Notes from Underground

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

One of eight children, Fyodor Dostoevsky was born to a family lineage of middle-class businessmen and petty nobles. His father Mikhail was a military doctor who later secured a government position and an acquired rank of nobility. A sickly but intelligent child, Dostoevsky was sent to a military engineering academy, which he hated. While he was there, it is believed his father was killed by serfs on his own plantation. His mother died of tuberculosis when Dostoevsky was a young man. Dostoevsky began a career as an engineer and, in his free time, wrote and translated. He also showed signs of epilepsy, greatly interrupting his professional and personal life. Accused of publishing materials critiquing the government, Dostoevsky was exiled to Siberia for five years, beginning in 1849, and his experiences there informed his character Raskolnikov's exile in his novel *Crime and Punishment*. After years of financial straits caused by a gambling problem, Dostoevsky began in 1866 the composition of novels—*The Gambler*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Notes from Underground*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—on which his reputation now rests. His health declined until his death in 1881; he was increasingly recognized, in his later years, as an immense talent, and he is considered today one of the finest novelists of the nineteenth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dostoevsky's time in exile certainly affected the rather pessimistic outlook and opinion of humanity in *Notes from Underground*, a response to the unchecked optimism of Chernyshevsky. *Notes from Underground* takes place during a time of transformation and modernization for Russia, and to some degree explores what it means to be a modern man or an intellectual in the 19th century. In part one, the underground man uses recent historical events (such as the American Civil War) to demonstrate the violence and irrationality of human history.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Notes from Underground*
- **When Written:** 1864
- **Where Written:** St. Petersburg
- **When Published:** 1864
- **Literary Period:** Realism, but many of the novel's features anticipate modernism and existentialism.
- **Genre:** Philosophical novella
- **Setting:** St. Petersburg, Russia
- **Climax:** The structure of the novella's plot, which contains little action, is somewhat anti-climactic. However, there are several minor climaxes: when the underground man finally bumps into the officer in part one, when he makes a fool of himself at Zverkov's party, and when tries to give money to Liza near the end of the novella.
- **Antagonist:** While the underground man struggles against people like the officer in part one or Simonov and Zverkov, these minor antagonists stand in for mainstream society itself, which is the main antagonist in the underground man's life. In addition, one can see him as often struggling against himself and his own overly active mind.

EXTRA CREDIT

The Overfed Man. The underground man has been hugely influential on many characters in modern fiction, and has even been the subject of parody. Woody Allen, for example, wrote a humorous essay entitled "Notes from the Overfed," written after reading Dostoevsky and a "Weight Watchers" magazine on the same plane flight. It begins, "I am fat. I am disgustingly fat. I am the fattest human I know."

PLOT SUMMARY

A note from the author introduces a fictional character known as the underground man, who the author says is "representative of the current generation," and whose rambling notes will form the novella that is to follow. The underground man begins by telling the reader that he is a sick, spiteful, unattractive man. He says that he doesn't know what he is sick with, but he refuses to be treated by doctors out of spite. He has been living underground for twenty years, but used to work in the civil service, where he was rude to anyone who came to his desk. He tells his readers that he is "neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect," and says that no one of intelligence in the 19th century can be a man of action or character.

The underground man says that he is not to blame for being a bad person, but that his "overly acute consciousness" prevents him from taking action. He says that "being overly conscious is a disease." He tells the reader that there are times when he wishes someone would slap him in the face, and says that he would neither be able to forgive someone who slapped him nor take revenge on him. Whereas less intelligent people act impulsively to get revenge, someone of "overly acute consciousness" has too many doubts and questions to take action. The underground man compares himself to a mouse

that retreats "ignominiously back into its mousehole." He says that men of action simply accept the laws of nature, science, and mathematics, thinking it impossible to protest that "two times two makes four." By contrast, the underground man hates such facts.

The underground man argues that there pleasure even in a toothache, saying that after a while someone with a toothache finds enjoyment in indulging in loud moans of pain that annoy others. He says that being "a nasty little man, a rogue" is pleasurable, and then asks the reader, "Can a man possessing consciousness ever really respect himself?" Moving on, the underground man says that he is incapable of apologizing. As a child, he would sometimes cry and repent when he did something wrong, but would then realize that this "was all lies, lies, revolting, made-up lies." He says that often gets into trouble because of his boredom, which is a result of his hyper-consciousness. He says that men of action only take action because they are stupid. They think that they have found "a primary cause" of something that gives them a reason for acting. But someone who is actually intelligent questions these causes and can think of multiple causes. So, he only acts out of spite.

The underground man speaks of people who believe that humans only do bad things because they don't know their "true interest" and that if people knew what was in their best interest they would only act accordingly. The underground man disagrees and says that sometimes man desires "something harmful to himself." He digresses slightly to argue that human civilization has made men more cruel, citing recent military conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War. He says that some people think that as science advances people will live more and more rationally, and society will approach the perfection of a crystal palace. He argues that this kind of existence would be boring and that people prefer to live according to their "own stupid will" rather than logic or reason. He says that sometimes people "desire something opposed to one's own advantage," simply in order to exercise one's free will. He claims that without desire and free will, mankind is nothing but "a stop in an organ pipe," obeying the laws of nature. He says that human history has been irrational and that such irrationality is man's only way of rebelling against the rationality of "two times two makes four" and proving that "he's a man and not an organ stop." He says that "two times two makes four is no longer life," and that "two times two makes five" is preferable.

