality. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* seems to offer a foretaste of what Sartre theorizes years after this novella is published. This paper aims to study the development of Ilyich's life story to understand the reconciliation of the present with the past and future by expanding one's sense of self as per Sartrean phenomenology. Furthermore, we study how different people frustrate or fulfil Ilyich's path to self-discovery and what makes them wield a different kind of influence on his consciousness. Gerasim, the boy, is given minimal space to articulate his philosophy and yet he is the one vested with the seminal responsibility to debunk the elaborate lie woven by Ilyich about his life. This paper studies this taciturnity in Gerasim's character as the ideal of caregiving wherein limited articulation allows for a breakthrough, as any utterance is facilitated by consciousness and consciousness is always in the custody of bad faith. The abortion of speech is an abortion of conscious constructs and it is by the virtue of this ability that he redeems Ilyich from his own fixed perception of himself.

To begin with, Sartre's theory encapsulates an array of ideas on ontology and temporality. This paper, though, essentially refers to his exposition of the totality of being and its relation to consciousness. His central claim is that being cannot be fathomed in its totality by our consciousness. This is explained in the following lines: "We have seen that neither belief nor pleasure nor joy can exist before being conscious; consciousness is the measure of their being; yet it is no less true that belief, owing to the very fact that it can exist only as troubled, exists from the start as escaping itself, as shattering the unity of all concepts in which one can wish to inclose it" (Sartre 75). Consciousness gleans insignificant parts from a totality and deceives the individual into believing that this fragment is all there is to them.

Sartre's delineation of the fullness of being presupposes a trinity comprising the 'existing,' 'lacking,' and 'totality of being.' There is a being-in-itself, which is unthinking yet complete, with the existing and the lacking encompassed in it. The being-in-itself has "not the slightest suspicion of duality in it [...] the density of the being of the in-itself is infinite. It is a fullness" (Sartre 74). A person is said to be living in bad faith when this fullness is decimated to a false existence by the function of their consciousness. This

happens because the being-in-itself can never exist as it is in the world; it is reduced by being-for-itself which functions through, what Sartre calls, facticity of the lived instance. The being-in-itself “simply resides in the for-itself as a memory of being, as its unjustifiable presence in the world” (Sartre 83) while the fullness is overcome by specificity of an assumed value which helps the being-for-itself create its own *de trop* foundation. The Being for itself, then, is defined as the conscious being who thinks. Facticity, on the other hand, is the knowledge of one’s circumstances or conditions which inform the being-for-itself. The for-itself, then, indicates a lack since it reduces the being-in-itself by restricting its fullness to a single value, ruling out other possibilities of existence. This precludes the realization of totality as consciousness becomes the measure of this being when the actual being-in-itself, which is a fullness, gets nihilated. Sartre summarizes this correlation in the following sentence: “The for-itself is the in itself losing itself as in itself in order to find itself as consciousness” (Sartre 82).

Now, I maintain that Ivan Ilyich maps out this journey of the self from living in bad faith to reconciling the supposed dualities of existence in his journey of (un)becoming in the text. The first part of the novella shines light on Ilyich’s identity as for-itself. Ivan Ilyich’s life unfolds, in the opening pages of the novella, as a subject of conversation among his peers who have just been informed about his death. The conversation confirms that Ivan Ilyich is a man of substance, having left behind a decent job and a perfect family. This is a man who has lived life as prescribed, bound by the values sealed in facticity, which Sartre considers the enemy of freedom. Sartre explains how “facticity [...] permits us to say that the for-itself *is*, that it exists, although we can never realize the facticity and although we always apprehend it through the for itself” (83; italics in original). This implies that the careerist in Ivan Ilyich is a reality of himself which is carefully curated and maintained. The idealization of values is the organizing principle of this character. This is best exemplified in his description as a “capable man, cheerful and kind, sociable and convinced of the need to follow the path of duty – duty being anything so designated by higher authority” (Tolstoy 172). He is who his society wishes to see him as. This being is merely a consciousness of being. His assumed being comes from the value his consciousness acquires from the external world. Facticity refers to the idealization of this value by Ilyich. This idealization is at the core of the loss of totality. Sartre believes that being is value but value must itself be divested of ideality for the being to be free. Idealization of a value begets a life lived in bad faith. The solution to this worldview is in the realization of one’s nothingness which is “the peculiar possibility of being and its unique possibility” (Sartre 79). Ilyich must expand his vision of himself beyond his material reality to get closer to those possibilities. This is the ontological problem Ivan Ilyich must overcome in the text.

