

An Existential Reading in Notes from Underground

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Abstract

Existentialism is concerned with the idea of finding true purpose and meaning in life. It emphasizes the importance of freedom, responsibility and search for meaning in the pursuit of self discovery and life's purpose. It often includes concepts such as Existential crises, courage, freedom and angst. Fyodor Dostoevsky was an influential Russian Novelist and short story writer. His works explore the human condition in social, spiritual and political atmospheres and his ideas influenced fields such as Modernism, Theology, Existentialism, literary Criticism and Psychology. He reflects on the importance of free will and individual choice rather than merely following societal norms and values. This paper examines Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" in terms of existential angst and advocates for a life without fear and self doubt. It depicts on the experiences of the protagonist The Underground man, a self loathing and misanthropic man who is "too conscious" critiques society and his own existence with contradictory and introspective ideas. He believes that man is the ultimate source in finding true purpose and meaning in life and rejects utopian and rationalist ideas. The inner and external struggles which he confronted make him to accept everything and he claims that suffering is also a part of life which defines personal depth and human nature. Search for meaning and recognition is the ultimate things which he seeks to attain in his life but the chaotic experiences and alienation from his own self and society restricts him in attaining it. The critique of rationalism and Utopian ideals were deeply explored in the context of individuality rather than logic and reasoning.

Keywords: Existentialism, Search for Meaning, Societal Norms, Free Will, Rationalism

Fyodor Dostoevsky was an influential Russian Novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer. He is considered as one of the most significant novelists of world literature. His introduction to literature were at his early years through fairy tales and legends. He completed his graduation at Nikolayev Military Engineering Institute. His job as an engineer and translating books get him extra money which further induced him to write many works. The final days of his life were spent in prison and eventually sentenced for death for his part in a literary group "Petrashevsky Circle". His literary works critically examines the human condition in social, political and spiritual atmospheres as well as "Existentialism" in relation to faith, morality, suffering and search for meaning in life.

The title "Notes from Underground" represents the notes or thoughts of (The Underground man). It suggests that the collection of notes from a hidden or marginalized perspective or reflects the narrator's alienation from societal norms and his own self. He was surrounded

by contradictory and introspective ideas and he is “too conscious” in all the aspects of his life. The title is metaphorical, represents the narrator’s rejection, suffering, alienation from society and his inner struggles. The word “Existentialism” is derived from the Latin word, “existencia” where “ex” means “out of” and “sistere” means “to stand”. It refers to a state of standing out or being present in the world. It has philosophical roots with writers such as Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard. Existentialism emerged primarily in the late 19th and 20th centuries, and attained its peak after World War II as individuals attempted to address freedom, responsibility and meaning. It has influenced fields such as literature, philosophy, psychology and the arts. It prioritizes individual freedom, responsibility and free will in creating meaning for their existence rather than merely following predefined societal norms and philosophical ideas. It often includes concepts such as existential crises, courage, freedom, despair and angst.

Search for meaning and purpose in life is an essential factor in the concept of Existentialism. It advocates for a life where individuals have to find their existence after their birth because none had born with inherent purpose. The key questions which existentialism incorporates is Who am I? and What is my purpose? Through this, we can get to know that each individual has a purpose to survive or exist in this planet.

The life of *The Underground Man* serves as a great example for existentialism. Social alienation, Inner struggles, and introspective ideas continuously haunt him as he develops despair and anxiety in his existence. A former civil servant and retired officer, he questions usual practices and actions which others are doing and become so aware in all the actions which he does. This shows that he inherits a different perspective compared to the majority of the group thus made him to behave in a new and unusual way. The intellectual arrogance, extreme self awareness and deep seated resentment contributed for his psychological turmoil. “I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased (Notes from Underground, 3). The chaotic and isolated life which he experienced made him to paralyse happiness and suffering and he believes that suffering is also part of the human condition which every individual has to experience. “Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering, and that is a fact” (Notes from Underground, 53). There are certain events which made him feel alone and dejected. The rejection and humiliation when he wanted to speak with an officer made him to feel a sense of an existence without meaning. A sense of alienation overwhelmed him when he was ignored by his old school friends and his craving to get their attention further provoked him to feel hatred and resentment. This reflects that *The Underground Man* has deeply undergone a different or alienated experience in society as well as in his own life.

On the other hand, he reflects on the idea that human beings are not always have to be rational. He opposes the traditional ideas of rationality and laws, emphasizes that individuals free will is more important than reason. “Reason is an excellent thing, there’s no disputing that, but reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational side of man’s nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole life, that is, of the whole human life including reason and all the impulses. And although our life, in this manifestation of it, is often worthless, yet it is life and not simply extracting square Roots” (Notes from Underground, 43).