Continuing to argue against the idea that mankind only acts in his best interest, the underground man says that there can be a peculiar pleasure in suffering and that "man sometimes loves suffering terribly." He says that the utopian idea of the crystal palace is a hoax and that he would reject it because he wouldn't be able to stick out his tongue rudely there out of spite. He tells his readers not to believe "one word, not one little word," of what he has written and says that he has no plans to print his notes, but merely writes to relive some of his boredom. He says that it is snowing outside, which reminds him of a story, and so in part two of the novella he will tell "a tale apropos of wet snow."

The underground man's story takes place when he is 24 and living a solitary life, but still working in the civil service. At times he wishes to make friends with others in his office, but at other times he hates them and feels alone. He criticizes himself for being overly Romantic, and then digresses about Romanticism. He says that Romantics in Germany and France or overly idealistic and foolish, whereas Russian Romantics remain somewhat practical. The underground man says that he spent much of his time at home reading, but "sank into dark, subterranean, loathsome depravity," because of depression and a "craving for contradictions and contrasts." He tells his readers that he is not trying to justify his depravity, but then changes his mind and says he is.

One night, the underground man sees a man get kicked out of a bar for fighting. He goes into the bar, thinking that he can get into a fight. He purposely gets into an officer's way, but the officer moves him aside without saying anything, barely noticing him and treating him like a fly. He thinks of challenging the officer to a duel but then realizes that everyone would just laugh at him for speaking in literary Russian about antiquated notions of honor. He goes back home and soon after sees the officer frequently around St. Petersburg. He writes the officer a letter, but ultimately doesn't send it. He often sees the officer on a particular street and usually gets out of the officer's way when they are about to walk into each other. He plans to walk into the officer and not move out of the way out of defiance and spite. He borrows money from his office chief in order to buy respectable-looking clothes for his encounter with the officer. He tries to bump into him, but keeps moving out of the way at the last second. Finally, he carries out his plan and bumps into the officer, but he acts as if he doesn't notice the underground man at all. The underground man is convinced that the officer was merely pretending not to notice him, and he feels "avenged for everything."

His happiness soon wears off, though, and he seeks escape from his despair in his dreams of "all that was beautiful and sublime." He says that he dreams for three months straight, involving scenarios where he is a hero, like a character from a work by Lord Byron, and where everyone loves him. After three months of these dreams, though, the underground man feels a desire "to plunge into society." He decides to go visit a former schoolmate named Simonov, whom he hasn't seen in a year. He enters Simonov's apartment and finds that two other former schoolmates are there as well. No one seems to notice the underground man and he says that they treat him like "some sort of ordinary house fly." His former schoolmates are planning a farewell dinner for a friend named Zverkov who is leaving St.

Petersburg. The underground man remembers Zverkov from school, and hates him for being an arrogant, attractive man. He recognizes Simonov's guests, both of whom he despised in school. He invites himself to the party for Zverkov, and they reluctantly allow him to come.

After leaving Simonov's apartment, the underground man berates himself for interfering with the party. He thinks he shouldn't go, but realizes that he will definitely go, even though he doesn't have any money. He recalls his years at school, when he was "a lonely boy," and didn't have many friends. He says he hated his schoolmates and was more intelligent than them. Occasionally he would try to make a friend, but would only use these potential friends to try to "exercise unlimited power" over someone else.

The next day, the underground man plans for the party. He is worried that it will be horribly awkward and he will be underdressed, but he decides to go to prove that he isn't intimidated by Zverkov and his other former classmates. When he arrives at the hotel where the party is being held, no one else is there, and a waiter informs him that dinner is not set to start for another hour. The underground man waits around embarrassedly as the waiter sets the table. Finally, the others arrive and Simonov apologizes for telling the underground man the wrong time for the party. Zverkov and Ferfichkin laugh at the underground man for having to wait by himself for so long. After some awkward conversation, the other party guests speak amongst themselves, ignoring the underground man and leaving him feeling "completely crushed and humiliated." He gets progressively drunker and tries to break into the conversation, but the others notice how drunk he is and look at him like an insect. The underground man stands up and makes a toast in which he insults Zverkov. Ferfichkin angrily says that the underground man deserves to be "whacked in the face," and he challenges Ferfichkin to a duel, at which everyone simply laughs. The underground man continues to drink at the party and paces back and forth, stomping his boots. None of the others pay him any attention. They all leave to go to a brothel, and as they are leaving the underground man begs Zverkov for his forgiveness. He decides to follow them to the brothel and demands that Simonov lend him money for a prostitute. He thinks that he will either win his former schoolmates over as friends or he will slap Zverkov in the face.

While riding a cab to the brothel, the underground man decides he will definitely slap Zverkov in the face to regain his honor. But when he arrives there, he can't find Zverkov. He sleeps with a young prostitute named Liza and then wakes up at two in the morning, feeling "misery and bile" growing in him and "seeking an outlet." He tells Liza about a dead prostitute whose coffin he saw being carried to a cemetery earlier in the day, and speaks at length of the horrible life of a prostitute. He and Liza speak about families and marriage, and he encourages her to leave the brothel, describing the "pure bliss" of married life. He tells Liza that if she continues being a prostitute she will lose everything. . . health, youth, beauty, and hope," and will wind up dead with no one to remember her. Liza cries, and the underground man gives her his address.

