



## Utopian Thoughts & Existential Crisis in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v9i6.3470>

### Abstract

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* forms the basis of nineteenth-century critical utopian rationalism and is considered an antecedent of modern existential thought. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky challenges the notion of human rational egoism, which was considered a basis for establishing a utopian society. The novella exposes the contradictions of utopian ideals through its exploration of irrationality, self-destructive excessive-freedom, and psychological-alienation. The extremely self-conscious nature of the narrator, the Underground Man, discloses the tension between individual excessive-freedom and determinism. In this paper intends to explore Dostoevsky's utopian thought, especially rational egoism embodied in Nikolay Chernyshevsky, while at the same time pointing to the existential themes embodied in philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Søren Kierkegaard. In terms of exploring some such themes of alienation, freedom, suffering, and identity-crisis, *Notes from Underground* divulges the contradiction between utopian ideals and human nature, and how existential crisis forms an inevitable part of modern human consciousness.

**Keywords:** *Excessive-Freedom; Identity-Crisis; Psychological-Alienation; Sufferings; Utopian*

### Introduction

*Notes from Underground* are considered one of the first literary works to deal with the theme of existential consciousness and is also known for being one of the strongest attacks on utopian ideology. The novella was written against the backdrop of the increasing popularity of rationalist and utilitarian ideas in Russia in the nineteenth century. The novella is an attack on the idea that human actions are based on logical reasoning. The novella was written at a time when thinkers like Nikolay Chernyshevsky were advocating perfect order in society based on logical reasoning. However, Dostoevsky introduces the theme of rebellion against logical reasoning in the character of the Underground Man, an unnamed civil servant living in isolation. The Underground Man is the protagonist of the novella and is known for being

the epitome of the contradictions of modern human existence. He is opposed to the idea of collective happiness, as propounded by utopian thinking, and states that man is sure to act against his own interests simply to prove his liberty (Dostoevsky 23-24). The very essence of Dostoevsky's opposition to utopian thinking is the idea that the very system designed to remove suffering and uncertainty from the world is opposed to the individuality of man (Nasir, Gul, and Ullah 156).

Furthermore, the novella is also significant as an early exploration of the ideas that are now considered part and parcel of existentialist thinking, especially the struggle between liberty and responsibility, the absurdity of existence, and the search for authenticity. The novella is considered an early exploration of the ideas propounded by existentialist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, especially the idea of alienation and rebellion against rational thinking (Markova 203). The Underground Man's rebellion against the need to conform is an expression of the individual's struggle against the "crowd" as propounded by existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard 89). The following paper will discuss the ways in which the novella *Notes from Underground* challenges the idea of utopian thinking while simultaneously reflecting an existential crisis. Through the analysis of the interrelationship between irrational freedom, hyper-consciousness, and alienation, the study reveals how Dostoevsky's works not only present a critique of the intellectual movement of the nineteenth century but also pose a timeless philosophical problem of the impossibility of reconciling the idea of freedom and the need for order and meaning.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research is situated in the context of anti-utopian and existentialist thought. Utopian thought, especially in the nineteenth century, was heavily influenced by Enlightenment values, which prized reason, progress, and human perfectibility (Polo and Grado 67). Fyodor Dostoevsky's work subverts this tradition through his protagonist, who subverts the values of rational determinism. The research will use existentialist thought, especially in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, to read the Underground Man as a figure of radical freedom and alienation. His desire to act in an unreasoned manner will be seen as a product of Sartre's idea that human beings are "condemned being free" (Sartre 29). His rejection of morality and social values will be seen as a product of Nietzsche's rejection of conventional values and morality (Nietzsche 114). In addition, the study uses the perspectives of psychological and literary criticism, particularly the dialogic approach of Mikhail Bakhtin, which emphasizes the diversity of voices and internal contradictions in the works of Dostoevsky (Bakhtin 84). The fragmented discourse of the Underground Man is an expression of the divided self, torn between the need to connect and the need to be alone.

### **Utopian Thought and Its Collapse in *Notes from Underground***

The nineteenth century saw an explosion in utopian thought, which was based on the rationalism of the Enlightenment, an ideology that posited the ability of human beings, driven by reason and self-interest, to create the perfect, harmonious society. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* can be seen as a commentary on the intellectual movement of the era, particularly the rational egoism of Nikolay Chernyshevsky, who posited the ability of human beings to create a logically ordered utopian society (Polo and Grado 92). Dostoevsky argues against the assumption of human rationality, positing the irrationality of human nature (Emerson 58). The underlying argument here is the metaphor of the "Crystal Palace" that represents an ideal utopian society where every action and step of a human is predictable and calculable. The Underground Man strongly protests this idea, believing that if such a system existed, humans would lose all freedom and become machines (Dostoevsky 41-42). The Underground Man believes that humans need not just rational happiness but also the freedom to choose irrationality, even if that means suffering (Rapoport 101). This is because this search for perfection actually defeats the purpose and existence of humanity.

