

“INSTEAD OF DEATH THERE WAS LIGHT”

A SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF TOLSTOY’S *DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH* AND ZHUKOVSKY’S ROOM IN THE BRASOVO ESTATE

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ABSTRACT – *The central theme of Leo Tolstoy’s novella The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886) is the protagonist’s concern with death and his journey in examining what a meaningful life is. In the narrative, Ilyich’s fear of death is disguised by a successful career and the gilded interior of a beautiful home, until a fatal illness forces him to come to terms with his mortality and to address meaning in his life. This article examines how the textual representations of interior spaces in the novella reflect the tension in the narrative and either conceal or reveal death, and how the disclosure of death in Ilyich’s interaction with the interior spaces leads to transformations in his perspective on his life and imminent death. To complement and deepen the interpretation of Tolstoy’s textual representations of space, this article furthermore explores the broadly contemporary pictorial representation of interior spaces in the genre of painted domestic interior scenes through an example by Stanislav Zhukovsky, A Room in the Brasovo Estate (1916).*

INTRODUCTION

The central anxiety of Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) concerns the problematic imminence of death and the issues that it raises in examining meaningful life. Ilyich’s fear of death is initially distanced and disguised by

the gilded interior of his beautiful home, which Tolstoy describes as “stunning”,¹ and by his successful career as a public prosecutor. However, a fatal illness forces Ivan Ilyich to come to terms with his mortality directly and, in part, through his interactions with the interior spaces of his home. Earlier scholarship on Tolstoy’s novella has delved into the various ways that it addresses the issue of dying, from the formal and symbolist dimensions of the narrative, to the psychology behind dying and illness,² and extending to the protagonist’s philosophical and ethical dilemmas.³ Scholars have also elucidated Tolstoy’s autobiographical inspiration for *A Confession*.⁴ Studies that tie the narrative of death and salvation to falsehood in linguistic or structural aspects of the novella, including metaphors and other figures of speech, provide the departure point for this article’s contribution to the analysis of Tolstoy’s text.⁵ This analysis uncovers how the changing descriptions of interior spaces in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* serve as a narrative device. Like language-based symbols and metaphors, this device employed by Tolstoy deepens the reader’s view of how death is revealed to and concealed from Ilyich, so constituting a significant aspect of his final transition towards death.

Comparing the interior spaces in Tolstoy’s novella to Stanislav Zhukovsky’s *A Room in the Brasovo Estate* (1916), a broadly contemporary painting of a well-appointed domestic interior, proves illuminating if only to further explore the meaning of interior space, and by contrast, exterior spaces, as a narrative device. Zhukovsky’s representation of a lavish interior space similarly addresses modern anxieties about bourgeois life through spatial tropes, creating a pictorial narrative that can be read like the narrative of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Although no direct link is known between the painting and the novella, published twenty years earlier, a reading of the painting in light of the novella uncovers comparable tensions between exterior and interior and, as will be argued, between bourgeois superficiality and natural authenticity, as well as notions of truth as embedded in a radiant natural light as opposed to a superficial glimmer.⁶

1. Ronald Blythe, “Introduction,” to Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Lynn Solotaroff (New York: Bantam Classic, 2004), 57.

2. See Marshall W. Jr. and Mark Bracher, “Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of the Self: A New Direction for Reader-Response Theory,” *PMLA* (1985), 342-354; James J. Napier, “The Stages of Dying and ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich,’” *College Literature* (1983), 147-157; and Kathleen Parthé, “Tolstoy and the Geometry of Fear,” *Modern Language Studies* (1985), 80-95, among others.

3. See F. M. Kamm, “Rescuing Ivan Ilyich: How We Live and How We Die,” *Ethics* (2003), 202-233; George J. Gutsche, “Moral Fiction: *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*,” in *Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich: A Critical Companion*, ed. Gary R. Jahn (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 58, among others.

4. Jeffrey Gordon discusses the novel in relation to Akira Kurosawa’s 1952 film *Ikiru*, which borrows from Goethe’s *Faust* as well as Tolstoy’s narrative in his “Kurosawa’s Existential Masterpiece: A Meditation on the Meaning of Life,” *Human Studies* (1997), 137-151. James Olney discusses the autobiographical connections in the novel and *A Confession* in his article “Experience, Metaphor, and Meaning: ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich,’” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972), 101-114.