The next day, the underground man writes a letter to Simonov, apologizing for his behavior. He worries that Liza will come and visit his house and see how revolting he really is. Liza doesn't come for a few days, to the underground man's relief. He describes his servant Apollon, who is arrogant and disobedient. One day, he tries to withhold Apollon's wages and force him to beg for his money, but Apollon simply stares at the underground man until he breaks down and demands that Apollon show him respect before getting paid. As the two are fighting, Liza arrives. The underground man feels ashamed in front of Liza and bursts into tears. He tells her that he has no pity for her and wants her to leave him alone. Liza embraces him, and he cries hysterically. After recovering, the underground man feels incapable of returning any love or affection to her, and wants her to leave him by himself in "peace and quiet." As Liza finally prepares to leave, the underground man slips some money into her hand "out of spite." Liza refuses the money and leaves immediately. He starts to run after her and imagines how he could "fall down before her, sob with remorse, kiss her feet, and beg her forgiveness," but then stops and lets her go. He tells his readers that he hasn't seen Liza since, and says that he feels ashamed to have written his notes. He angrily says that all human are "estranged from life," and "cripples." He says that he represents the truth about mankind, claiming, "in my life I've only taken to an extreme that which you haven't even dared to take halfway." He says he doesn't want to write anymore. An author's note concludes the novella, telling the reader that the underground man wrote more notes, but that this seems like a good place to stop.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Underground Man – The unnamed protagonist of the novella, who is introduced as "representative of the current generation." He is sick, spiteful, self-contradictory, and pessimistic, and his rambling thoughts and monologues make up the majority of the novella. He repeatedly addresses his readers, and tells them that he is "overly conscious." He continually over-thinks and questions things, and this hyper-consciousness prevents him from taking any real action. He is a lonely man who constantly vacillates between wanting society's acknowledgment and approval and wanting nothing to do with any other person. He has a low opinion of humanity and denies the idea that humans are essentially rational and only desire what is best for them, thinking instead that men are foolish, irrational, and cruel. The underground man is obsessed with literature and often models his thoughts and actions on things

he has read. He is thus separated in a certain sense from reality, as well as from society. He is presented as a pessimistic exemplar of modern man, and claims that he merely takes to extremes the qualities that most people suppress in themselves. Dostoevsky thus suggests that everyone has a little bit of the underground man's pessimism and spite in him or her.

The Officer – In part one, the underground man tries to get into a bar fight, and he steps in an officer's way. The officer, though, merely moves him aside without saying anything, practically ignoring him. The underground man thinks of challenging him to a duel, but decides to get his revenge by bumping into him in the street and forcing the officer to acknowledge him as a person. When he finally gathers the courage to do this, though, the officer pretends not to notice the underground man. The officer is representative of how society tends to ignore and neglect the underground man.

Zverkov – One of the underground man's former schoolmates, an attractive and popular man whom the underground man particularly dislikes for his bragging and stories of romantic exploits. Simonov, Ferfichkin, and Trudolyubov throw Zverkov a going-away party in part two, and the underground man invites himself to the party. There, he gets drunk and insults Zverkov. He later apologizes to Zverkov, but Zverkov tells him that he couldn't possibly feel insulted by the underground man. The underground man follows Zverkov and his other former schoolmates to the brothel after the party, hoping to slap Zverkov in the face in order to regain some honor, but he doesn't find Zverkov or the other party guests at the brothel.

Simonov – One of the underground man's former schoolmates, whose apartment he visits one night when he feels lonely. Simonov, Ferfichkin, and Trudolyubov are planning a going-away party for Zverkov, and the underground man invites himself to the party. Simonov is reluctant to let the underground man come, as the underground man owes him money. After the party, the underground man shamefully begs Simonov for more money, so that he can go with everyone else to the brothel.

Ferfichkin – One of the underground man's former schoolmates, whom he sees at Simonov's apartment and at Zverkov's going-away party. Ferfichkin was the underground man's "bitterest enemy" in school, where he was a show-off. After the underground man insults Zverkov at the party, Ferfichkin threatens the underground man, and the underground man replies by challenging Ferfichkin to a duel. Ferfichkin and the other party guests find this ridiculous.

Liza – A prostitute whom the underground man sleeps with after following Zverkov to a brothel. The underground man is disgusted with having had loveless sex with her and talks to her about her pathetic situation as a prostitute. He brings her to tears, but then gives her his address, and she visits him soon after, looking for his help in escaping the brothel. He refuses, but then breaks down and cries. She embraces the underground man as he cries, but he then tries to give her money and she leaves, refusing his money.

Apollon – The underground man's defiant, disobedient servant. The underground man tries to exercise his power over Apollon by withholding his wages and forcing him to ask for the money. However, Apollon merely stares at the underground man, driving him crazy, until he gives him his wages. More strong-willed than his master, Apollon is a source of humiliation for the underground man, who calls him his "executioner."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Anton Antonych Setochkin – The underground man's boss, from whom he borrows money multiple times.

Trudolyubov – One of the underground man's former schoolmates, whom he sees at Simonov's apartment and at Zverkov's going-away party. The underground man says that Trudolyubov habitually treated him "as a nonentity."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THOUGHT VS. ACTION

Most of *Notes from Underground* is made up of the underground man's rambling thoughts. There is little real action in the plot. This is because, quite simply, there is little action in the underground man's life. As he himself says, he is a man of "overly acute consciousness," and his excessive intelligence basically cripples him. He over-thinks and questions everything, and cannot settle on a "primary cause" of anything that would then allow him to decide what action to take. Similarly, he believes that men of action often act out of a simplistic idea of justice that they think vindicates their actions. The underground man, by contrast, cannot settle for an overly simplistic understanding of justice. He thinks things over ceaselessly and sometimes ponders things so much that he changes his mind or contradicts himself. Thus, he can find no basis for acting in a particular way, since he can easily argue himself out of doing something.

