Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes From Underground* is often considered an early example of existentialism, and a particularly influential one. Although written in the mid-nineteenth century, it easily invites comparison to twentieth-century works such as Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* and J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Certainly, Dostoevsky’s Underground Man is comparable to the disaffected heroes of Camus’s and Salinger’s stories. The specific qualities of existentialism that tie the novel to a movement it predates are the lack of meaning in life, an absurdist take on the world, and the isolation of the main character. Upon closer examination, the existentialist elements in *Notes From Underground* stem from its lead character’s self-hatred. Thus, the Underground Man’s existential crisis is created rather than inherited. In creating an existentialist environment for himself, the Underground Man perpetuates his own skewed perspective on “reality.” The notion of “reality” is perhaps the most intrinsic to existentialism. In this school of thought, humans simply exist. Any meaning that existence takes on is simply an attempt by people to create significance where none is or can be. The pursuit of any kind of meaning is absurd. In other people’s reliance on order, structure, and especially religion, the existentialist sees a willful self-delusion. People look for happiness in government, money, family, and religion. For the existentialist, these are merely structures created by humankind to brainwash itself into a kind of forced sense of fulfillment. In Dostoevsky’s novel, the Underground Man finds himself in a unique, if hypocritical, position. On one hand, he clearly despises the people and the world around him. His work as a civil servant is just one of many kinds of suffering, and he loathes his coworkers. From another perspective, however, the Underground Man defines himself by his opposition to these people and institutions. If not for them, to whom or what could he direct his vitriol? The Underground Man must create a “reality” where he is in opposition to the world to find some kind of reason for his self-hatred. In doing so, he is breaking the very existentialist tenets he professes to uphold. The Underground Man may be mocking others’ false realities, but in doing so, he has created one of his own. To reinforce this skewed reality, Dostoevsky uses a number of structural tools. First and most importantly, the story is told from the Underground Man’s perspective. Like *The Stranger*’s Meursault and *The Catcher in the Rye*’s Holden Caulfield, the Underground Man is our sole window into this world. As a result, we only get his skewed take on the “reality” in which he lives. Key to this reality is the Man’s status as “underground.” He identifies himself as underground for two main reasons. First, it establishes him as an outsider, and although this status is the source of much misery, it is essential for the reality he has created for himself. Second, it hints at the notion of revolution: there might be other Undergrounders out there waiting to unite against the oppression of their everyday lives.
Ironically, the Underground Man is too apathetic to seek out other Undergrounders, creating further dissatisfaction in himself.

What also makes his narration unique is its almost Brechtian sense of distance. The Underground Man frequently interrupts himself to editorialize upon his thoughts and actions. At one point, when lamenting his conflicts with Liza, he admits that he was going to lie but instead stopped himself. This kind of self-awareness broaches self-consciousness and further serves to isolate him. In a sense, the Underground Man is isolated not only from the world but from himself as well. The constant reflection and neurotic speculation indicates that for all of his self-absorption, the Underground Man does not truly know himself. In structuring the narrative this way, Dostoevsky invites the audience to remain similarly distanced from the action of the story.

Another crucial structural component is the Underground Man’s anonymity. Scholars like to speculate as to how closely the Underground Man resembles Dostoevsky, but within the story itself, the character’s namelessness and facelessness serve an important role. The Underground Man, by writing incognito, can be everyone and no one. In a certain light, he represents the masses who walk the streets every day, drugged by their own inertia in a society that does not support them. Conversely, he may not even exist at all. In a world of created realities, perhaps the Underground Man is a kind of phantom composed of various types of dissatisfaction.

Finally, the actual structure of the book reinforces the idea of the skewed reality of the Underground Man. The first half of the novel is in many ways the Man’s diatribe against both society and himself. He describes his wickedness and suffering, along with the ills of the world around him. It is as if the Underground Man (or perhaps Dostoevsky) felt the need to clear his throat before beginning the story proper. In rejecting a more traditional structure, Dostoevsky sets his hero (and his book) apart, refusing to be constrained by yet another norm. Once the story begins, the results are largely episodic, with the Underground Man drifting through random encounters with so-called friends and the hapless prostitute Liza. The result is a kind of snapshot of misery and rage, eschewing standard climactic structures. Characters do not change or grow, for to do so would be anathema to the existentialist point of view.

