

*Notes From Underground*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Reviewed by Ollie Hensgens (Literary Arts 2024)

He is something not quite like us. Smarter perhaps, he watches us from the underground, through worn-down gaps in the floorboard. Into the depths of a character whose psyche deteriorates in a twenty-year span, *The Underground Man* is sick and relishes in it. He feels superior to the stupid for being conscious, but inferior for being isolated. Fyodor Dostoevsky shows us how to relate to a man we know is cruel, in his novel *Notes From Underground*.

Our novel is split into two sections, the first being the notes, written by the Underground Man. For 41 pages we read his monologue, as he weaves us through contradicting philosophies and beliefs about himself. The Underground Man is isolated and sick. He is 40 years old and a retired veteran, living in St. Petersburg Russia. His health deteriorates, both physically and mentally, as he lives in recluse, refusing help. Our second section recalls anecdotes from his time in Russia's civil service, at 24, where we come to understand where his philosophies came from.

The Underground Man is more intelligent than others, more 'conscious'. Throughout the novel, we read his disdain for the stupidity of the people around him, whom he feels superior to. At the same time, he feels inferior to them, because his consciousness prevents him from taking action. He compares himself to a mouse, feeling a need for revenge, but having too many doubts to act on it, so he retreats to his mouse-hole.

The Underground Man craves connection, but because of his 'lack of action', he finds himself struggling to build relationships with others. In the first section, we learn

that the Underground Man has given up completely on socializing, he is cynical of society and himself, so he shuts himself away in his apartment. In the second section, our character is still cynical, but hopeful. He is socially inept, which we learn from his conversations with his peers. He wants interactions with others, but acts hostile to them, ruining any friendship that could have been.

The Underground Man has very extreme emotions. He has a lot of self-hatred and guilt, for which he projects onto the people he meets in the second section. He feels a lot of shame. He knows he is more conscious than others, but is ashamed for feeling so. He feels ashamed for the way he treats others, people he wants to have friendships with. He feels more intelligent than the people around him, insulting their intelligence, while also feeling ashamed for feeling smarter than them.

These feelings of self-hatred manifest in a pleasure he takes in his pain. He knows his health is spiraling, both physically and mentally. Though he refuses help, out of spite. He purposefully hurts the people he wants relationships with, even though he feels guilty for it. He feels alienated by and from society, but he perpetuates his isolation on his own. And by the time he is 40, he has completely shut himself off from society, reverting to looking upon society through 'cracks in the floorboards', as if he is removed from it, outcast.

*Notes From Underground* follows the mind of a mentally ill man through short notes and memoirs. Using a complicated and chaotic structure, Dostoevsky is able to construct a character that is unpredictable and chaotic. He does this by writing in a stream-of-consciousness writing style, and an unreliable narrator. These combined, the first section reads similar to a monologue, or a character rambling about their philosophies and life.

At the beginning of the novel, we read an author's note. "Both the author of the notes and the notes themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, such persons as the writer of such notes not only may but even must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed.. He is one representative of a generation that is still living out its life". The Underground Man, or our main character and narrator, is never named, and this is done intentionally by Dostoevsky. Our main character is meant to represent a wider group of people, people who have been let down by society, or been outcast. The outcome of this, is the reader seeing a part of themselves in this character, whether it be feeling outcast, superior, inferior, or relishing in one's own pain, we are meant to see ourselves in this character, despite him being an unlikable person.

Likely as a result of the two points above, this novel lacks in both concrete imagery and setting descriptions. We are given a vague sense of his city, and his apartment but not much else. One image that is repeated throughout the book is the description of wet snow. It is always snowing in the Underground, which could be passed off as a simple setting description because the story is set in Russia, but it also is used to set the tone for the book. It represents the feeling of the Underground Man in a more tangible, physical way.

*Notes From Underground* is a novel unlike anything else from its time. Dostoevsky's insight into the human mind influenced many philosophers, and the book played an important role in the development of Realist Fiction. Through this book, we see ourselves in someone that we know is cruel, and we find understanding and empathy for people that we may not like.