The underground man often imagines action but never follows through, as when he is on his way to the brothel in part two and thinks about how he will slap Zverkov in the face. (He never actually does this, as he arrives too late to find Zverkov.) This lack of actual action leads to a pervasive sense of boredom and inertia in the novella, which the underground man describes as

key parts of his underground life and which sometimes give rise to his sense of spite toward others. Crippled by his own intelligence, all he can do is retreat underground, talk to himself, and write his thoughts down. Through this pathetic character, Dostoevsky is able to pose a number of troubling (and perhaps ultimately unanswerable) questions: would it be better for the underground man to be stupid and therefore able to act and live like a normal person? What is the value of intelligence or thought if one cannot act on it? And is it possible for a truly intelligent, acutely conscious person to live a functioning life in modern society?

LONELINESS, ISOLATION, AND SOCIETY

The underground man is a lonely, isolated character. He speaks and writes from a mysterious place underground, separated from society. But even before retreating underground, he feels isolated even within society, whether at school (where he had no friends) or at work (where he hates all his coworkers). The underground man lives a life effectively in isolation from mainstream society, but it is not clear whether he does this out of choice—does he reject society or does society reject him? Does he crave the acknowledgment of others or does he not even want it? At times, it seems that he disdains society and voluntarily withdraws himself into isolation because he feels that he is more intelligent than everyone else. However, at times it seems that he lives by himself simply because no one likes him, and because he is rude and cruel to others. In the end, it is probably a bit of both: having been rejected by many people, the underground man scorns them and withdraws, but this withdrawal makes others dislike him even more, so that he withdraws still more. This cyclical pattern results in his near-complete isolation from society.

The underground man has an ambivalent attitude toward society: on the one hand, he despises it, but on the other hand he envies those who can function in mainstream society and occasionally wishes that he had friends or companions. This ambivalence can be seen especially through his struggles with shame and embarrassment. These are social emotions, as they are only felt in relation to other people: one feels ashamed or embarrassed in front of other people or because one imagines what others might think. Around others, the underground man continually feels ashamed and embarrassed, as can be seen in his interaction with the officer in part one, or at the party in part two. As these feelings hint that he really does care what others think, the underground man becomes angry at himself for feeling embarrassed and ends up vacillating between embarrassment and defiantly acting in a rude, shameful way (as when he paces back and forth during the party for Zverkov).

Because of his problematic relationship to society, the underground man lives a lonely, boring life. However, his isolation does afford him certain benefits. By being so separated from mainstream society, he gains a critical distance from which he can observe, critique, and comment on society. Also, when growing up, his isolation from others gave him time to read, learn, and become a very intelligent person. Thus, the underground man does not entirely hate his isolation. He goes back and forth between wanting to be a part of society and wanting nothing to do with it, between feeling unfairly exiled from others and voluntarily exiling himself. Perhaps the most pathetic thing about his character is not so much that he is isolated from others, but that he cannot even make up his mind about what he wants—friendship or solitude.

HUMAN NATURE

Notes from Underground opens with the underground man's famous assessment of his own character: "I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." He is pessimistic and sees the worst in himself. Moreover, he often generalizes from his own nature and his own ideas about people to speak broadly of human nature. He presents himself not only as one spiteful, sick man, but as an example of how mankind is truly spiteful and sick. He has a very a low opinion of modern man, claiming that anyone of intelligence in the 19th century cannot be a man of action or character. He disagrees with the idea that humans are rational and naturally improve or desire what is good for them, citing examples from history to prove that human society is cruel and bloody in part one.

Additionally, he routinely compares humans to animals. He speaks of people as either bulls or mice in part one, and repeatedly says that people treat him like an insignificant fly. These recurrent animal similes are the underground man's way of bringing humans down to the level of the animal, suggesting that they are simply one kind of animal among many on this planet, with no special dignity. This tendency to degrade humanity can be related to Darwin's theory of evolution, which had recently been translated into Russian when Dostoevsky was writing *Notes from Underground*. In part one, the underground man mentions the scientific discovery that man is descended from apes (an exaggeratedly simplistic version of Darwinism). This idea is a huge blow to the human ego, suggesting that humans are not special creatures, but merely one evolved species out of many.

The underground man thinks of humans as foolish, irrational, cruel, and despicable creatures—including himself. But to what degree does this deluded character speak to a universal human condition or nature? The underground man himself addresses this very question at the end of the novella. Addressing his readers, he says, "I've only taken to an extreme that which you haven't even dared to take halfway." He claims that his pessimism is simply honesty about true human nature, and that others have similar thoughts or tendencies as he does but suppress them or deceive themselves. Regardless of whether

one agrees with the underground man that his pessimistic conception of human nature is the truth, it is hard to disagree that spite, malice, and irrationality don't form at least part of human nature. The underground man may take these aspects of humanity to an extreme, but his example serves as a corrective to those alluded to in part one, who would naively think that man can be completely good and completely rational. We may not be mere insects, but we are not always noble heroes, either.