The isolation of the main character is also a focal point of the existentialism in Notes From Underground. After all, how could the Underground Man rebel against anything if he loved his job, had lots of friends, belonged to social and religious groups, or even had a family? The pervading paranoia that the Underground Man exhibits is directly attributable to the self-hatred that characterizes the existentialist hero. His coworkers and friends must snub and exclude him to fulfill his need to be ostracized. He needs to simultaneously reject and feel rejected by Liza to ensure that he has no close relationships.

It is in his troubled interactions with Liza that the Underground Man’s need for isolation and general misanthropy become darker. The existentialist hero often proceeds from a kind of generalized
misanthropy to direct and focused misogyny in his relationships with women. Like Meursault and Holden Caulfield, who have troublesome and angry relationships with the mothers, sisters, and potential love interests in their lives, the Underground Man cannot reconcile his feelings for Liza. This failure to love leads some critics to speculate about existentialist characters’ sexuality (as with Caulfield) because it is yet another way in which they are outside the norm. In the Underground Man, as with other existentialist protagonists, this trait manifests itself as a love-hate relationship with women. Since he cannot find romantic love through traditional routes, he purchases it. Yet despite Liza’s lowly status, the Underground Man finds himself attracted to her. In order to prevent these feelings from moving any further, he verbally abuses her and she leaves. The Underground Man acknowledges his own conflicted feelings when he runs outside after Liza’s abrupt exit. He simultaneously wants to drive her further away and to win her back. He acknowledges feeling guilty and wanting to beg her forgiveness. When he sees that she has disappeared completely, never to return, he consoles himself with the thought that he abused her for her own good. In his isolationist worldview, his misogynistic tirade against Liza was actually a kind of liberation for both of them. Once again, the Underground Man reaffirms his loner status.

One possible explanation for the misogynistic bent of existentialist heroes like the Underground Man is the issue of creation. Women are creators in a way that men never can be, a trait the existentialist hero recognizes and thus simultaneously reveres and abhors. If he prides himself on the knowledge of a mere existence onto which others graft fictitious “realities,” then women create an immediate disjunction for him. They are creators whose creations are not imagined but very much real. In the final paragraph of the book, the Underground Man hints at this by stating the burdens of manhood and feeling as though men are no longer born of their fathers (tellingly excluding mothers from the equation).

In the end, misogyny, misanthropy, racism, and any other outward directions of hatred manifested by existentialist heroes like the Underground Man are simply subterfuge. The real object of the Underground Man’s hatred is himself. He lives in terror of rejection, so he creates distance between himself and the rest of the world in order to avoid it. Some of the last few words of Dostoevsky’s novel suggest that the Underground Man is fatigued by his own self-hatred. In stating that he no longer wishes to write from Underground, perhaps he is acknowledging the existential impasse his self-hatred has generated.
“I want to test whether it’s possible to be entirely frank at least with oneself and dare to face the whole truth.”

Anyone who has attempted psychotherapy after a traumatic event in his or her life has probably had a thought similar to this comment Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Underground Man makes to himself at the end of his opening Notes and immediately before he begins his ruminations about incidents in his past that might have led to his present despair, self-loathing, and complete alienation from society. Preceding, by fifty-some years, Freud’s talking cure as a means to self-discovery and a better life, Underground Man’s desire for honesty includes certain traditional suppositions: that some sort of determination or resolution to be honest can, in fact, locate truth; that there is a whole truth lying about somewhere to be found and then faced; and that finding and facing it involves courage. “Dare” implies all of these; with such language, Underground Man transforms himself into a hero—an individual going against the odds even while he harangues himself as “spiteful,” “sick,” and “unattractive.” In seeking and confronting truth, he becomes a man with a mission; yet in lacking traditional heroic virtues and in conflict with a world whose values he rejects, Underground Man presents himself more exactly as an antihero.

Traditional epistemology argues that “truth” is knowledge that is independent of subjectivity; this kind of truth is located, for instance, in Plato’s forms or arrived at through Aristotle’s logic. Some contemporary paradigms of epistemology, however, envision truth as dependent upon one’s positionality. According to this argument, one’s race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, and all the experiences shaped by these will inform the truth that one discovers in his or her life. In addition, some philosophers, such as Lorraine Code in What Can She Know, would argue that seeing society from the point of view of its margins rather than its center provides a useful view. According to this idea, a disenfranchised person living in the margins of society—such as, perhaps, a woman on welfare—would be able to understand the dynamics of the national economy in a way those in more powerful positions in the center of society—such as politicians—would not. When life is looked at from the margins, understanding shifts, offering insight beyond the range of vision limited by views from the center.