Ilyich has a rather tenacious connection with the Cartesian view of himself. He knows he is enormously capable, therefore he is. This knowledge or consciousness, though, as Sartre clarifies, is incomplete because it comprehends the entire being based on the instantaneity of the moment. This facticity is based on the instant and is therefore predicated on a lack of alternative possibilities of this being. The instantaneity of his being does not entertain the alternative possibility of death or even illness. He is healthy and becomes sick in the course of the novella. This is to say that the transition from *having been* to *having become* is a narrative about the usurped value of self which was

previously assumed to be a fixity. In fact, he ponders over his death and exclaims: “How can it be? How can I understand it?” (Tolstoy 71). The predominant values of Ilyich’s culture never comprehend the undeniable nothingness of Ivan Ilyich till he falls sick. Ilyich could only be as dead as he was alive insofar as being alive only means anything if the possibility of an alternative like death is simultaneously considered. Nothingness, explained in more detail later in this paper, is the realization of all possibilities of self which leaves us with a sense of void. It makes us feel that we are and yet we are not because of the infiniteness of these possible selves. Yet, a glaring evidence of this dismissal of one’s totality is that death is a distant possibility for a man like Ilyich as per everyone who has known him. The strength of the lie that the for-itself tells itself is remarkable in the way Ilyich’s colleagues remark that he seemed like he would recover the last time he was seen by them. Life and death, though, must coexist as potent possibilities on the spectrum of one’s totality such that in being alive one is always dead. Nothingness does not follow being, it is concomitant to it. It is in this way that Sartre contests the assumption of duality wherein things are perceived as diametrically opposed to each other because, according to him, the totality does not work in a binary. Totality is a unity of all possibilities. The idea of having ‘become’ sick is impossible if one has always been all of their possibilities and the being-in-itself offers no scope of duality. The “being of the in itself is infinite” (Sartre 74). Ilyich does not realize this unity until later. The nothingness, which haunts beings, is completely obscured in his case by the facticity of mercenary lifestyles and megalomaniac dispositions. Ivan Ilyich’s bad faith is not a conscious erasure of his nothingness, of the eventuality that he too shall die. His bad faith, like everyone else’s, is reinforced by idealized values that parochialize being and preclude nothingness from entering one’s consciousness.

Cathy Caruth, in a different context of explaining how trauma works through literature, suggests that the voice of the other in re-experiencing the traumatic instance is of prime importance (8). While trauma is not of interest in this context, the voice of the other as the revelatory source of one’s own reality is an interesting concept to co-opt. This is where Gerasim’s character as the placatory influence on Ilyich also becomes relevant. His inability to contemplate life in its fullest potential is essentially decimated due to the fatigue of maintaining the facade of immortality. When this facade wears off, the anguish of wasted efforts engulfs him and then starts the phase of dejection. The voice of the other, which Caruth refers to in a different context, is Gerasim, the caretaker’s voice, a person whose existence would not be of consequence to a healthy and well to do Ivan Ilyich. This voice becomes apparent in the peacefulness of its silent existence. It becomes worthy of Ilyich’s attention, in his difficult journey, through its humility of not knowing everything, a repudiation of consciousness as the source of being. The development of their dynamic and subsequent acceptance of the non-duality of life by Ilyich starts here.

Ivan Ilyich’s journey of absolute discomfiture with his degenerating self, begins with this problematization of value. This implies that if Ilyich’s consciousness does not allow him the picture of an alternative life and if he is too enamored of his lived reality, his consciousness must undergo a change and discard assumed fixities for Ilyich’s reconciliation with himself. He is made to reevaluate his conscious thoughts after falling ill. In the part of the novel where 17 years of his married life are explained, his resilience

to marital problems and professional setbacks is remarkable. He responds fiercely when a change attempts to threaten his carefully construed reality. This is evident in his response to the lowest point in his life where he feels deserted by everyone before falling sick. He retreats for a while only to resolve that he will go back and “get his own back on those men who underestimated him” (Tolstoy 180). There were unbecoming instances in his life like the death of a daughter and the growing interpersonal distance in his conjugal and filial relationships but his sickness was the ultimate driving force which made him reconsider his values. He says to himself in a moment of self-reflection: “but if it’s like that, and I am leaving this life knowing I have ruined everything I was given, and it can’t be put to right, what then?” (216). Asking himself such existential questions is arguably the final characteristic of a fundamental shift in his value system. This shift creates disturbance but only until Gerasim comes along and with his taciturnity invalidates the need for an alternative value system. From here on, this paper probes into the change in Ilyich’s consciousness that occurs with the change in his lifestyle as he falls sick. It further investigates what makes him die at peace despite the toppled sense of self he gets with the onset of his sickness.

