Fyodor Dostoevsky: An Analysis of Existentialism within *Notes from Underground*

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote the short novel *Notes from Underground* in 1864. The novel encompasses the life and thoughts of a lonely, spiteful, sickly man ranting into a journal. Dostoevsky’s “underground man” is often grotesque, generally cruel, and completely isolated from other human beings. The rants of the anonymous “underground man” are brutally honest and intensely independent. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* skillfully illustrates a fundamental paradox faced by all humanity. The novel is a tremendous achievement in existentialist thought because it illustrates the existence of a single individual man who in the midst of his infinite failures struggles to exist, to define himself, to define the universe around him and to belong.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement concerned with the humanity of the individual. It centers on the analysis of an individual struggling to comprehend his or her own being in a universe that cannot be comprehended. Existentialist thinkers strive to assert full responsibility for their actions without the hindrance of preconceived notions of morality. The philosophy pulls away from logical existence; instead, it strives to attain understanding through the comprehension of what existing in the universe truly means. Existentialist thought seeks to define the individual and to find his independent existence. It revolves around the idea that first a person exists in the universe, and then must seek to define himself in order to truly appreciate the nature of life and humanity. Existentialism is concerned with “being” rather than just simply “existing.” It is a philosophical movement that revolves around the idea that the individual has full responsibility for creating the meaning of his life. Nothing except the individual dictates his
existence, and so the individual has to take responsibility for his acts. This then can cause suffering and angst, which eventually lead a human being to discover the true nature of his essence. These fundamental truths of existentialism are the building blocks for *Notes from Underground*.

The narrator of *Notes from Underground* is the “underground man;” the entire novel is comprised of his diary entries. The “underground man” explains that the purpose of his writing is self-inspection and the desire to better conceptualize his thoughts. He is struggling to understand his life, to make sense of his existence, and to comprehend the true nature of his being. Jean-Paul Sartre, a pioneer of existentialism, wrote in his work “Existentialism and Human Emotions” that “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards” (345). The “underground man” is doing just that, he’s struggling to define himself after encountering his existence in the world. His journal entries illustrate his depression, his disparity, and his loss. He is all alone, and his only hope to truly see himself, to truly understand his own presence in the universe is through introspection. The “underground man” is struggling to develop an understanding of the nature of his being, and the nature of the universe around him. He is a cardinal symbol of existentialist philosophy.

In one of the most famous passages of the novel the narrator states: “α P;≡&.8 ∃≡:.>≡6... α 2≡6 P;≡&.8. =,BΔ4&.;,8∨H.;:.>Z6 β P;≡&.8” (“I am a sick man. ... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man”) (Dostoevsky 1). The quote immediately sets the tone for self depreciating thought. The “underground man” is a sickly, lonely, debased man. He insists on painting himself as petty, angry, and hateful. The “underground man” judges himself very harshly. In an excerpt from “Being and Nothingness” Sartre writes that “the human being is not
only the being by whom negations are disclosed in the world; he is also the being who can take negative attitudes toward himself” (369). Sartre theorizes that some men, in order to make the negative a part of their subjectivity “establish their human personality as a perpetual negation” (370). The underground man has done just that. He exists in a perpetual state of self negation. The “underground man” holds on to only one positive characteristic, his intelligence. He prides himself on being intelligent because without it he is lost. His ability to profoundly introspect allows him the possibility of existential evolution.

The “underground man” struggles to exist and belong in a world in which he clearly does not. He attempts to define himself in some way and comes to the conclusion that he cannot, that he was never considered a concrete thing by himself or anyone around him. “=, Η≡:, 8≅2:Ζ<, ≥≡ ∀0, 4 4P,< >, ΦΦ<:, Φ*:∀Η::Φβ: >4 2:Ζ<, >4 4ΔZ<, >4 B≡:, Π≡<, >4 P,ΦΗ>Ζ<, >4 (,Δ≡, <, >4 ∀Φ,8≡<Z<” (“I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect”) (Dostoevsky 1). The author of the diary struggles because he is unable to define himself, or posit himself into the known universe. He insinuates that he has given up trying to do so and says he comforts himself with “Φ,Η,Τ,>4, ,PΗ≡ 6/<>Z6 P,≡&8 4 >, ≡0,Η Φ,Δ::,2≡ P,<>4ΩΦ**: Φ*,::∀Η::Φβ, ∀ *,::∀,ΗΦβ Ρ,<>4ΩΦ**: Η≡:, 8≡ ∀ΩΔ8” (“the consolation that an intelligent man cannot become anything seriously, and it is only a fool who becomes anything”) (1). Sartre wrote in “Being and Nothingness” that “consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being” (369). Despite the “underground man’s” inherent intelligence
and intuition he is still very lost. He appears to be trapped in a world he cannot define, as a person he cannot understand. He is in fact a being conscious of the nothingness of his being.