Underground Man anticipates this contemporary construct of epistemology by choosing a position of marginality, not necessarily to gain more knowledge but because of the knowledge he believes that life has already given him. He asserts that in this position he has an authority to speak truths otherwise unspoken but experienced by many. He, unlike they, can see such truths because of his position underground; he, unlike they, can speak them because of his position underground; and he, unlike they, has the courage to do both because, antihero that he is, he has claimed the position of
living underground. That he understands his position as one of privilege can be seen in his derisive
tone toward his audience. “That is something you probably will fail to understand,” he says
condescendingly to his audience of “gentlemen” and “sirs.” He knows “better than anyone” because
he is underground, which is circular to the fact that he went underground intentionally because of the
insight he gained above ground. Although he constantly derides himself, he simultaneously praises
himself for daring to live underground, where he can see and speak truth.

“Underground,” therefore, acts as a privileged site of knowledge, and the person speaking from
underground gains heroic stature in daring to go there. In addition, underground functions as a
metaphor for interiority, alienation, and radical individualism. In going underground, the narrator not
only turns inward toward himself to massage and inflate his ego with what he knows, but he also
looks outward from this position to criticize those who live “above ground” for capitulating to the
hegemony of what he both embraces and decries: reason. People above ground—all those
gentlemen and sirs—believe in the supremacy of rationalism and insist that culture, acting on the
basis of reason, necessarily and naturally improves itself. In arguing this, Underground Man protests
against the values of the Enlightenment initiated in the century before him by the philosophers
Descartes and then Kant, which resulted in positivism and “laws of nature, the conclusions of natural
sciences, [and] mathematics” contemporary to his creator, Dostoevsky.

Descartes’ celebration of rational thought and the understanding of humanity based on such
thought—that one is human because one reasons—is condensed in his famous statement “I think,
therefore I am.” For Descartes, knowledge can be objectified and indeed must be to locate it; one
must separate reason from emotion to discover what is true, and this action defines the possibilities
for improving society. Just as Lorraine Code argues that truth is never fully objective in this way, so
Underground Man disdains Descartes’ assertion. For Underground Man, this law of the
Enlightenment leads to the demise of human possibility; for him, reason does not take into account
all the things one does that are not reasonable yet nevertheless lead to knowledge in the fuller sense,
which is something that embraces all aspects of human behavior. It is not reasonable to find
pleasure in pain, and the “lofty and beautiful” should not, reasonably, give a person “a violent pain in
the neck.” However, Underground Man experiences both of these unreasonable thoughts and
behaviors: his insistence on absolute honesty defies the form of reason constructed and glorified by
the Enlightenment.

The Underground Man’s response to rationality as limiting rather than enhancing humanity no doubt
seems ludicrous to many students in the current age of technology, where rational thought in the
form of the computer often does seem to be the most efficient access to the knowable. In
accordance with Descartes, students are encouraged to think through difficult choices, to think
before they act, and to put their mind to all tasks, for doing so will likely result in accomplishing
them. They are encouraged to be “men [and women] of action,” the people who, in the view of
Underground Man, become unaware of the “real” truth about the rational. This truth is that celebrating reason as the highest virtue leads to “excessive consciousness,” and this, in turn, leads to the alienation in which Underground Man finds himself and ambivalently praises. “I swear to you, sirs, that excessive consciousness is a disease—a genuine absolute disease,” he says. With laws of reason contaminating life above ground, the narrator escapes the pollution by living beneath it, for there he might be miserable but will see more and be more—no matter that “being” might constitute being less than “an insect.”

Leaving behind Cartesian insistence on reason, Underground Man also goes underground to demonstrate his argument against Kant. Drawing from Descartes, Kant understands reason as foundational to moral thought, which he formulates as his categorical imperative: “Act on that maxim which can at the same time have for its object itself as a universal law of nature” (Kant, 1993). According to Kant, moral principles can be universalized because they derive from reason, and reason—as Descartes explained—arrives at an objective truth upon which all people, using reason, will agree. Reason together with the categorical imperative will cause humanity to act to its own advantage, in this way progressing to its best. It is just this positivism that Underground Man denies, and he does so by revealing the secret that all people share but only he has the courage to speak: that he often does not act in his own self-interest and that even his choice in going underground indicates that he prefers the squalid to the sublime, the dark to the light. Underground Man says:

"Isn’t there, indeed, something that is dearer to almost every man than his very best interests....[I]sn’t there an advantage...which is more important and more advantageous than all other advantages, which a man is prepared, if need be, to go against all laws, against reason, honor, peace, prosperity...just so to achieve?"

