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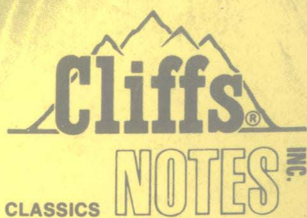
DOSTOEVSKY'S

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND



YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

NOTES

including

- *Life and Background*
- *List of Characters*
- *Introduction to the Novel*
- *General Plot Summary*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Character Analyses*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

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Notes from Underground

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in 1821, the second of seven children, and lived until 1881. His father, an army doctor attached to the staff of a public hospital, was a stern and self-righteous man while his mother was the opposite—passive, kindly, and generous—and perhaps this fact accounts for Dostoevsky's filling his novels with characters who seem to possess opposite extremes of temperament.

Dostoevsky's early education was in an army engineering school, where he was apparently bored with the dull routine and the unimaginative student life. He spent most of his time, therefore, dabbling in literary matters and reading the latest authors; his penchant for literature was obsessive. And almost as obsessive was Dostoevsky's preoccupation with death, for while the young student was away at school, his father was killed by the serfs on his estate. This sudden and savage murder smoldered within the young Dostoevsky, and when he began to write, the subject of crime, and murder in particular, was present in every new publication. Dostoevsky was never free of the horrors of homicide and even at the end of his life, he chose to write of a violent death—the death of a father—as the basis for *The Brothers Karamazov.*

After spending two years in the army, Dostoevsky launched his literary career with *Poor Folk,* a novel which was an immediate and popular success and one highly acclaimed by the critics. Never before had a Russian author so thoroughly examined the psychological complexities of man's inner feelings and the intricate workings of the mind. Following *Poor Folk,* Dostoevsky's only important novel for many years, was *The Double,* a short work dealing with a split personality and containing the genesis of a later masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment.*

Perhaps the most crucial years of Dostoevsky's melodramatic life occurred soon after the publication of *Poor Folk*. These years included some of the most active, changing phases in all of Russian history and Dostoevsky had an unusually active role in this era of change. Using influences acquired with his literary achievements, he became involved in political intrigues of questionable nature. He was, for example, deeply influenced by new and radical ideas entering Russia from the West and soon became affiliated with those who hoped to revolutionize Russia with all sorts of Western reforms. The many articles Dostoevsky wrote concerning the various political questions, he published knowing full well that they were illegal and that all printing was controlled and censored by the government.

The rebellious writer and his friends were, of course, soon deemed treasonous revolutionaries and placed in prison, and after nine months a number of them, including Dostoevsky, were tried, found guilty, and condemned to be shot by a firing squad.

The entire group was accordingly assembled, all preparations were completed, and the victims were tied and blindfolded. Then, seconds before the shots were to be fired, a messenger from the Tsar arrived. A reprieve had been granted. Actually the Tsar had never intended that the men were to be shot; he merely used this method to teach Dostoevsky and his friends a lesson. This harrowing encounter with death, however, created an impression on Dostoevsky that he never forgot; it haunted him for the rest of his life.

After the commutation of the death sentence, Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia and during the four years in prison there, he changed his entire outlook on life. During this time, in horrible living conditions—stench, ugliness, and filth—he began to reexamine his values. There was a total change within the man. He experienced his first epileptic seizure, and he began to reject a heretofore blind acceptance of the new ideas which Russia was absorbing. He underwent a spiritual regeneration so profound that he emerged with a prophetic belief in the sacred mission of the Russian people. He believed that the salvation of the world

was in the hands of the Russian folk and that eventually Russia would rise to dominate the world. It was also in prison that Dostoevsky formulated his well-known theories about the necessity of suffering. Suffering became the means by which man's soul is purified; it expiated sin; it became man's sole means of salvation.

Dostoevsky married a young widow while still in exile. After his exile, he served four more years as an army private, was pardoned, and left Siberia to resume his literary career. He soon became one of the great spokesmen of Russia. Then, in 1866, he published his first masterpiece, *Crime and Punishment.* The novel is the story of Raskolnikov, a university student who commits a senseless murder to test his moral and metaphysical theories concerning the freedom of the will. The novel exhibits all the brilliant psychological analyses of character for which Dostoevsky was to become famous and incorporates the theme of redemption through suffering.