REASON AND RATIONALITY

The Russian writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky and his followers believed that man only desired what was in is best interest, and that mankind could be improved and taught to listen to reason so that society would progress to a kind of utopian existence, symbolized by the image of a perfect **crystal palace** (which the underground man derogatively refers to). The underground man can be seen as Dostoevsky's answer to Chernyshevsky.

In part one, he rambles and rants about numerous topics, but the primary one is a debate over rationality: to what degree are humans rational? Do they really only ever desire what is good for them? The underground man defiantly asserts that man is not rational and insists that human history is irrational. He argues that the perfect existence of the crystal palace, with everyone behaving reasonably, is impossible—and not even desirable. The underground man's major claim is that man will occasionally desire something not in his best interest, if only to demonstrate his ability and free will to do so. If mankind behaved only according to reason, logic, and scientific fact, he would become an "organ stop," as the underground man puts it. Life would be nothing but obeying the rules of scientific and mathematic fact, summed up by the simple equation, **two times two equals four**. If the whole world operates according to logic, facts, and equations, how can there be free will or human choice? The ability to choose actions that are not logical, that are not reasonable or "right" decisions is the very thing that gives humans free will and individuality, argues the underground man. The only way to stand up for humanity is to oppose the bland rationality of two-times-two-equals-four and delight in the irrationality of two-times-two-equals-five.

Not only does the underground man argue for the importance of irrational behavior, but he also provides an example through his own actions. He often contradicts himself and emphasizes his ability to hold multiple viewpoints at once, to change his mind, and even to be hypocritical. His self-contradiction and ability to disagree with himself is a way of championing individuality over reason. Moreover, in part two, we repeatedly see the underground man act illogically and not in his best interest, as he embarrasses himself and gets himself into awkward, even painful situations, such as inviting himself to Zverkov's party, or going to the brothel, or giving Liza his address. Thus, one can see part two as the proof to the argument of part one. In part one, the underground man argues for the irrationality of human behavior, and in part two he shows examples of his own irrational behavior. Both his arguments and his actions form a powerful counter to the optimism and utopianism of those who would look forward to the perfect rationality of the crystal palace.

SPITE, PAIN, AND SUFFERING

The underground man is a spiteful man (he himself says so), who takes pleasure in annoying and harming others. He irritates his former schoolmates, fantasizes about slapping Zverkov in the face, and drives Liza to tears by describing her horrible situation as a prostitute. This malice toward others is one way in which the underground man separates himself from others and shows that he wants no part in mainstream society.

But if the underground man is to some degree a sadist (one derives pleasure from hurting others), he is also at times a bit of a masochist (one who derives pleasure from experiencing pain). He acts in ways that set himself up for awkward and painful social situations, as when he basically crashes Zverkov's party. And, more literally, he even says that to him the pain of a toothache can be pleasurable. He describes a strange pleasure to be found in pain and despair, and perhaps this is what he seeks by spitefully inflicting so much pain on both others and himself.

Another way of understanding all the pain the underground man revels in is as another form of rebellion against oppressive rationality. It makes no sense for the underground man to hurt others for no reason and to hurt himself, but this may be precisely the point. By recklessly behaving in a way that benefits neither him nor others, the underground man proves his ability to defy rationality and live in accordance with his own will, rather than logic—even at the cost of significant suffering.

LITERATURE AND WRITING

One of the ways in which the underground man differs from others and isolates himself is through his obsession with literature. As he recalls in part two, he grew up without many friends and spent much time reading. Similarly, he says that much of his time underground is spent reading. As a solitary activity, reading isolates the underground man from others. Moreover, his excessively literary sensibility prevents him from functioning normally in society. He is obsessed with the idea of duels, for example, a dated practice from traditional literature. He imagines challenging someone to a duel in a bar, but then thinks better of it because he realizes everyone will laugh at him for his talking about such literary things as points of honor. And when he actually does challenge Ferfichkin to a duel, everyone does

laugh at him. Moreover, Liza tells him that he talks like a book, referring to his highly literary language. The underground man's preoccupation with literature thus makes him socially awkward. Even when among others, his habit of reading has an isolating effect on him.

Literature does, however, offer one possible way for the underground man to overcome his isolation: through writing. By writing, the underground man can enter into a kind of conversation with a community of readers. While most of the novella is made of his interior monologues, he is able to turn his writing into a kind of dialogue by imagining the responses of his readers and replying to them. The conversational qualities of the underground man's writing can be seen as an attempted response to isolation, as his writing becomes a conversation with himself and with his imagined readers. However, at the end of part two, the underground man rejects even this community of readers, when he says that he shouldn't have even written his notes. Thus, literature, writing, and reading remain ultimately solitary pursuits for the lonely underground man. Even when not reading or writing by himself, he is trapped within his fantasy-tinged world influenced by what he has read. But literature is not wholly detrimental. While his obsession with literature tends to isolate the underground man, it can also be seen as offering him a kind of personal escape from his bleak life. And, ironically, it is through the very medium of literature that Dostoevsky is able to communicate these negative, potentially harmful aspects of excessive reading and writing.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is, at least partially, a response to Nikolay Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to Be Done?* In this book, Chernyshevsky espoused an optimistic confidence in human rationality. He thought that if people could be taught well enough, they would naturally desire what is best for them, and society could continually improve until we reached a utopian existence symbolized by the image of a crystal palace—a perfect building where everyone lived in harmony. This same symbolic building shows up in part one of *Notes from Underground*, where the underground man vehemently disagrees with Chernyshevsky, championing the importance of irrationality and free will against the logic and laws of nature. The underground man says that he would hate to live in the crystal palace, because he wouldn't be able to stick out his tongue rudely there. In other words, he wouldn't be free to indulge his spite and irrational desires. The crystal palace thus symbolizes essentially the same thing in Dostoevsky's novella as it had in Chernyshevsky's novel: a utopian place of purely rational living. In *Notes from Underground*, though, this utopia is denigrated as an impossible dream, and one that wouldn't even be desirable if it were possible.