To expound on the nature of this transition in consciousness, we need to juxtapose previously held beliefs with the newfound knowledge of a debilitating self. Ilyich is a character who knows he is living life as it ought to be lived. He desires nothing else, implying an apparent fulfilment and fullness in life. If something felt amiss or lacking, it was quickly disregarded as a triviality. This is why, when Ilyich had signs of bodily discomfort early on, the “strange taste in his mouth and some discomfort on the left side of his stomach” did not count as ill health (Tolstoy 60). This indicates that Ilyich does well to affect a totality of being even after he is evidently changed by his illness. This resistance does not last. Things begin to change in his consciousness as the realization of his illness besets him. Ilyich, who is accustomed to objectively defining his reality, is ambushed by the worst change of events where even “the doctors could not decide; they all decided differently” (165). When he visits the doctor, he only needs one answer to put his mind to rest: “Is it a dangerous illness or not?” (62). To this, the doctor responds, surprisingly, using Sartre’s parlance, “there existed only the weighing of possibilities” (61). The facticity of life is now scathed by the ambiguity of Ilyich’s condition. Possibilities and its articulation are essential but also an inconclusive exercise. Among the many possibilities, the mind tends to accept the ones that the society approves of and which assuage personal goals. Susan Sontag, in her essay, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” articulates the rationale behind anti-art. Art is an expression of the human consciousness and how it interacts with the world. Whatever applies to art, an attempt to fathom and express human reality, also applies to the conscious thoughts of the dying and pensive man that Ilyich has become. Anti-art is the phenomenon of producing art which asks more questions than it answers, admitting ignorance. The artist must resign and admit to the fatigue of verbosity through the years. The admission of ineptitude in fathoming the myriad possibilities of existence must occur for the consciousness of language, which art represents in Sontag’s essay, to be convincing again. Sontag refers to the artist in explaining the role of silence but this essay co-opts the artist as a thinking/reflective subject who attempts to understand life. The artist might as well be Ilyich who tries to reflect on his life in hindsight. His approach is similar to Sontag’s artist. This postmodern outlook of capitulating to the irreducible polysemy of life is the same kind of concern

which Sartre expresses through his exposition of human possibilities. Sontag's artist and Tolstoy's protagonist are both grappling with "having nothing to say [and yet] seeking a way to say that" (Sontag 12).

The idea of possibility is the crux of this disconsolate self of Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's text and the source of freedom in Sartre's ontological theory. Ivan Ilyich, after falling sick, is discomfited because a new possibility has opened itself which threatens to subvert his idealized value of the being-for-itself. He finds himself straddling between the degenerating body and the resistant consciousness while laboring to go back to the facticity of his older life. The lack begins to make itself apparent now. The pain in the abdomen must be acknowledged as it excruciates. In moving from a state of denial to the state of acknowledging sickness, Ilyich's assumed perception of self as an undying man starts to wither. Relief is intermittent and pain is starting to replace it. The two possibilities always co-existed but, now, by making itself felt, the fixity of potency and wellbeing is giving way to the hitherto unacknowledged pain. Ilyich wades through life with alacrity and swallows all the hardships. His fractured family, conjugal disappointments, and professional woes are evidence of an ever existing painful side of self but Ilyich's unwillingness to concede to it could only be surmounted by bodily degeneration, of a degree which could no longer be denied by the deceptiveness of the conscious self. This concession to pain confirms that life has changed and is, in fact, capsized.

The consciousness consistently lacks one or the other possibility. When Ilyich was robust and well to do, there was nothing but the promise of life which he considered pleasant and perfect. He was "*le phénix de la famille*" (The phoenix of the family) (47). After the illness, everything lost its luster all of a sudden. He became pensive and denied sickness because his consciousness would not allow disease to co-exist with his consolidated sense of self. Ilyich has been a man of a single reality which could either be this or that, life or death. One of the two things only features as a *lack* in his consciousness confirming Sartre's claims about consciousness being a false measure of being.