After finishing *Crime and Punishment,* Dostoevsky married again and went abroad, hoping to find peace from numerous creditors and also hoping to begin a new novel. The peace of mind Dostoevsky longed for he never found; instead, he discovered the gaming tables of Europe—and accumulated even more guilt in addition to his ever-mounting debts. The novel Dostoevsky composed abroad was *The Idiot,* the story of a wholly good and beautiful soul. In his notes, Dostoevsky sometimes called this hero Prince Christ; he hoped to create a man who could not hate and who was incapable of base sensuality. The novel is one of his masterpieces, a fascinating, intense study of the destructive power of good.

Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov,* was his masterwork and is a masterpiece of Western literature. Only a year after its publication, Dostoevsky was dead but already he was acknowledged to be one of Russia's greatest writers.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

The Underground Man

The unnamed paradoxical narrator of the story who is addressing an imaginary audience.

Liza

The prostitute whom the Underground Man befriended and then cruelly rejected.

Anton Antonich Syetochkin

The Underground Man's immediate superior from whom he borrowed money and whom he visited when he needed to "embrace humanity."

Simonov

Practically the only schoolmate the Underground Man has seen since graduating from school.

Zverkov

A good-natured schoolmate whom the Underground Man detested because of his social success.

Trudolyubov

A distant relative of Zverkov's, a rather inoffensive and undistinguished person.

Ferfichkin

A sycophant who hung onto Zverkov's coattails.

Apollon

The Underground Man's servant whom he hated and also feared.

Olympia

The most desirable of the prostitutes; Zverkov claimed her for himself.

GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator introduces himself as a man who lives underground and refers to himself as a spiteful person whose every act is dictated by his spitefulness. Then he suddenly admits that he is not really spiteful, because he finds it is impossible to be anything—he can't be spiteful or heroic; he can only be nothing. This is because he is a man of acute consciousness and such a person is automatically rendered inactive because he considers too many consequences of any act before he performs the act and therefore never gets around to doing anything. In contrast, a person who is not very intelligent can constantly perform all sorts of actions because he never bothers to consider the consequences.

The man of acute consciousness finds that he cannot even commit an act of revenge because he never knows the exact nature of the insult. Such a man is plagued with an active imagination which causes him to exaggerate any type of insult until it becomes fantasized out of all proportion to the original insult. By this time it is ridiculous to try and perform any act of revenge.

It is easy for other people to classify themselves, but the Underground Man knows that no simple classification can define the essence of one's existence; therefore, he can only conclude that he is nothing. Yet in society, the scientists and the

materialists are trying to define exactly what a man is in order to create a society which will function for man's best advantage. The Underground Man objects to this trend because he maintains that no one can actually know what is man's best advantage. Such a society would have to be formulated on the theory that man is a rational being who always acts for his best advantage. But the history of man proves that he seldom acts this way.

The Underground Man then points out that some people love things which are not to their best advantage. Many people, for example, need to suffer and are ennobled by suffering; yet, the scientist and the rationalist want to remove suffering from their utopian society, thereby removing something that man passionately desires. What the Underground Man wants is not scientific certainity, but the freedom to choose his own way of life.

The Underground Man concludes that for the man of conscious intelligence, the best thing to do is to do nothing. His justification for writing these *Notes from Underground* is that every man has some memory which he wishes to purge from his being, and the Underground Man is going to tell his most oppressing memory.

Sixteen years ago, when he was twenty-four, he lived a very isolated and gloomy existence with no friends and no contacts other than his colleagues at work. To escape the boredom of this life, he turned to a life of imagination. There he could create scenes in which he had been insulted and then could create ways of revenging himself. But he never fulfilled his dreams.

When his isolation became too unbearable, he would visit his immediate superior at his home. Once, however, feeling the need to "embrace humanity," he was driven to renew his acquaintance with an old schoolmate, Simonov. Arriving at the house, he found Simonov with two old schoolmates discussing a farewell party they were planning for Zverkov. The Underground Man invited himself to the party even though he had always hated Zverkov and had not seen him since their school days.

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At the party, the Underground Man unknowingly arrived an hour early (the time had been changed) and, during the course of the evening, created a repulsive scene. When the others left to go to a brothel, he begged for some money from Simonov so that he could go too. He was ashamed and horrified at what he had done, but he followed his companions to the brothel.

When he arrived, he was determined to slap Zverkov, but he could not find him; he was relieved to discover that everyone had already retired. Then he met Liza, a prostitute with whom he retired. Later, he awakened and told her in high-flown language about the miseries of prostitution. He knew he was doing so partly for effect and partly because he felt rejected by his friends. Upon leaving, he gave Liza his address and told her to visit him. She promised to do so.