TWO TIMES TWO EQUALS FOUR

This simple equation epitomizes rationality and scientific and mathematical fact for the underground man. In its simplicity and truth, it is undeniable and leaves no room for disagreement or protest. The underground man says that some people think the whole world and all of human life can be understood according to reason and logic of the kind exemplified by two-times-two-equals-four. But, he strongly disagrees with this notion. He asserts that if life were nothing but a series of equations and logical laws to be figured out, mankind would have no free will; life would simply be dictated by reason and logic, and man would be nothing but an "organ stop," acted upon by natural forces. In the face of this, the underground man stresses the importance of man's irrationality and his ability to behave illogically. The equation two-times-two-equals-four symbolizes the oppressive reason and logic against which the underground man struggles. Arguing for the importance of free will, he insists that two-times-two-equals-four is "no longer life," and claims that mankind's freedom lies in its ability to believe illogically that "two times two makes five."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Norton & Company edition of *Notes from Underground* published in 2000.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness; I'm not even sure what hurts. I'm not being treated and never have been, though I respect both medicine and doctors. Besides, I'm extremely superstitious—well at least enough to respect medicine. (I'm sufficiently educated not to be superstitious, but I am, anyway.) No, gentlemen, it's out of spite that I don't wish to be treated. . . . My liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening paragraph, the Underground Man introduces himself to the reader. His self-denigrating words establish the tone and themes of the rest of the novel. In this passage, we learn that the Underground Man is sick with a mysterious illness, but refuses to be treated by a doctor, a fact that immediately reveals his mistrust in society––a mistrust that he clings to even at the expense of his own health. We see that he is "spiteful," "unattractive," "extremely superstitious," and masochistic, exemplified by his declaration "My liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!" Yet he seems to take a perverse pride in these qualities, akin to the pride in his comment that he is "sufficiently educated not to be superstitious."

Indeed, it is clear from this passage that the Underground Man is deliberately contrarian, taking pleasure in the shock value of presenting himself as a repulsive, ignoble person, and in opposing mainstream values. He even appears proud to contradict himself, pointing out that his education and intelligence should rid him of superstition, but that he is superstitious all the same. Similarly, he respects "both medicine and doctors," but refuses to be treated "out of spite" – a deliberately irrational, self-sabotaging move.

❝ Yes, sir, an intelligent man in the nineteenth century must be, is morally obliged to be, principally a characterless creature; a man possessing character, a man of action, is fundamentally a limited creature.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has continued to tell the reader about himself, explaining that he used to work for the government as a civil servant, and enjoyed being rude to people on purpose. He then contradicts himself, saying he was lying about ever being rude, but that he wasn't a good person either. In this passage, he concludes that "an intelligent man in the nineteenth century" must be "characterless," because to be otherwise is to be "limited." Here the Underground Man again reveals his contrarian logic; ordinarily we would think of being a man of "character" and action" as being *less*limited as a result of these qualities.

By situating himself as "an intelligent man of the nineteenth century," the Underground Man emphasizes that he is presenting himself not as a curious oddity, but as a figure epitomizing certain social themes and issues of his era. Although he rejects society, he remains invested in critiquing what he perceives to be its failings.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ I swear to you, gentlemen, that being overly conscious is a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease. Ordinary human consciousness would be more than sufficient for everyday human needs—that is, even half or a quarter of the amount of consciousness that's available to a cultured man in our unfortunate nineteenth century, especially to one who has the particular misfortune of living in St. Petersburg, the most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world. (Cities can be either premeditated or unpremeditated.) It would have been entirely sufficient, for example, to have the consciousness with which all so-called spontaneous people and men of action are endowed.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has confessed that he has tried to become an "insect," but that it is not possible, because he is "overly conscious." In this passage, he explains that he sees being overly conscious as "a genuine, full-fledged disease," and that it would be preferable to have "even half or a quarter of the amount of consciousness" that he possesses as a cultured and well-educated resident of nineteenth-century St Petersburg. He seems to be arguing something similar to the idea that "ignorance is bliss," that thinking too much about things inevitably leads to discontent.