In addition, Dostoevsky reveals the limitations of utilitarian philosophy, which defines happiness as the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. The Underground Man argues against the concept of happiness when he says, “I believe that suffering is the sole origin of all consciousness” (Sari 73). His choice of pain and humiliation reveals his need to exercise his free will in a world that seeks to impose order and predictability (Nasir, Gul, and Ullah 162). The rejection of utopia is further reinforced in the Underground Man’s need to exercise free will, which is an irrational and unpredictable force in the world. The Underground Man argues, “I believe that the recognition of one’s free will, the absolute and direct awareness of it, in the absence of any doubt or disbelief, is the beginning of all moral action” (Dostoevsky 45). In addition, the Underground Man says, “I would always choose what is detrimental to my interests, simply in order to exercise my free will” (Dostoevsky 45). This concept is reminiscent of the existentialist concept of freedom as espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, wherein man is characterized by his capacity to make choices, even in the absence of rational ground (Sartre 34).

Moreover, the Underground Man’s rebellion is reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s views on the herd mentality and the importance of the individual will (Nietzsche 128). Furthermore, Dostoevsky’s critique of utopianism is also rooted in psychology. The Underground Man’s over-awareness makes him incapable of action, and this is the source of his self-loathing (Rapoport 109). This is reminiscent of the failure of rationalism to capture the essence of human psychology. Instead, excessive rationalism leads to immobility and alienation, further discrediting the concept of utopianism (Markova 215). The Underground Man’s relation to Liza also demonstrates the failure of utopian ideals in terms of human relations. Although he momentarily entertained the possibility of redeeming himself through compassion, he was still unable to sustain a meaningful emotional connection, which led to his cruelty and rejection (Sari 81). This, again, demonstrates the incongruity between ideals and human relations. The form that Dostoevsky uses to narrate his story also demonstrates the failure of utopian thought. The disjointed and contradictory nature of the Underground Man’s narrative is an example of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, or the juxtaposition of multiple conflicting discourses within a single consciousness (Bakhtin 97).

Then again, this also demonstrates the failure of human identity to be contained within a rational discourse. The failure of utopian thought in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* is actually a demonstration of a broader philosophical problem: the failure to reconcile human freedom with the need for order. On the other hand, Underground Man’s negation of a rational system does not simply refer to a negation of a particular ideology, but also to a negation of the idea of progress and perfectibility, as emphasized in the Enlightenment period (Emerson 64). Underground Man’s emphasis on irrationality, suffering, and contradiction implies that any attempt to create a utopian system would always be doomed to failure, as it fails to take into account the unpredictability of human nature. In this sense, Dostoevsky critiques utopian thought through its inherent contradictions and limitations, and Underground Man serves to illustrate how such a perfect and utopian society would not only be impossible, but also dehumanizing, paving the way for the existential crisis that marks the second dimension of the novella.

### Existential Crisis and the Psychology of the Underground Man

Though *Notes from Underground* effectively subverts utopian thinking, it’s more profound philosophical impact is its exploration of existential crisis through the eyes of the Underground Man. Fyodor Dostoevsky creates a character that is acutely aware of his own self, and this creates a dichotomy between his insight and his psychological anguish. This “hyper-consciousness,” as it is called, puts the Underground Man in a situation where he is unable to act because of his reflection on his situation, thus further alienating him (Rapoport 121). He does not gain enlightenment but instead realizes the contradictions of life, leading him to further despair. The existential crisis of the Underground Man can be traced back to his feeling of isolation from society. While he chooses to stay aloof from society, he also wants to be recognized, which creates a paradox in the character of the Underground Man (Nasir, Gul,

and Ullah 175). This paradox can be explained as existential despair, as explained by Søren Kierkegaard, which is the inability to reconcile one's inner self with the external world (Kierkegaard 102). The Underground Man's inability to conform to the norms of society increases his feeling of alienation from society.

One of the key features of the existential crisis is the tension between freedom and paralysis. The Underground Man believes in absolute freedom, which he cannot allow to be compromised in any deterministic or rational manner (Dostoevsky 52). In other words, the Underground Man believes in absolute freedom, but it becomes a burden rather than a liberating concept. His inability to make a move is an expression of what Jean-Paul Sartre would later call the anguish of freedom, which is the understanding that one is completely responsible for one's actions in an indifferent world (Sartre 41). Instead, the Underground Man becomes paralyzed, which is the negative side of freedom. Moreover, the actions of the narrator can be seen as an example of absurdity, another theme of existential philosophy. He often performs irrational and self-damaging actions not out of necessity but to prove his independence. This can be seen in the philosophy of Albert Camus, who believes that human existence is absurd because of the dichotomy between searching for meaning and the universe being indifferent to human existence (Camus 57). The Underground Man's actions of performing things against his own interests can be seen as an example of absurdity, proving the pointlessness of looking for rational explanations for human behavior.