During the next day and for days afterward, the Underground Man was horrified that Liza might actually show up. He knew that he could not keep up the pretense of the previous night. And, one night as he was having an absurd argument with his servant, she did arrive. He was embarrassed that she should see him in such poverty and in such an absurd position. He went into hysterics, and she comforted him. Later, he insulted her and told her that he was only pretending about everything he said. Crudely, he gave her five roubles for her services, but before she left, she crumpled the five-rouble note and left it on his table. He ran after her to apologize but could not find her. His shame over his conduct still troubles him.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

Notes from Underground is perhaps Dostoevsky's most difficult work to read, but it also functions as an introduction to his greater novels later in his career. The ideas expressed in *Notes from Underground* become central to all of Dostoevsky's later novels, and therefore this work can be studied as an introduction to all of Dostoevsky's writings. One reason that the work is so

difficult is that Dostoevsky included so many ideas in such a short space, and thus the ideas are expressed with extreme intensity and are not elaborated upon. The student who has read other of Dostoevsky's works will immediately recognize many of Dostoevsky's ideas in this work.

Notes from Underground is composed of two parts: a confession to an imaginary audience in Part I, and then, in Part II, an illustration of a certain episode in his life entitled "A Propos of the Wet Snow." First of all the confession itself is a dominant technique in Dostoevsky's writings. As a monologue or a confession, the man from underground can use it to reveal directly his innermost thoughts. These thoughts are made more dramatic by the fact that he is addressing them to an imaginary audience which is opposed or hostile toward his views and toward him. Therefore when he ridicules, or laughs at, or becomes spiteful about, some idea, he is doing so in terms of an imaginary audience reacting against him.

The novel can act as a rebuttal to a novel published the year before, 1863, by Chernyshevsky, entitled sometimes *What Shall We Do?*, or sometimes translated as *What Is To Be Done?*. This particular novel advocated the establishment of a utopia based upon the principles of nineteenth-century rationalism, utilitarianism, and socialism. Such a rationalistic, socialistic society, Dostoevsky thought, would remove from man his greatest possession: human freedom. Dostoevsky therefore becomes the champion of the freedoms of man: the freedom to choose, the freedom to refuse, the freedom to do anything he wants to do. For Dostoevsky, then, man's freedom was the greatest thing that he possessed and Dostoevsky thought that in a scientific, rationalistic, utilitarian society man's freedom would be replaced by security and happiness. This is what Chernyshevsky and other socialists were advocating: that if man is given all the security he needs, then man will automatically be happy.

Dostoevsky attacked these ideas because he believed that if man were simply *given* security and happiness, he would lose his freedom. To him science, rationalism, utilitarianism, or

socialism were equated with the doctrines of fatalism and determinism, which contradict man's freedom to control or determine his own fate.

When the Underground Man says that twice two makes four, this is a scientific fact. But man does not always function merely by scientific fact. For Dostoevsky the rational part of a man's being is only one part of his makeup. That is, man is composed both of the rational (two times two makes four) and the irrational. It would be nice to think sometimes that twice two makes five. This would be, in Dostoevsky's words, "a very charming idea also." The point is that if man functions solely as a rational being, then man's actions are always predictable. Dostoevsky's point is that man's actions are *not* predictable. There are even some men who enjoy suffering and are only happy when they suffer. Consequently in a socialistic society where man's security and happiness is being assured, this would deny the fact that men—some men—want to suffer and are improved by their suffering.

Thus one of the great ideas throughout all of Dostoevsky's fiction is the idea that through suffering man achieves a higher state in the world. That is, through suffering man can expiate all his sins and become more closely attuned with the basic elements of humanity. Consequently if a utopia removes suffering, then it is removing one of the essential ingredients by which man improves himself and becomes a greater person.

In another image in the novel Dostoevsky is afraid that if man lives in this utopian society then he will end up like a mechanical being—the "organ stop," as Dostoevsky puts it. Man is meant to be more than an organ stop or a piano key; he is meant to be more than a mechanism in a well-regulated clock. The freedom to choose was, for Dostoevsky, the greatest thing that man had. The freedom to choose, if he wished to, suffering. The freedom to choose religion. The freedom to choose, sometimes, those things which are destructive to man. Take away this freedom and man ceases then to be a man. He becomes, as in another image, an ant. Man deserves something better than to die upon an ant heap.