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David Danaher, quoting Gary Jahn,⁷ insists that “we must read ‘[...] the apparently straightforward narrative [of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*] metaphorically.’”⁸ Focusing on Tolstoy’s use of light and dark imagery, Danaher reads the layer of metaphors as a “subtext embodying Ivan’s transformation from death to spiritual rebirth.”⁹ In this vein, this article’s analysis of the transformation occurring in Ilyich’s domestic space brings a hitherto unexamined metaphorical layer of the narrative into focus. This essay explores how space is a subtext that tells the story of the protagonist’s spiritual transformation and how interior spaces serve as metaphors for the falsehoods or ‘deceptions’ of material life. The very interior that was meant to keep death at bay does not in fact keep it out of sight, but rather discloses it and contributes to Ilyich’s spiritual and moral struggle.

5. See David Danaher, “A Cognitive Approach to Metaphor in Prose: Truth and Falsehood in Leo Tolstoy’s ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich,’” *Poetics Today* (2003), 439-469; David Danaher, “Tolstoy’s Use of Light and Dark Imagery in ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich,’” *The Slavic and East European Journal* (1995), 227-240; and David Shepherd, “Conversion, Reversion and Subversion in Tolstoy’s ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ich,’” *The Slavonic and East European Review* (1993), 401-416, among others.

6. Danaher, “A Cognitive Approach to Metaphor in Prose,” 461.

7. Gary Jahn, *The Death of Ivan Il’ic: An Interpretation* (New York: Twayne Press, 1993), 60.

8. Danaher, “Tolstoy’s Use of Light and Dark Imagery in ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ic,’” 227.

9. Ibid. 227-228.

10. Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida’s Haunt* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 16.

In *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, Mark Wigley maintains that the depiction of architecture in literature is first a construct for philosophical theory, and is “then subordinated as a metaphor to defer to some higher, non-material truth.”¹⁰ Although Wigley refers to philosophical treatises rather than works of fiction, interior spaces can be used as lenses to read the progression of a fictional narrative and to uncover implicit narratives relating to protagonists’ transformations. This article discusses the various representations of the rejection and acceptance of death in the novella, which elucidates how the dynamic between the material and immaterial in terms of both space and death leads to the disclosure of death to both the reader and Ilyich himself, which in turn shapes how Ilyich considers and reconsiders his home, his life, his sickbed, and his imminent death.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

In Chapter Three of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the reader is introduced to Ilyich’s interest in interior décor as a mode of social conformity: his home is “like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich.” Ivan Ilyich himself “undertook the decorating, selecting the wallpaper and the upholstery, purchasing more furniture, mostly antiques, which he

thought particularly *comme il faut*.¹¹ Full of “dark and gleaming things” which include “damasks, ebony, plants, carpets, and bronzes,”¹² the interior that Tolstoy’s protagonist creates resonates with the lavishly appointed interior in Zhukovsky’s painting, which will be discussed in more detail later in this article. Both novella and painting appear to reflect deep consciousness and aspirations of social status. On domestic spaces in nineteenth-century literature, Saskia Haag writes: “The house, both as a real and a metaphoric figure, can be considered as one of the most intriguing objects for articulating the effects of economic, social, and political changes.”¹³ Ivan Ilyich’s social aspirations ultimately backfire and his outward, material appearance reveals precisely what “ought to have remained hidden”¹⁴ when he is injured by the “knob of the window frame” while hanging draperies.¹⁵ This injury leads to a fatal illness and initiates Ilyich’s internal struggle and anxiety, as he seeks to strip away the deceptions of material life to discover what is truly meaningful.

In this way, the relationship between Ilyich’s home and his spiritual journey begins to unfold. Keeping up the “magnificent”, elegant apartment becomes a nagging anxiety, as “he had gone to such pains with the decorating that any damage to it upset him.”¹⁶ What initially seemed a beneficial gift to Ilyich becomes a source of pain, discomfort, and terminal illness.¹⁷ Over time, the relationship between his pain and his home becomes apparent and urgent to Ilyich, as the pleasantness of the interior collapses to reveal that all along, ‘It’, or death, had been hiding within those walls.¹⁸

As Henri Lefebvre writes in *The Production of Space*, “death must be both represented and rejected. Death has a ‘location’, but that location lies below or above appropriated social space; death is relegated to the infinite realm so as to disentrail (or purify) the finiteness in which social practice occurs.”¹⁹ After initially evading death by relegating it to the background and by concerning himself with the visible successes and pleasures of material life, Ilyich attempts to understand how his illness and his dying are linked to his interactions with his domestic space. What he once thought to be real and beau-

11. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 56.