The incident with Liza serves to further enhance the psychological nature of Underground Man's struggle. On one hand, he seems to offer her solace and hope, indicating that there was a possibility for human connection (Sari 89). Nevertheless, when Liza reciprocates his feelings genuinely, Underground Man treats her badly, causing her to leave him (Dostoevsky 68-69). Such behavior shows Underground Man's inability to form real relationships, given his fear of vulnerability outweighs his longing for intimacy. The incident shows how Underground Man's existence harms him, illustrating how his inner turmoil translates into his relationships with others. Moreover, the Underground Man's fixation on suffering also speaks to the complexity of the character's psychological state. The Underground Man takes perverse pleasure in pain and humiliation, using these feelings to affirm his individuality and freedom (Nasir, Gul, and Ullah 182). Such an idea flies in the face of traditional notions of happiness and speaks to the Friedrich Nietzsche notion of using suffering to affirm one's strength and self-confidence (Nietzsche 139). Suffering is thus used by the Underground Man to counter the rationalizing forces of society, even as it alienates him further.

The narrative form of the novella also contributes to the existential crisis through its disjointed and contradictory nature. The Underground Man's speech is full of confessions, justifications, and self-criticisms, reflecting the disjointed and unstable nature of the Underground Man's personality. The multiple personas presented in the novella are an example of the concept of dialogism, as explained by Mikhail Bakhtin, where the characters, as presented by Dostoevsky, are an example of the multiple personas that exist in the same mind (Bakhtin 112). The self is, therefore, presented as being disjointed and unable to unify itself. In addition, Underground Man's problem can also be seen in terms of a response to a loss of values and certainties. Without a secure moral framework, Underground Man has to find his way in a world characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. Such a world also foreshadows one of the main ideas of existentialism, namely, that man has to create meaning in a meaningless world (Markova 229). Conversely, Underground Man, unlike later heroes of existentialism, fails to overcome his cynicism and remains locked in his condition. In the end, the existential crisis of the Underground Man illustrates the limitations of utopian thought and existential freedom. While the Underground Man is able to successfully critique the flaws in rationalist ideology, he does not provide an alternative, leaving the reader in a state of tension, much like the Underground Man himself. The paradox of modern existence, the desire for freedom coupled with the inability to cope with the results of freedom, is what

Fyodor Dostoevsky illustrates in the complex character of the Underground Man, which not only foreshadows the existential movement but critiques the ability of existential thought to lead to nihilism.

### Conclusion

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is still a significant work that offers a deep insight into the conflict between utopian ideals and existential realities. Dostoevsky's deconstruction of the rationalist ideas that prevailed in nineteenth-century utopian thought reveals the fundamental contradictions that exist within any system that attempts to govern human behavior through logic and order (Emerson 71). The Underground Man is revealed as a potent rejoinder to such ideas, exemplifying the irrationality, freedom, and complexity that are fundamental to human existence. The rejection of deterministic ideas, such as those presented by Nikolay Chernyshevsky, that are presented in the novella also challenges the idea that human beings are rational actors whose actions are motivated purely by self-interest (Polo and Grado 118). Rather, Dostoevsky offers a vision of humanity that is fundamentally unpredictable, driven by desires that are often at odds with rationality. The Underground Man's emphasis on irrational freedom highlights the limits of the utopian system, demonstrating that the pursuit of a perfectly ordered society may ultimately lead to a loss of individuality and authenticity (Dostoevsky 74).

At the same time, the reader is offered a very disturbing image of an existential crisis. The Underground Man's self-awareness, alienation, and inability to act are all symptoms of the burden of absolute freedom (Rapoport 134). His state of mind can be seen as a precursor to the existential ideas of later philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Albert Camus, particularly the conflict between freedom and responsibility, the experience of absurdity, and the search for meaning in an uncertain world (Sartre 52, Kierkegaard 115, Camus 63). Until now, unlike these later existentialists, the protagonist in the novella does not find a solution to these problems, but instead continues in self-contradiction and despair. In addition, the reader is offered an image of the destructive power of existential isolation in the novella. The Underground Man's encounters with other people, particularly Liza, show the protagonist's inability to make connections with others, since his fear of vulnerability precludes his desire to connect (Sari 97). This, in turn, emphasizes the existential problem of modernity, which is the need to reconcile the freedom of the individual with the need to belong to a social group.

In the end, *Notes from Underground* is ultimately a commentary on the ills of utopianism and the potential pitfalls of existentialism. Dostoevsky shows that while the rejection of oppressive ideologies is necessary, the individual is left with the burden of complete freedom (Nasir, Gul, and Ullah 190). In this way, the novel is not only an early precursor to existentialism, but also an early critique of its potential pitfalls, showing that the search for complete and total freedom is ultimately not only unfulfilling, but also leads to isolation and despair. So, the tension between utopianism and existentialism in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is ultimately relevant, and provides valuable insights into the nature of human beings and the challenges that they face.

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