In a later novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky makes perfectly clear his ideas in a passage called "The Grand Inquisitor." In this later novel the grand inquisitor offers man security and happiness; Jesus reappears upon the earth offering man total freedom. Dostoevsky believed that the voluntary choosing of Christ, the freedom to choose Him at whatever expense, is the greatest gift given to man. And man's freedom then becomes central to all of Dostoevsky's novels.

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

PART I

The Footnote

Summary

In a footnote, Dostoevsky asserts that while the diary and the narrator are imaginary, such a person as the narrator not only exists, but that he *must* exist because he represents many people who are forced by the circumstances of society to live, as he does, underground.

Commentary

Dostoevsky's footnote makes it clear that the Underground Man is not an absolute anomaly, is not an exception, but that in such a strict, scientific society as that of the nineteenth century, such a man *must* exist or else society would become a single, collective, mechanical robot. He is *not* a "representative man" or an "active man" who consents to the scientific determinism being perpetrated in nineteenth-century society; instead, he is that important and significant holdout against a scientific acceptance of life. Therefore, in a purely scientific-oriented society, he represents the man of consciousness who refuses to accept and to yield to the discoveries of science. Consequently, we must assume that in a mechanistic society, such a person as the narrator must exist, metaphorically, underground; that is, contrary to the general trend of the rest of society.

Section 1

Summary

The narrator immediately reveals that he is a sick, spiteful, and unattractive man who believes that his liver is diseased. He refuses to consult a doctor about his liver, out of spite, even though he knows that he is hurting only himself by his spite. He is now forty years old and has been a spiteful person ever since he began working for the government twenty years ago. Throughout his employment, he never accepted a bribe, but he did delight in making any petitioner feel uncomfortable and unhappy, even though most of the petitioners were timid and poor.

The narrator confesses that the real motive for his spitefulness lies in the fact that he is really neither a spiteful nor an embittered man. He simply amuses himself, like a boy scaring sparrows, by being spiteful. Furthermore, he says, he was lying when he said he was a spiteful man; he was lying out of spite because even if he wanted to, he couldn't really become a spiteful man. Furthermore, he cannot become anything. Even though he is aware of many opposing elements within himself, he can't become anything—neither hero or insect, honest or dishonest. He will live out his life in his small corner because an intelligent man can't do anything; only a fool can. "A man of character, an active man is pre-eminently a limited creature." A man living in the nineteenth century is morally obligated to be a creature without a character.

To become older than forty, the narrator tells us, is "bad manners, is vulgar, immoral." And he has a right, he feels, to say this because he plans to go on living for many, many years past forty. As for the reason he joined the civil service, he says that he did so only to have something to eat. When a distant relative died, leaving him 6,000 roubles, he immediately resigned and settled down in his "corner"—a wretched, horrid room on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. He has a servant, a stupid, ill-natured country woman, and he knows that he could live more cheaply

elsewhere, but he refuses to leave, even though the climate in St. Petersburg is bad for his health.

Commentary

In introducing himself as a sick, spiteful, and unattractive man, the Underground Man sets the tone for the entire narrative. He describes what is now commonly called the "anti-hero"; that is, a person whose traits and actions are not considered heroic or even admirable—a person who might even be common and ordinary, but one with whom we can align ourselves in one way or another because his ideas strike us as proper and reasonable or, at least, understandable whether or not we agree with those ideas. The use of the term "anti-hero" has become prominent in twentieth-century literature and here, in *Notes from Underground,* is one of the germinal ideas for this type of character.

The Underground Man is one who is sick and spiteful, and we acknowledge that here is a man who is sick mainly because he cannot accept the ideas currently popular in his society. He is spiteful because he resents the direction of development he finds in his society, and his revolt against these unacceptable trends render him, in the eyes of his contemporaries, a spiteful being. But he is also physically sick and won't consult a doctor, out of spite. And he is also spiritually sick, as we find out in Part II, because he can't accept love.

Dostoevsky conveys these ideas dramatically by having the Underground Man address an imaginary audience who is, he assumes, antagonistic to his ideas. Part of the paradox, then, is that the "spiteful" narrator constantly interrupts his narration in order to try and seek the approval of his audience and to justify his own behavior. He intentionally identifies himself as being spiteful because he knows that his audience will characterize him as a spiteful person; therefore, he anticipates his audience by admitting that he is spiteful.

Dostoevsky offers yet another paradox when he has the Underground Man admit that he was lying when he said that he

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