12. Ibid. 57.

13. Saskia Haag, “Zusammenstimmung’ Poetics of Private Space in 19th Century’s Literature,” in *Indecent Exposures: Proceedings of the IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conferences*, ed. Vern Walker (Vienna: IWM, 2007), 1.

14. Sigmund Freud, “From The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism* (2nd ed.), ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 944.

15. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 57.

16. Ibid. 59.

17. Ibid. 57.

18. Ibid. 58.

19. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991), 35.

tiful is now false and terrifying. The walls and interior spaces symbolize Ilyich's state of mind as much as they can be seen as abstract concepts of concealment and truth. The wall appears to him a silent, frightening limit, signifying his current situation of life and death, particularly as the latter looms nearer to him. Ilyich bitterly considers how he had “sacrificed his life” for the drawing room, for the attributes and gifts that it would bring, and he tries to occupy himself again with decoration and keeping up appearances. Ilyich had been particularly proud of the old furniture purchased for the house, “which added a decidedly aristocratic tone to the whole place”²⁰ for hosting those of “good social standing.”²¹ After busying himself with rearranging picture frames and albums on a table, he loses sight of this petty activity because even within the pleasant room, “It [death] was staring at him distinctly from behind the plants.”²² Within the very interior space that once represented a pleasant life ‘*comme il faut*’, there is an underlying horror of reality, of the mortality and frailty of human life that he had been evading. Where Ilyich's life had been almost exclusively dedicated to worldly ambition and appearances, the unwelcome notion of death became apparent with the beginning of his illness.

DOMESTIC SPACE AND THE PSYCHE

The manner in which Ilyich's perspective on his home and its interior spaces changes as his condition deteriorates propels the narrative forward and parallels it on a metaphorical level. In “Outside the Interior” Peter Schwenger explores the descriptions of rooms and other interior spaces in works of fiction. He quotes Freud's comparison of “the system of the unconscious to a large entrance hall, in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals. Adjoining this entrance hall there is a second, narrower room – a kind of drawing room – in which consciousness, too, resides.”²³ The interior, remarks Schwenger, is “no heart of darkness, but an exterior space.”²⁴ He adds that it seems that there are two interiors, that of the protagonist's inner spirit and that of the house, each the exterior of the other. The “house's so-called interior decoration is really exterior decoration, an attempt to

20. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 57.

21. *Ibid.* 60.

22. *Ibid.* 82.

23. Peter Schwenger, “Outside the Interior,” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* (2005), 2.

24. *Ibid.* 2.

express or even define the psychic interior.” The domestic interior space in Tolstoy’s novella, as well as Zhukovsky’s painting, is a framing device for the unknown that lies beyond the drawing room. The painting (Fig. 1) depicts a drawing room in the Brasovo Estate, showing the room filled with fine furniture, paintings, bronze urns, and potted plants, with two doors at the back of the drawing room open to reveal a corridor leading to a brightly sunlit garden. In the painting, the main subject is not necessarily the drawing room in the foreground, but rather that which lies beyond the corridor doors in the background – a space elicited only by the contrast of interior and exterior. This addition of the garden as a second space provides contrast to the interior drawing room, and it can be viewed in comparison to the garden and not just as an interior in and of itself. In this way, that obscured outside space adds a different meaning to the interior, much like how the implicit presence of ‘It’, lurking in the dark and hidden corners of his once beautiful home, terrifies Ilyich: as Freud describes, the entrance hall, which lies between the interior and exterior and jostles those contrasting worlds against one another, is like a threshold that gives each a distinct meaning. The screens and walls