Having earlier in the story criticized "men of action," he now speaks of them with a degree of envy, saying that their level of consciousness is "entirely sufficient." His comment that St Petersburg is a "premeditated city" shows that even on the level of urban geography, too much thought has a negative, crippling effect.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

"There is some enjoyment even in a toothache," I reply. I've had a toothache for a whole month; I know what's what. In this case, of course, people don't rage in silence; they moan. . . . In the first place, these moans express all the aimlessness of the pain which consciousness finds so humiliating, the whole system of natural laws about which you really don't give a damn, but as a result of which you're suffering nonetheless, while nature isn't. . . . I beseech you, gentlemen, to listen to the moans of an educated man of the nineteenth century who's suffering from a toothache. . . His moans become somehow nasty, despicably spiteful, and they go on for days and nights. Yet he himself knows that his moans do him no good: he knows better than anyone else that he's merely irritating himself and others in vain. . . Well, it's precisely in this awareness and shame that the voluptuousness resides.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has taken on the voice of the reader, imagining the reader laughing at him and suggesting he will say he loves having a toothache next. The Underground Man then "responds" to this imagined interjection by saying that yes, he *does* derive pleasure from a toothache. This exchange between the narrator and his anticipated reader is comic; the Underground Man is aware of his own ridiculousness, and seems determined to embrace it. Yet at the same time, there is also a degree of truth within the Underground Man's foolish, flamboyant claims. The fact that people derive pleasure from an ailment such as a toothache––whether the source of the pleasure is the pain itself, or the opportunity to complain about the pain––is an example of an illogical, yet completely recognizable human characteristic.

Indeed, the Underground Man's use of the term "voluptuousness" suggests that by behaving in irrational, contradictory, and self-sabotaging ways, people make life fuller and richer. The implication is that if everyone behaved logically and never indulged in perverse or pointless acts, life would be mechanical and dull. On the other hand, this fact does not redeem or erase the ridiculousness of indulging in one's own pain. The young man with the toothache "knows that his moans do him no good"; in fact, they make the situation worse by "irritating himself and others in vain." Yet the Underground Man implies that it would be even *worse* if no one ever behaved in this silly, self-destructive way.

Part 1, Chapter 7 Quotes

Oh, tell me who was first to announce, first to proclaim that man does nasty things simply because he doesn't know his own true interest; and that if he were to be enlightened, if his eyes were to be opened to his true, normal interests, he would stop doing nasty things at once and would immediately become good and noble, because, being so enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would realize that his own advantage really did lie in the good; and that it's well known that there's not a single man capable of acting knowingly against his own interest; consequently, he would, so to speak, begin to do good out of necessity. Oh, the child! Oh, the pure, innocent babe! Well, in the first place, when was it during all these millennia, that man has ever acted only in his own interest? . . . And what if it turns out that man's advantage sometimes not only may, but even must in certain circumstances, consist precisely in his desiring something harmful to himself instead of something advantageous?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has described a greedy person he knew who only cared about red wine; he confesses that he would like to become like this person, but that it is possible only in his dreams. In this passage, he discusses the concept that people do "nasty things" only because they don't know or understand their own interests, and if they were "enlightened," then they would act in a positive, upright manner. This is a fairly well-accepted (if optimistic) view of human nature, but one that the Underground Man disagrees with vehemently. He declares that no person in "all these millennia" has acted only in his own interest, and that sometimes there is a perverse kind of advantage in "desiring something harmful" for yourself.

While the Underground Man's claims may sound absurd, this does not mean they are inaccurate. In fact, Dostoevsky was ahead of his time in describing many aspects of human nature that became central concerns of 20th century literature, philosophy, and psychology, including neurosis, irrationality, and self-destructive behavior. However, at the time the novella was written, these phenomena were not widely discussed and acknowledged, and thus the Underground Man's views push him to the fringes of society, at odds with the people around him.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

Who would want to desire according to some table? And that's not all: he would immediately be transformed from a person into an organ stop or something of that sort; because what is man without desire, without will, and without wishes if not a stop in an organ pipe?

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has described the widely-held belief that as human civilization advances, we will eventually reach a "crystal palace," a state in which everyone lives happily and harmoniously according to the laws of nature. The Underground Man believes that this is neither possible nor desirable, and in this passage explains that if human free will was reducible to science, this would make a person nothing more than an "organ stop." The "stop" is the part of the organ (a musical instrument) that pushes wind through the organ's pipes in order to make sound, and it is only activated by someone pressing the keys. The Underground Man thus implies that rational, scientific viewpoints see people as a mechanism controlled by an external force – in this case, the laws of nature–and in so doing eliminate their free will, their very personhood.

But I repeat for the one-hundredth time, there is one case, only one, when a man may intentionally, consciously desire even something harmful to himself, something stupid, even very stupid, namely: in order to have the right to desire something even very stupid and not be bound by an obligation to desire only what's smart.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has earlier expressed his view that scientific understandings of rationality and free will reduce a person to nothing more than an "organ stop." According to him, this cannot be true because humans do not tend to act in their own interest––rather, as he explains in this passage, people deliberately act against their own advantage simply to prove that they can. The Underground Man's statement that there is "one case, only one" in which people act against their own interest is purposely meant to be ironic, as this one case encapsulates every occasion and reason why a person might behave in a self-sabotaging manner under the umbrella of "in order to have the right to desire something very stupid."

In short, anything can be said about world history, anything that might occur to the most disordered imagination. There's only one thing that can't possibly be said about it—that it's rational.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has discussed people's desire to behave in a self-destructive, irrational way just to prove that they have the right to do so. Here he claims that "anything can be said about world history" except that it is "rational." Once again, the Underground Man expresses disdain for the idea that as civilization advances, humanity is becoming more logical, fair and compassionate. Instead, he views the history of humanity as chaotic, filled with meaningless suffering and nonsensical acts. This perspective directly opposed many nineteenth-century understandings of history, including Enlightenment and Marxist views. Under these ideologies, history is teleological, meaning that it operates according to cause-and-effect momentum and moves in a particular direction.