As an orphan who seldom experienced love in his life, assumes that love might be a dominance that one put on other. Because of his bitter experience, he started to criticise himself and his isolated life, horrified by his own existence “I was incapable of love, for I repeat, with Me loving meant tyrannising and showing my moral Superiority. I have never in my life been able to imagine any other sort of love, and have nowadays come to the Point of sometimes thinking that love really consists in the Right—freely given by the beloved object—to tyrannise Over her.” (Notes from Underground, 195-196). The *Underground Man*’s relationship with Liza were marked by his

power, control and self destruction. The initial love and care eventually fades because of his inner struggles and introspective ideas. He started to dominate and blame Liza because of his personal insecurities and hyperconsciousness and they ended up in resentment. The intimate connection of the Underground Man with Liza emphasizes his longing with human connection but it has a tragedy in existence because of his hyperconsciousness and overt sensual.

The Underground Man's inability to maintain a relationship with others reflects his deep psychological and personal insecurities. The economic and class struggles are some of the factors which drives him to feel a sense of inferiority and resentment. As a minor civil servant, he consciously feels inferiority towards other higher officials. This high conscious made him to feel a sense of inferiority. The desire of to be recognised by others is deep seated desire for him. But the social status and class struggles restricts him to be recognised by others.

The economic struggles which contributed to his chaos are his low paying job, poverty and embarrassment over money. The need for money continuously haunted him and his financial instability contributes to his isolation and partial connection with society. The things which made him powerless is that he struggles to buy cosy things as compared to aristocratic people. And as a result, even though he wants to be valued and recognised by society, the economic and class struggles remain stagnant often hinders him and brought him a sense of aloof and self doubt. The rejection of rationalism and Utopian ideals has been one of the defining traits he considers. He criticises the idea that human behaviour can be controlled by logic. He despise the idea that $2+2=4$ claims that it is a symbol of oppressive determinism. He strongly priorities individual choice and freedom even if it leads to self-destruction. He criticises the ideas of rationalists, that logic maximizes the well being but he believes that desires, emotions and unpredictability play a greater role in defining human behaviour. He mocks over the idea that humans always act in their best interests, suggests that they act against reason to justify their individuality. His criticism of Utopian ideals serves as a crucial thing to navigate. He satirizes the belief that a perfect society can be built through rationality. He teases the idea of a perfectly organized rational society where every needs are met, claims that it is oppressive because it eradicates, personal freedom unpredictability. His views on suffering also claims that, individuals need suffering for personal depth and innate human identity or else they would change like machines by doing routine works. He asserts that $2+2=4$ is metaphorical represents people should act logically in all the aspects, claims that sometimes people want $2+2=5$ simply to just define their individuality from imposed truths. "Twice two makes four seems to me simply a piece of Insolence. Twice two makes four is a pert coxcomb who Stands with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I Admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but If we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five Is sometimes a very charming thing too". (Notes from Underground, 53).

The experiences of the protagonist The Underground Man serves as a powerful example for the theme of "Existentialism" or precisely we can say that he inherited existential dread which means, a quality of anxiety or despair when we examine life's meaning, purpose and morality which leads to a sense of meaninglessness and uncertainty. The above events and factors contributed to his self doubt and a sense of aloof or separation from his own self and society. He wants to spend time in isolation sometimes to neutralise his feelings and to ponder about the circumstances which made him to behave in a certain way. This reflects that human brings at times needs a personal space to relax, rectify and find a purpose for their existence. Rather than worrying about his problems, he embraces his sufferings and accepted it as a part of personal growth and human condition. "Even in toothache there is enjoyment" (Notes from Underground, 21). The contradictory and introspective ideas alienates himself from society and he questions his own existence. It is because of his extreme self awareness and hyperconsciousness. The chaotic and confused life which he leads is because

of the range of frustrated events which he encountered in his past. Although he struggles to find meaning and purpose, the displeased events which he confronted makes him to realise the essential existence of human beings. He believes in individuality, free will and personal choice rather than following predefined philosophical ideas or social norms. Rationality and Utopian ideals leads to logical and ideal society but it has given no importance to human feelings, desires and he claims that self value and free will is essential to define our individuality. It is crucial for every individual to find meaning and purpose in life because it helps us to know our goals and priorities and it can also shapes how we respond to our twist and turns. Although we may face contradictions and disappointments in searching the meaning, it is significant for every individual to seek it, because it gives satisfaction and fulfillment and makes life enriching and rewarding.

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