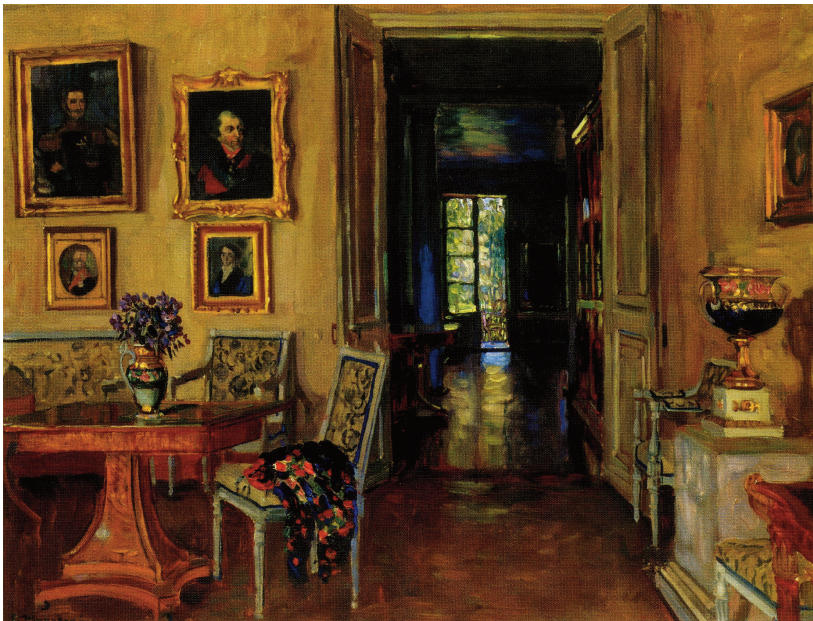


Fig. 1
 Stanislav Yu. Zhukovsky.
A Room in the Brasovo Estate, 1916
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 107cm.
 Courtesy of the State Tretyakov Gallery.

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that once gave Ilyich comfort and temporary relief by enforcing the separation of his interior and exterior worlds have collapsed, “or rather became transparent, as though It penetrated everything and nothing could obscure It,”²⁵ bringing death to the foreground.

In the article “Tolstoy and the Geometry of Fear”²⁶ Kathleen Parthé discusses how pending death forces Ilyich to confront and revise his position in domestic space and “retreat from the world into one small room, where he and it are alone in the universe.”²⁷ Soon, Ilyich no longer moves from the sofa, but remains “facing the wall, as his perception of both the interior and that of his psyche begin to transform,” and as “everything that had once obscured, hidden, obliterated the awareness of death no longer had that effect.”²⁸ After crying in bed, he pauses to face the wall and “ponder on the same question: Why and for what purpose, is there all this horror?” He confronts himself with this new perspective of fear, which reveals the great falsehood of his life: “weary of contemplating but unable to tear his eyes away from what was right there before him.”²⁹ Ivan Ilyich almost physically wrestles with ‘It’ while facing the sofa as he “shuddered, shifted back and forth, wanted to resist, but by then knew there was no resisting.”³⁰

Tolstoy himself addresses a similar situation and confrontation in the autobiographical *A Confession*, in which he describes his spiritual and existential crisis. Remarking that one ignores the first symptoms of indisposition and “then these signs reappear more and more often and merge into one uninterrupted period of suffering,”³¹ Tolstoy’s crisis is not unlike Ilyich’s own symptoms of pain, which become more difficult to ignore. Tolstoy continues: “the suffering increases, and before the sick man can look round, what he took for a mere indisposition has already become more important to him than anything else in the world – it is death!”³² Comparisons have been drawn between this text and the fictional novella,³³ and in this specific instance Tolstoy summarizes the transformation that Ilyich undergoes when his deterioration and dying occupy all his thoughts, wondering: “what is it for? What does it lead to?” As Lubkemann Allen suggests, “the nineteenth-century

25. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 81.

26. Parthé, “Tolstoy and the Geometry of Fear,” 80-95.

27. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 84. This confrontation echoes Tolstoy’s own claustrophobic sentiments in *A Confession*.

28. *Ibid.* 82.

29. *Ibid.* 105.

30. *Ibid.* 105.

31. *Ibid.* 676.

32. *Ibid.* 676.

33. Olney, “Experience, Metaphor, and Meaning”.

novel was also engaged in this debate concerning the temporal as well as spatial dimensions of visions.”³⁴ She adds that these texts present “complex and constantly revised narrative aesthetics of vision, corresponding with the increasingly rapid shift”³⁵ of the creative gaze itself as it moves between the internal dialogue of the dying protagonist and the narrative occurring around, in spite of, and because of him. The reader therefore sees the narrative of the novella through “overlapping lenses – of a subject both seeing and seen in a revealing light,”³⁶ viewing Ilyich’s story as it appears within his own internal thoughts and feelings, as well as the events that occur to him ‘outside of himself,’ reflecting the same changes that he undergoes internally. The various metaphorical descriptions provided to the reader as such accentuate Ivan Ilyich’s internal struggles as well as illustrate his death and liberation from his pain.