While Ilyich's consciousness is beginning to consider alternatives to the existing possibility, it keeps coming back to the irresistible fixity he earlier identified with. Sartre would say that Ilyich's freedom would come about if he stopped deceiving himself by vacillating between possibilities as disparate realities. The premise of this freedom is encompassed in the Sartrean definition of possibility: "Possibil[ity] is the something which the for-itself lacks in order to be itself" (Sartre 102). Possibilities help negate the lack and reconcile with the totality of being. While one can never be all of their possibilities and experience their totality, the consciousness of nothingness which one can only comprehend and never achieve offers fulfilment. This is because nothingness is all the latent possibilities, "always an elsewhere" (Sartre 78), and if they all co-exist then nothing gets left behind but one is, also, not easily classified as a result. The unique role that nothingness plays in Ilyich's ontological recovery is explained in the function of Nothingness: "Nothingness is the putting into question of being by being that is precisely consciousness or for-self" (Sartre 79). Ilyich actively questions his consciousness, with the possibility of death looming large, as he asks himself "What if I really have been wrong in the way I have lived my life, my conscious life?" (Tolstoy 135). This is followed by anguish which is begotten by the overwhelming knowledge of one's possibilities and

subsequent freedom of the Being. For him, the anguish makes itself felt as resisting death starts to become difficult. He tells himself to think it over but in conclusion he only finds out that he “thinks about repairing his appendix yet it is death” (69). He realizes how “work could no longer conceal from him what he wanted concealed” (71). The time of the manifestation of this anguish makes it difficult to suggest that it has the same cause of realized freedom and not the loss of a life he did not live properly. In either interpretation, there is anguish because of a belated revelation of the freedom he was capable of but did not use. His anguish is, perhaps, redoubled not only because it announces enormous freedom of the totality of self but also because it comes too late. Despite this interpretation, I claim that in the case of Ilyich the anguish is rather short lived. This could be because he dies in peace, knowing the falsity of the life he is leaving behind. Now, to Ilyich, “all that had then seemed like joys melted away and turned into something worthless and often vile” (Tolstoy 84). The anguish evaporates, slowly, into fulfilment, as it makes life less desirable and death less damning. He identifies the bigotry of the people around him. Earlier, his wife’s unsympathetic demeanor towards him hurts him but he is able to forgive them all in the wake of his newfound totality, in which there is scope for all kinds of responses. Ilyich dies free but did not live free and yet if he died free then freedom was always an integral component of his constitution, which is arguably a solace in his dying days. This borrows from Sartre’s analysis on how “it is impossible to throw the negations [in this case, the negation of death and sickness] back into an extra-mundane nothingness since they are dispersed in being, are supported by being and are conditions of reality” (Sartre 21). This realization of self has to be facilitated in the case of Ilyich, and Gerasim serves to do exactly that.

Before expounding on the nature of the role Gerasim plays, it becomes important to discuss how nothingness haunts being such that life and death always coexist. The others, in Ilyich’s society, continue to live in bad faith, relishing not being dead as if it were a fixed state of being, which now distinguishes them from their dead friend. This is where Sartre’s positioning of nothingness in being makes optimal sense. Sartre says that being-for-itself, in this case alive and productive, is the foundation of nothingness because it is the consciousness of being alive, different from actually being alive. This is to suggest that our consciousness precludes the peculiar possibilities of being (Nothingness) by creating its own flawed foundation of aliveness whereas the Sartrean concern is that this aliveness is a mere contingency and thus one cannot allow consciousness of being alive to define who we are. If being alive is a contingency, it warrants the question, “Why is this being exactly such and not otherwise?” (Sartre 79). The state of being healthy is a condition not necessarily chosen, just as being sick is not. This renders all possibilities mere contingencies, one of which cannot be one’s permanent truth insofar as they are concomitant. The sickness cannot arise from an unalloyed state of healthiness. Healthiness can only cause more of itself just as nothingness cannot arise from the Being if it is not already and since forever a part of it. Descartes claims “I think, therefore I am” but he is also doubtful of this self insofar as he expresses himself as a thinking subject. This doubt which stems in the reflection of self in our consciousness is the confirmation of a haunting nothingness. This hauntingness is because of the possibilities that freedom brings with itself. Ilyich is disturbed after becoming sick because the other possibilities of life are now thrust upon him.

