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The Medical Gaze in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

In *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, Ivan Tolstoy brings up Michel Foucault's idea of the "Medical Gaze" through a dying man, Ivan Ilych, his illness, to which he refers to as an "it," and the numerous doctors he sees as a result of the illness. A combination of these things show how the patient's personal identity can depend on the doctor's behavior towards them and their illness. In Foucault's, *The Birth of the Clinic*, he defines the medical gaze as, "[It] authorizes the transformation of symptom into sign and the passage from patient to disease and from the individual to the conceptual" (Foucault 114). For example, when Ivan goes to see a doctor for the first time, the doctor does not treat Ivan humanly and cares only for his own interpretation of the illness. When Ivan simply asks the doctor if his case was bad or not, the doctor ignores his question and creates his own, "From his point of view it was not the one under consideration, the real question was to decide between a floating kidney, chronic catarrh, or appendicitis" (Tolstoy 138). Tolstoy's use of the word real emphasizes the doctor's personal agenda with characterizing Ivan's illness. He has no care for Ivan's concerns and only wants to distinguish the illness for his own credibility. He is taking away Ivan's personal identity, and solely attempting to figure out what illness is inside of Ivan's body. Furthermore, Ivan comes to accept his unknown illness as an "it" that is a part of his being. Showing ultimate defeat with his illness, Ivan concludes, "look at it straight in the face: look at it and without doing anything, suffer inexpressibly" (Tolstoy 146). The use of the word "it" describing the illness shows that Ivan believes that the illness is

now taking hold of his identity. It is no longer characterized as his illness, but an “it,” a legitimate thing that he has absolutely no power over. It shows the beginning of the end for Ivan. Finally, as Ivan’s illness gets worse, he is no longer seen as himself, but his illness. When a doctor comes to Ivan’s house to see him, Ivan’s wife tells the doctor how Ivan likes to have his feet held up by his servant, Gerasim, the doctor replies, “These sick people do have foolish fancies of that kind, but we must forgive them” (Tolstoy 152). He doesn’t even use Ivan’s name when referring to the event, he just categorizes Ivan into “sick people.” Ivan has lost any sense of his original identity, it has been consumed with a term more generic than illness. He has been grouped together with every sick person, which makes him an individual “it” in a group. He has completely become his illness. Through Tolstoy’s story, he shows through Ivan that the medical gaze that doctors use on patients takes away the patient’s personal identity and objectifies the patient as an “it” instead of a human being.