As the narrative progresses, the depiction of interior space begins to demonstrate death’s disclosure. The reader is introduced to the black sack that Ivan Ilyich dreams that he is thrust into, at the bottom of which there is a mysterious light, culminating in the end of the transformation and leading to his conclusion that “death is conversion.”³⁷ According to James Olney, the crux of the novella “lies in the equivalence of death and conversion”³⁸ by which Ilyich redeems himself. Olney elaborates on the quality of conversion in death when describing Ilyich’s “sudden, complete movement towards union [with the eternal and infinite] (and the change in his character, accomplished in one page, is less a steady development than a violent and thoroughgoing transformation) is a gesture of pity... for others.”³⁹ In Ilyich’s transformation, death becomes the last “transfiguring step” in his salvation, “the final conversion and ultimate transformation of the individual.”⁴⁰ As Tolstoy writes of Ilyich’s death, the act of death and dying is replaced with a scene where “instead of death there was light.”⁴¹ The aspect of space and conversion is also alluded to by Gary Jahn; he writes that the “gradual contraction of time and space around Ivan Il’ich leads logically to the story’s time line reaching time-zero and its space line reaching space-zero at the time of his death.”⁴² When we reach the point of death in Chapter Twelve, there is a “reversal”

34. Sharon Lubkemann Allen, “Reflection/Refraction of the Dying Light: Narrative Vision in Nineteenth-Century Russian and French Fiction,” *Comparative Literature*, 54/1 (Winter 2002), 3.

35. *Ibid.* 3.

36. *Ibid.* 3.

37. Olney, “Experience, Metaphor, and Meaning,” 106.

38. *Ibid.* 106.

39. *Ibid.* 111.

40. *Ibid.* 113.

41. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 113.

42. Gary Jahn, “Introduction,” in *Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Il’ich: A Critical Companion*, ed. Gary R. Jahn (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 26.

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by which the wall becomes threshold and is unexpectedly “revealed to be a new beginning, as is shown by Ivan’s sense of relief and well-being, his overcoming of time, and his escape from the confines of the ‘black hole’ into a space that contains no dimensions at all, only light.”⁴³

Although Ilyich’s house once signified that his family “moved in the best circles and their home was frequented by people of importance and by the young,”⁴⁴ it becomes a symbol of constraint. In confronting his life of ‘law and propriety,’ Ivan is liberated from its confines and embraces love, forgiveness, and death. Comparing Tolstoy’s notes in *A Confession* to the novella, George Gutsche writes that, for Tolstoy, “being oneself, finding the God within, understanding within oneself the meaning of life”⁴⁵ is important, and that repentance and forgiveness for one’s sins “is possible through self-understanding; brotherhood is a natural result of serving oneself and the God within.”⁴⁶ When Ilyich finds his hand resting on his son’s head, moments before his death, he wants to rectify his life and do something good to give it meaning. He asks, “But what is the real thing?”⁴⁷ and is moved by compassion for his family. He tells his wife to “Take him [his son] away... sorry for him... and you,” and attempts to utter the word “Forgive.”⁴⁸ Unlike Tolstoy, Ilyich does not pursue significant self-examination, but instead this transformation of goodwill and love towards his family is sudden, leading George Gutsche to describe it as inherent and true, or “firmly rooted in him,”⁴⁹ propelling him forward in his transformation.

43. Ibid. 26.

44. Ibid. 61.

45. Gutsche, “Moral Fiction: *The Death of Ivan Il’ich*,” 58.

46. Ibid. 58.

47. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 112.

48. Ibid. 112.

49. Gutsche, “Moral Fiction: *The Death of Ivan Il’ich*,” 58.

50. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 113.