In addition to the “underground man’s” state of confusion he is engulfed in notions of suffering. In “Existentialism and Human Emotions” Sartre states that there is no escape from anguish, and that anguish leads to quietism and inaction. There is certainly no escape from anguish for the underground man, whose constant state of suffering has in-fact left him secluded in his dingy apartment, echoing the existential fundamentals of suffering and angst. The fact that the “underground man” believes that to be conscious is to suffer illustrates the inherent torment of his existence. “I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness - a real thorough-going illness”) (Dostoevsky 2), the author states to his non-existing audience. Furthermore, the “underground man” insists that an actual enjoyment can be gained from suffering. “In despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of one’s position”) (2). The “underground man” in his hopelessness seems to give up because he cannot define himself or the world around him. Because he cannot belong he surrenders to a state of withdrawal. In that state he feels a sense of belonging. Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and a widely regarded existentialist, wrote in “The Sickness unto Death:” “...the kind of despair is over one’s weakness; the despairing individual does not will to be himself. But
if the person in despair goes one single dialectical step further, if he realizes why he does not will to be himself, then there is a shift, then there is defiance, and this is the case precisely because in despair he wills to be himself...” (98). The “underground man” reaches this dialectical step. In that moment of despair, shame, and hopelessness he feels relief and understanding, he then feels enjoyment. “α *≡ H≡ (≡≡N≡*4; PH≡ ≡ξ∅ξ∀: 8∀8≡,-H≡ H∀6>≡, >,>≡Δ<∀::>≡, B≡*:>: 8≡, >∀Φ:∀0*,>: 4Π, &≡2&Δ∀ξ∀H.: Φβ, ∃Z&∀:≡, & 4>θ ≡ (∀*P∀6Tθ B,H Δ≡Δ(Φ8θ ≡>≡P.: 8 Φ,Ξ, & ν(Ξ: 4 Φ4;>≡ Φ2>∀&∀H:., PH≡ &≡H 4 Φ, (≡*β β Φ*,:∀:≡BβH:. (∀*≡ΦH:. PH≡ Φ*,:∀>≡≡≡ ≡BβH:-H∀84 >48∀8 >, &≡Δ≡H4T:., 4 &>θHD,>≡, H∀6>≡, (ΔZ2H:., (ΔZ2H:. Φ,Ξβ 2∀ ⊥H≡ 2θ∃∀4<4, B4:4H:. 4 Φ≡Φ∀H:. Φ,Ξβ *≡ H≡ (≡, PH≡ (≡Δ,Ρ:. ≡∃Δ∀ξ∀:∀Φ:. >∀8≡,Π & 8∀8θ ≡H≡ B≡2Δ>θ , BΔ≡8;βHθ − Φ:∀≡ΦH:. 4 >∀8≡,Π − & Δ,T4H:.;>≡, Φ,Δ:.;2>≡, >∀Φ:∀0*,>4!.” (“I got to the point of feeling a sort of secret abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness, and at last -- into positive real enjoyment!”) (Dostoevsky 2).

Throughout his diary the “underground man” immerses himself in the paradox of free will and the trappings of inertia. He states that “%,*:. BΔβ<≡6, 2∀8≡,>Z6, >,B≡ΦΔ,*ΦH&.,>Z6 B:≡* Φ≡2>∀>4β — ⊥H≡ 4>,ΔΠ4β” (“the legitimate fruit of consciousness is inertia”) (5). He writes that consciousness by nature produces movement, which
abides by the laws of nature. People act in accordance to nature and define themselves through their actions. The writer claims that this is limited and stupid. He writes that nature controls the being, and the being has no true individuality or freedom. He moves, inertia pushes him, yet he is only a slave to the world in which he resides. The “underground man” insists that he longs for the ability to give up and give over to the will of the unknown. He praises inaction, and wishes he could have been a lazy sluggard, and had considered this his vocation. The “underground man’s” succumbing to nature is fundamentally anti-existentialist. The narrator becomes overpowered by his very own intense individualism and philosophically collapses. Sartre wrote in “Existentialism and Human Emotions” that “man is nothing else but what he makes of himself, such is the first principle of existentialism...man will be what he will have planned to be” (345). The “underground man’s” sudden infatuation with inertia and his surrender to nature is a fundamental betrayal of existentialism. Precisely for this reason is his return to the notion of free will and ultimate personal responsibility so triumphant.