The realization of satisfaction is final when Gerasim, the cheerful boy who worked as a caretaker for Ilyich, tends to him without giving him false assurance of the single possibility Ilyich earlier believed to be the entirety of his being. Gerasim is the only character who understands that Ivan Ilyich *was* a potent individual who *is* now dying. He overcomes the fixity of being that others are unable to surmount. The text mentions how Ilyich is embarrassed by the stark juxtaposition between Gerasim, who looks youthful, and himself. Ilyich is empathetic towards the aliveness of Gerasim when he says “this is not very nice, is it? You’ll have to forgive me, I cannot help it” (Tolstoy 126). While early on Ilyich respects the living too much to be kind to his dying self, Gerasim is the influence which becomes the site of a seemingly impossible reconciliation of life and death; he is a young and stout boy with an acceptance for the transience of his youth. It is further elaborated in the evolution of their dynamic that “only Gerasim’s strength and vitality gave him comfort rather than distressed him” (127). Gerasim’s presence initiates a subtle interaction between the dualities with which Ilyich had characterised his life. Gerasim assures Ilyich that death and sickness will come to all and he is not particularly discomfited by Ilyich’s condition. This is to suggest that Gerasim reconciles the duality by invalidating the possibility of its existence. His aliveness acknowledges the lacking bits (nothingness or unique possibilities of the self). This helps Gerasim maintain his calm around a dying man without fearing for his own life like the others in Ilyich’s family. Gerasim, thus, does not just facilitate the realization of totality but also serves as a role model of this manifestation. He is at peace with all possibilities as he acknowledges the vastness of the human condition, even if he does not particularly understand and experience all of it. Totality, I add here, is not about being more but about believing in the possibility of more, to always believe in an elsewhere and not consider the status quo permanent. Gerasim knows his youth hides less appealing possibilities which it will transition into and he helps Ilyich realize that death is not new, it was always there, just as life has not necessarily ended. Ilyich is made to feel less alien and more human despite his dying condition. The wall between the living and the dead is decimated in this exchange which, in turn, dissolves the perceived dualities as well.

Gerasim, due to his status as a help in the house, tends to speak less and only answers the questions he is asked. A more ontological explanation for his reticence, though, is in understanding the profundity ascribed to silence by Sontag in “The Aesthetics of Silence.” Sontag maintains that art must outgrow its perceived function of being a reflection of consciousness (4) which is also Gerasim’s burden in this text as the source of reconciliation for the dying. This co-option of the diagnosis of what art must do to alleviate the soul is suitable for Gerasim insofar as he, too, is delivering on a similar expectation of having to soothe by tending to Ilyich. Ilyich is fatigued by the imposition of lies he has lived with. The association of any other value to his dying self would agonize him again by returning to the loop of facticity of the moment. His identity cannot be free with the involvement of consciousness. Words and discourse have a menacing effect in this situation. This is also because the dying are agonized by the clamor of life and promises because they cease to live in the future. Sartre in his fictional work called *The Wall* accentuates the misery of his protagonist when his dying self creates a wall beyond which nothing exists. The dying are categorically different from the ones who take care of them in this regard. Gerasim acts like he is before the wall with Ilyich. Gerasim concedes to understanding the situation of the dying Ilyich by staying silent and

offering no words of consolation or appeasement. Moreover, Gerasim's delivery of care must be of a kind wherein he refuses to articulate a philosophy which the recipient feels obliged to demystify. This is a better resolution than the din of advanced medicine if we go by the words of critics like Temira Pachmuss who claims that science has increased and not reduced the need for speculation on life and knowledge (72).

The burden of articulation is only ended when silence ensues as a concession to the insolubility of all the possibilities of self. Sontag's essay deals with this in exploring silence in its existence as a 'decision.' She calls it "the exemplary suicide of the artist [interpreted here as the thinking/reflective being], who thereby testifies that he has gone too far" (Sontag 9). Silence eliminates consciousness by admitting that "sanity is the price to pay for trespassing the accepted frontiers of consciousness" (9). Silence gives way to action-oriented care in its all-knowing conundrum where possibilities converge to confuse speech. In remaining silent and dutiful, Gerasim's youthful maturity reconciles the dualities of old and young, rich and poor, and living and dying. Gerasim's silence is arguably indicative of the impossibility of suggestions on the questions who he is and how he is different from Ilyich. He thinks death is already making its progress towards him, he and the dying Ilyich are barely distinguishable on an ontological level which cannot be deftly expressed without the convolution that conscious utterances would create. Words are definitive and delimited, they invite spurious distinctions and categories. Their omission, the silence, is the only way of placating a man who has been betrayed by conscious thoughts and articulation all his life.