In other words, people more naturally fall from the good rather than consistently embrace it because in falling they achieve a greater good. This greater good, this “most advantageous advantage,” is the affirmation of their individuality and freedom: people do not necessarily act in their self-interest; they act against what is best for them just to prove they can do so.

For Underground Man, self-consciousness constitutes the problem in self-actualization, for it produces “inertia.” In the case of “over-acute consciousness,” he says, you think rather than do, even though he simultaneously decries men of action as superficial, unknowledgeable about the meaninglessness of the actions they pursue. The more heightened the consciousness, says Underground Man, the more a man becomes a mouse and less a man, unable or uninterested in “facing” the “stone walls” which are the “laws of nature, the conclusions of sciences, mathematics.”

Here, however, in understanding himself to be a mouse, Underground Man paradoxically finds freedom, and he is aware of the paradox in so doing:

“Oh absurdity of absurdities! But how preferable it is to understand everything, to be aware of everything, of all impossibilities and stone walls, and yet refuse to reconcile yourself to a single
one of those...if it sickens you to submit to them; how preferable...to sink into voluptuous inertia, silently and impotently gritting your teeth and wallowing in the idea that you don’t even have anyone to rail at.”

In choosing this course of refusal, even if it makes him miserable, he heroically asserts his power as an individual in refusing to follow what society argues are laws of nature. Whether those laws are reasonable is inconsequential; the grand thing is saying “no” to them, even if it makes him a mouse to do so. Again, he evinces self-abasement, an insistence on a fall from what would otherwise be good reason to achieve another good: individuality and freedom. Contrary to what Kant suggests, for Underground Man, reason does not lead to greater freedom; rather, constructs of reason (as imposed by society) limit freedom and inhibit individuality.

The relationship of reason to freedom and individuality permeated much intellectual discourse at this time, seen especially in the Romantic celebration of innocence over experience and emotion over reason. For the German Romantic Heinrich von Kleist, writing about fifty years before Dostoevsky, the reason praised by Descartes and Kant in the Enlightenment as the highest aspect of human nature represented a fall from the natural state of grace, which Kleist characterized as more closely aligned with beauty and art because of its simplicity and affinity with nature. His essay “On the Puppet Theater” offers an interesting context to examine Underground Man’s depiction and rejection of reason as the highest aspect of human experience. In Kleist’s essay, Mr. C., a dancer, and an unidentified narrator discuss the art of puppetry. According to Mr. C, puppets, mechanically controlled through wires and strings by another, move more gracefully than human dancers do, whose self-consciousness limits their range of movement, resulting in affectation. Our ability to reason causes this self-consciousness, which we gained by eating from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, where, without reason, we were innocent, more graceful, and more beautiful. In this formulation, reason, or in the words of Underground Man, “acute consciousness,” limits freedom.

For Kleist, the fall from innocence into reason might be fortunate in that it has given people the potential to be more moral creatures because, as Kant explains, morality requires reason, but this fall has the unfortunate consequence of limiting aesthetic achievement, meaning full expression of the self. Kleist maintains some irony here, but he asserts the possibility that reason limits rather than expands human potential. Mr. C says that consciousness is a “disorder,” an “iron net” that subverts the “natural grace of humankind” by limiting “freplay.” As a result, he suggests that humankind might need a “second fall,” an expansion of consciousness that could transcend the existing limits of consciousness (defined by the first fall), so the answer to the problem of “knowing” is knowing more. While certainly no Romantic, Underground Man does embrace more full knowledge, the sort that in the long run conspires to deprave him, lower him, and make him miserable. He “insist[s] on clinging precisely to his...most vulgar folly, solely in order to confirm to himself...that men are still men, and not piano keys, which may be played by the hands of natural laws themselves.” In refusing to be a
puppet or a piano, he burdens himself with the responsibility of knowing more, an act that condemns him to the Underground but raises him to the stature of hero, or more exactly, an antihero because of the marginality by which he positions himself to access truth and the nature of the truth he gains.

**Works Cited and Consulted**