The “underground man” becomes disenchanted with the idea of inaction and surrender; instead he becomes inflamed with the notion of free will. Suddenly this deprecated, shameful, sickly “underground man” is transformed into an activist for free will, triumphantly forsaking inaction. His diary entries become laced with passion and desire. The author departs from his want to belong and to be defined. Instead he longs for true independence, for free will. He argues against the idea that men follow the rules of nature to their benefit. He states that those who adhere in acting in ways that are beneficial and virtuous are simply helping to build their own
prison because rational thought limits one’s ability to act freely. The author champions the ideas of living free from the labels of good and bad, right and wrong. “+ΦΗ:.. ≡*4> H:..:8≡ Φ:θΡ∀6, H:..:8≡ ≡*4>, 8≡(*∀ P:;≡&.,8 ⇐≡0,H >∀Δ≡P;≡, Φ≡2>∀H:..:>≡ B≡0,;∀H:.. Φ,∃, *∀0, &Δ,*≡≡(≡, (:θB≡≡(≡, *∀0, (:θB,6T,(≡, ∀ 4<<;≡: PH≡∃ 4<,H: BΔ∀&≡ B≡0,;∀H:.. Φ,∃, *∀0, 4 (:θB,6T,(≡ 4>, ∀ZH:.. Φ&β2∀>>Z< ≡∃β2∀>>≡ΦΗ:..: −0,;∀H:.. Φ,∃, ≡*>≡≡≡(≡ H≡:..:8≡ θ<>≡≡(≡” (“There is one case, one only, when man may consciously, purposely, desire what is injurious to him, what is stupid, very stupid—simply in order to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible”) (Dostoevsky 8). He states that what man truly wants above all else is independence regardless of cost or suffering. The author writes “3 Φ P,(≡ ΔH≡ &2β:4 &Φ, ΔH4 <θ*Δ,ΠΖ, PH≡ P:;≡&.,8θ >∀*≡ 8∀8≡(≡−H≡ >≡Δ<∀:.>≡(≡, 8∀8≡(≡−H≡ *≡∃Δ≡*,H:..:>≡≡≡≡≡(≡ N≡H,>4β? E P,(≡ ΔH≡ >,BΔ,<,>>≡ &≡≡≡Δ∀24:4 ≡>4, PH≡ P:;≡&.,8θ >∀*≡ >,BΔ,<,>>≡ 3:∀(≡Δ∀2θ<>≡ &Z≡≡(≡≡N≡H,>≡:β? Θ:;≡&.,8θ >∀*≡ — ≡*>≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡обытия

Page 17

At his core the “underground man” wants simply to act in a way that is free from morality,
obligation, or self-preservation. The “underground man” is the human manifestation of the first and most important tenet of existentialism.

It is precisely at this point that the novel enters the realm of concrete reality. The “underground man” recalls an instance when he wakes up with a prostitute. The author forces the young girl to look introspectively at her life. He confronts her and illustrates to her the truly hideous nature of her existence. He attempts to convince her to quit her current position and to find love. For the first time in the novel the author speaks of love. It is shocking, and a high contrast to the rest of the novel. The author states: “(Love! But that’s everything, you know, it’s a priceless diamond, it’s a maiden’s treasure, love—why, a man would be ready to give his soul, to face death to gain that love)” (Dostoevsky 19). As he tries to convince the young girl that there is hope in love, he also seems to convince himself. He transcends his despair, he seems to actualize, and seems to find the desire for love.

This hope is almost instantly shattered. As quickly as he rises above his depraved condition he plummets back down. When the young girl shows up at his home he is instantly cruel to her. To prove to the two of them that he is dominant and powerful he terrorizes her, uses her, debases her and throws her out into the street. He says after all is done: “(‘I was incapable of love, for I repeat, with me
loving meant tyrannizing and showing my moral superiority”) (Dostoevsky 21). After professing that salvation lies in love, the author asserts that he is incapable of love, and is only capable of cruelty.

The novel closes as the author professes that all that he has written is an evil memory. The hope that existed while he was talking to the young girl dissipates. All that is left in the end is the “underground man” once again alone in his corner. The author states that he has an infinite amount of evil memories and that he regrets ever writing the diary: “Α≜8Δ∀6>,6<,Δ,<>,:∃Ζ:≜ΦΗΖ∗>≜,ΦΗ∀:≜∃ΖΗ≜,⊥Η≜ϑ0>,:4Η,Δ∀ΗδΔ∀, ∀4ΦΒΔ∀&4Η:,::≜, >∀8∀2∀>4,” (“I have felt ashamed all the time I’ve been writing this story; so it’s hardly literature so much as a corrective punishment”) (Dostoevsky 21). As the diary comes to a close the author is still suffering, still lost, still alone, and feels no better off than when he started. However, he is in fact better off. Through his struggle to comprehend his humanity, his existence and the universe around him, he truly sees himself. In his anguish he ceases to be engulfed in the details of his existence, and instead develops an oneness with his true being. Finally, although he does not comprehend the universe around him, he is in fact conscious that the universe exists. He is not lost or inhuman. He is in fact profoundly human, and an extreme individual. Through his struggle he comprehends his being and does so through his own understanding, while also assuming responsibility for his actions. The “underground man” is a true example of the humanity of the individual, an individual struggling with the nature of his being, with his existence and with the universe around him.
The “underground man” struggles to define himself, and to place himself into the world, into a reality in which he feels he does not belong. What makes this novel unique is the infinite ability and desire the “underground man” possesses to indulge in introspection. He struggles to attain a sense of connection with the outside world, while simultaneously demanding free will and independence. He yearns to exist free from morality and subjugation to basic human nature. His failure to crawl out of the underground only adds levels of dimension to his struggle, and to the novel as an existentialist work. The “underground man” never escapes his suffering and alienation. At its core his failure is caused by his paradox of need. He yearns to belong and yet demands to be independent. This is why *Notes from Underground* is an important contribution to the existentialism movement. The diary of the “underground man” is a window into the true nature of existentialism.
Works Cited