The fact that Ilyich finds respite in the company of Gerasim is proof that Ilyich is tired of lying to himself and wishes to practice estrangement from his own consciousness. Sontag comments on the greatness of an artist coming from their ability to hold their silence following the logic that a "bird does not sing amidst a thicket of questions" (Sontag 4). People who cease to speak cease to understand or want to be understood. Gerasim does not expect anything, his portrayal is rather staid and impenetrable. Ilyich, arguably, finds respite in this voicelessness as it makes his transition from a self-important self to an awakened individual easier. To not have to explain anything seems to have a soothing effect as it leads to easy renunciation of tenaciously held lies without the need for any rationalization and yet being content with this paradigm shift. Death is easier to deal with when it does not have to be explained to the ones who are yet to realize the lurking force of death in their seemingly vivacious lives. Trespassing one's consciousness and reconciling with the freedom of totality is meant to be an individual journey. Gerasim facilitates this self-realization by not reinforcing the aspects of Ilyich's being-for-itself and this makes him a palatable supporter in this journey.

The post-discursive care from Gerasim helps Ilyich overcome solitude of the mind without having to align with any new perspectives. All perspectives and possibilities coalesce. In this case, the term post-discursive refers to the eschewing of consciousness by aborting the use of language or discourse and using actions to communicate instead. In Gerasim's silence, he finds the death of voice and pure acceptance of the possibility of death. In Gerasim, Ilyich sees the haunting nothingness amidst the vitality of his youth. He sees the vigor of life on the cheerful face of Gerasim against the truth of his own degenerating corporeality without the feeling of anger. Unlike Gerasim, Ilyich's wife discomfits him by her preoccupied and invigorated disposition. In

reality, it is not the vitality of the people which brings Ilyich despair, it is the denial of death in his wife's demeanor and its embrace by Gerasim that moves Ilyich in different ways towards them. Sartre confirms that lying is often a manifestation of a life in bad faith. He suggests that "the ideal description of the liar would be cynical consciousness, affirming truth within himself, denying it in his words" (Sartre 48). The dissolution of these lies sets Ilyich free. He is finally able to reconcile with his depreciating self as he begins to fight the false consciousness actively. When he looks back at his prime of life, he finds nothing appealing there. The marriage was a 'disgusting marriage.' It was alive in all but name just like all the other lies his life had been about. The new all-encompassing consciousness of the dying protagonist cuts through the rapacity of his wife's seemingly busy life to find its haunting nothingness. The wife shall die too, as will the others. Ilyich does not anymore think of life as the absence of death. Binaries have come undone.

A clarification must be made here about the nature of this assumed freedom that besets Ilyich in his final moments. He does not *realize* his 'totality' upon the onset of illness and renewal of consciousness. This, Sartre says, is impossible as we can only ever exist as a lack in our consciousness—"the being which is released to the intuition of human reality is always that to which *some thing is lacking*" (Sartre 86; italics in original). The totality is attained in the process of transcendence (surpassing the lie of the for-itself or consciousness to acknowledge other possibilities) wherein Ilyich no longer identifies with a certain type of self. He becomes free when his being overcomes the fixity of a specific value, responsible for running his life hitherto. Attaining totality would mean knowing all of one's possibilities as part of one's consciousness and realizing that totality begets freedom by rendering one's being deprived of any fixity and filled with endless potential. The for-itself is no more allowed to deceive one's being when the value is toppled and works towards nothingness. The death of desire in Ilyich makes him pity his wife whom he hated earlier. He no more idealizes living, insofar, as death hovers over it at all times. His last thought "death has gone" (Tolstoy 219) is arguably Ilyich's consciousness proclaiming that death is ending with life insofar as they are the possibilities of a single unity. Death did not occur, it ended with life itself.



Works Cited

- Baird, Robert M. "Existentialism, Death, and Caring." *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1976, pp. 108–115, www.jstor.org/stable/27505339.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.
- Pachmuss, Temira. "The Theme of Love and Death in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*." *The American Slavic and East European Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1961, pp. 72–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3001246>.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E Barnes, Washington Square Press, 1993.
- Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence." *Styles of Radical Will*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013, pp. 3–34.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. 1886. Stanford University, pp. 39–91, https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/existentialism/materials/tolstoy_death_ilyich.pdf.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

This page has been intentionally left blank.



www.ellids.com
editors@ellids.com