51. Ibid. 113.

As he resolves his struggle, “that which had been oppressing him and would not leave him suddenly was vanishing all at once – from two sides, ten sides, all sides.”⁵⁰ The very words “two sides, ten sides, all sides” refer back to the interior space that was earlier depicted as the fearful, constraining limits of falsehood. Now “that which had been oppressing him” disintegrates in the process of conversion, and so “instead of death there was light,”⁵¹ ending that transformation from the repressed fear of death. First, death becomes a frightening presence to Ilyich, who refers to death as “It,” then finally death transforms him again to bring Ilyich disclosure and liberation. His last bodily

movements further express a sense of liberation, and as he realizes death is imminent, he “drew in a breath, broke off in the middle of it, stretched himself out, and died”.⁵² Whereas the pain of dying had “forced him,” in Parthé’s words, to retreat into a confined space where he and death were alone, Ilyich is able to physically stretch out and use this opened-up space more generously once “death is over.” As Lubkemann Allen writes, in reference to Ilyich’s transformation and salvation towards *svet*, or genuine light, the protagonist’s “refractive vision has simply opened up the way for their consciousness to appropriate and redirect vision.”⁵³ Salvation extends to the metaphorical breaking apart of the walls from all sides, as Ivan’s bodily and spiritual transformation is echoed in his interaction with his surroundings.

ZHUKOVSKY’S ROOM IN THE BRASOVO ESTATE

The drawing room of Zhukovsky’s painting is painted with attention to details such as the gold paint on the picture frames, and the pattern of the pale brocade upholstery. Light enters from an unseen source on the left, which casts shadows to the right, as seen on the sides of the framed paintings, the chairs, and the bronze trophy. The chair at the table, and the matching armchairs and sofa in the New Russian Empire style, like Ilyich’s “little chairs scattered here and there,”⁵⁴ are deftly painted, as is the varnished sheen of the wooden table top. The walls are filled with large painted portraits of men in various costumes. One man appears to be dressed in gentleman’s clothes, another in traditional Russian costume. The two largest portraits, portraying men in military uniform, suggest stability, lineage, and status. The size of the portraits and the attire of the subjects may reflect the history of the family that might occupy the drawing room and the remainder of the house. On the right side of the room, the large enamel-painted bronze urn on the pedestal reminds one of Ilyich’s dream of having “plates and china on the walls, and [...] bronzes.”⁵⁵

Although all of the room’s furnishings are clearly delineated and depicted, the viewer’s focus on the room is interrupted by the large doors that open

52. Ibid. 113.

53. Lubkemann Allen, “Reflection/Refraction of the Dying Light,” 19.

54. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 56.

55. Ibid. 56.

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to a corridor. This corridor, which echoes Ilyich's dark hole and Freud's "entrance hall," is blurrier than the rest of the pictured room. The edges of the columns, panelled doors, wainscoting, and table, which are visible in strokes of blues, dark browns, and greys, are relieved by the reflections of lighter mahogany, pale gold, lemon yellow, and bright greens in the distant garden. The drawing room's open doors suggest dynamic movement 'into' the corridor as well as a progression of events, although there is no active character or plot in a literary sense. The flowered shawl draped over the seat of the nearest chair suggests the absence of a person, perhaps a woman, who may have exited the drawing room in the same direction through the open doors, which lead to another balcony door that opens onto a garden. The manner in which the closed interior space has been opened evokes a sense of movement through the dim corridor to something that is far brighter and full of light. Painted in green, earthy, and lavender tones, the garden has grass and trees, even a garden chair. Except for these basic details, the garden is not clearly delineated, and it therefore contrasts with the "decorous drawing-room" with "specific interior décor,"⁵⁶ which exemplifies well-to-do, bourgeois tastes.

The walls, the open doors, and the corridor leading to the garden may be viewed as metaphors for a larger, hidden narrative in the painting. Echoing Freud's appropriation of the disposition of domestic interior space in his discussion of the unconscious, the walls in the painting, with their fine colour and their elaborately framed portraits, are not dissimilar to Tolstoy's descriptions of the walls of Ilyich's home. Similarly, the dim corridor, as a mysterious, nebulous passage out of the drawing room's shimmering faux-reality, leads to something far more real and exterior that is signified by the garden's natural landscape. Despite its distant position at the end of the corridor, the garden is more compelling than the drawing room. There is an unmistakable 'gap' in the painting and a mystery in the garden, which, by its sheer luminosity and brightness, draws one's gaze away from the dimness of the corridor and from the muted colours of the rest of the interior space in the painting. The garden's natural light, which contrasts with the softer window

56. Schwenger, "Outside the Interior," 2.

light in the interior of the drawing room, is not unlike the authentic illumination mentioned by Tolstoy, whereby “instead of death there was light.”⁵⁷ Light signifies salvation and liberation for the dying Ivan Ilyich, just as the bright garden seems to offer a more inviting and promising prospect than the elegant interior of the house. This prospect might not be apparent at first glance, as in Ilyich’s case. Initially, his elegant interior spaces were the source of long-sought happiness and the reward of social advancement, yet ultimately, Ilyich’s efforts to decorate his house propel him into illness and introspection, and finally in his renouncement of his old habits, they propel him into his liberation through death.

In the painting *A Room in the Brasovo Estate* and in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the interior spaces of households provide strong indications of the character of the people who reside in them. The painting’s forceful spatial recession from the drawing room to the garden relates a narrative that leads the viewer out of a space belonging to one who is “not really rich but who want[s] to look rich.”⁵⁸ Reading the way that the depiction of space functions in the painting reveals themes of falsehood and truth in the work. The exterior glitter, or “superficial glimmer,”⁵⁹ of the drawing room contrasts sharply with the luminosity of the garden, which one suspects is far larger than what is seen through the doors. In her article “Remapping Arcadia: ‘Pastoral Space’ in Nineteenth-Century Russian Prose,” Rachel Platonov explores the integral role of the pastoral, or natural space in nineteenth-century Russian art and literature, describing the pastoral place as being “identified with boundlessness and ease, both physical and behavioural, the freedom of nature being counterpoised to the constriction of society.”⁶⁰ Platonov goes on to suggest that these pastoral, natural spaces of “peace, quiet, and calm” are often depicted as the antithesis, or contrast to human civilisation or bourgeois, living spaces, adding that the very contrast itself, which Zhukovksy’s painting seems to highlight so intensely, “is in fact, the very keys to its [the pastoral space’s] existence.”⁶¹ The garden extends beyond what is depicted, while the drawing room is contained within the frames of its walls and the canvas. The construction of space plays on notions of truth and falsehood by negotiating

57. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Solotaroff, 113.

58. Ibid. 57.

59. Danaher, “A Cognitive Approach to Metaphor in Prose,” 461.

60. Rachel S. Platonov, “Remapping Arcadia: ‘Pastoral Space’ in Nineteenth-Century Russian Prose,” *The Modern Language Review* (2007), 1107.

61. Ibid. 1121.

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material limits and free spaces. By visually leading the viewer to the garden as destination, the drawing room is not only a space in itself, but also relates to another space, that of the garden and the exterior, which changes the perception of the beauty of the interior. As in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the concept of life beyond the drawing room compels a conversation about the “superficial glimmer” of interior spaces and their relation to the inner worlds of their inhabitants, whether Ivan Ilyich or the imagined inhabitants of the Brasovo Estate.

CONCLUSION

In Tolstoy’s novella and in Zhukovsky’s painting, interior spaces are depicted in a way that expresses their inhabitants’ transition from pleasant bourgeois reality, or *comme il faut*, to realizations of more abstract notions of truth, freedom, and genuineness associated with more natural, spiritual ways of life. In Tolstoy’s narrative, Ilyich’s struggle to come to terms with his life and gain the ability to love and forgive parallels the movement in Zhukovsky’s painting from the drawing room to the garden as a point of conversion or disclosure of death. The superficiality of the interior of Ivan’s house reflected his desires and hopes for a better life and improved social status and, in his interactions with interior spaces, Ilyich stumbled upon the truths of living and fatal illness.

Both Tolstoy and Zhukovsky use the interior of a room as a metaphor for the larger bourgeois reality, thereby highlighting its repression of older, spiritual truths and its denial of nature and natural laws such as death, which reveals itself, more particularly in the novella, after a series of events that include its appearance where Ivan Ilyich least expected it, behind the screens he constructed to conceal it. As Ilyich approaches death he reaches his “attainment of the true light,” a “tropological motif made up largely of light and dark imagery reaches fulfilment.”⁶² Ilyich is freed from the falsities of his former life, and in his dying he experiences a kind of rebirth, “phoenix-like, in a dramatic merging with the light.”⁶³ In Zhukovsky’s painting, the luminosity of

62. Danaher, “Tolstoy’s Use of Light and Dark Imagery in ‘The Death of Ivan Il’ič,’” 236.

63. Danaher, “A Cognitive Approach to Metaphor in Prose,” 465.

the garden brings a similar, sublime light to the interior of the room, revealing a larger, more mysterious universe that bourgeois life cannot entirely conceal, and while it does not explicitly reveal death and meaningful living as clearly as the novella does, the sheer luminosity of the garden in contrast with the drawing room can suggest a similar conversation about living meaningfully.

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