The Underground Man's view of history, meanwhile, more closely resembles movements of thought that emerged following the First World War, such as existentialism. People who had previously believed that humanity was growing more rational and compassionate over time were shocked and disillusioned by the senseless brutality of the war. As a result, many developed a more cynical understanding of mankind as cruel, illogical, and self-destructive. What is striking is that Dostoevsky's Underground Man espouses these exact ideas many decades *before* World War 1 took place.

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Two times two makes four—why, in my opinion, it's mere insolence. Two times two makes four stands there brazenly with its hands on its hips, blocking your path and spitting at you. I agree that two times two makes four is a splendid thing; but if we're going to lavish praise, then two times two makes five is sometimes also a very charming little thing.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has claimed that the reader whom he is addressing wishes to make people more rational using the laws of science, a notion he finds outrageous. In this passage, he declares that "two times two makes four" is "mere insolence." He personifies this mathematical formula, describing it as standing brazenly with its hands on its hips." Through this personification, the Underground Man makes explicit the connection between logical thinking and rigid authoritarianism. Of course, mathematics by itself is merely an abstract mode of thought, and thus it is strange to describe it as "insolent." On the other hand, by making the connection between mathematical reason and authority, the Underground Man emphasizes that logic is used in a cruel and oppressive way.

Such thinking stands in direct opposition to the contention of Enlightenment thinkers (who were influential at the time when the novel was written) that scientific reason will automatically lead to a more humane, compassionate world. However, the Underground Man also contradicts himself in this passage; having called two times two makes four "insolence," he then describes it as "a splendid thing." Rather than undermining the Underground Man's argument, however, this contradiction actually supports it, as contradiction itself (like two times two equals five) is an example of illogical thinking. The Underground Man thereby emphasizes the connection between irrationality and freedom, even if that means the freedom to contradict oneself and not make any sense.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ You believe in the crystal palace, eternally indestructible, that is, one at which you can never stick out your tongue furtively nor make a rude gesture, even with your fist hidden away. Well, perhaps I'm so afraid of this building precisely because it's made of crystal and it's eternally indestructible, and because it won't be possible to stick one's tongue out even furtively.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has returned to the concept of the crystal palace, and in this passage he provides a more detailed explanation for why the idea is so reprehensible to him. He is disturbed by the notion that the palace is "indestructible," representing a frozen, unshakeable state of existence that can never be challenged or changed. However, what the Underground Man seems to find most horrifying is the prospect that in the crystal palace it would be impossible to "stick one's tongue out" or make another "rude gesture." This passage is comic, and at first seems entirely absurd. If people were living in a perfect state of reason, compassion, and peace, would it really matter that they couldn't stick their tongues out?

However, this superficial silliness belies a more incisive and serious point. The freedom to act in a rude and stupid manner is valuable not because stupidity is important, but because freedom is. As the Underground Man has previously argued, if people do not have the ability to act in a foolish and self-destructive manner, then they are really nothing more than machines. Note that sticking one's tongue out in particular is a gesture reminiscent of childhood; this is significant, as many opponents of scientific rationalism embrace childhood as a state of existence in opposition to the oppressive forces of logic and authoritarianism.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

Of course, I hated all my fellow office-workers from the first to the last and despised every one of them; yet, at the same time it was as if I were afraid of them. Sometimes it happened that I would even regard them as superior to me. At this time these changes would suddenly occur: first I would despise them, then I would regard them as superior to me. . . . All others resembled one another as sheep in a flock. Perhaps I was the only one who constantly thought of himself as a coward and a slave; and I thought so precisely because I was so cultured. But not only did I think so, it actually was so: I was a coward and a slave. I say this without any embarrassment. Every decent man of our time is and must be a coward and a slave. This is how he's made and what he's meant to be. And not only at the present time, as the result of some accidental circumstance, but in general at all times, a decent man must be a coward and a slave.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has jumped back in time, recalling his life at the age of 24 when he worked as a civil servant. He has recalled that he had no friends, and in the office didn't even look at anyone. In this passage, he describes the mixed feelings he possessed toward his coworkers––he "despised everyone one of them," but also felt inferior to them and was fixated on the idea that he himself was "a coward and a slave."

Once again, this passage powerfully describes the contradictory, irrational, and self-sabotaging nature of modern subjectivity. The Underground Man's conflicting feelings about his coworkers, while seemingly paradoxical, actually reinforce one another. He resents them for their conformity ("as sheep in a flock"), but can't help but feel isolated from the group.

One morning, although I never engaged in literary activities, it suddenly occurred to me to draft a description of this officer as a kind of exposé, a caricature, in the form of a tale. I wrote it with great pleasure. I exposed him; I even slandered him. At first I altered his name only slightly, so that it could be easily recognized; but then, upon careful reflection, I changed it. Then I sent the tale off to Notes of the Fatherland. but such exposés were no longer in fashion, and they didn't publish my tale. I was very annoyed by that. At times I simply choked on my spite. Finally, I resolved to challenge my opponent to a duel. I composed a beautiful, charming letter to him. . . But, thank God (to this day I thank the Almighty with tears in my eyes), I didn't send that letter.

Related Characters: The Officer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has described an evening when he saw a man be kicked out of a bar for fighting, inspiring the Underground Man himself to try to get into a fight. His attempt to provoke an officer is unsuccessful; at first he considers challenging the officer to a duel, but instead goes home and writes a letter slandering the officer. This passage reveals the bizarre and comic lengths to which the Underground Man goes in his attempt to create conflict with the officer. He boasts of having "exposed" and "slandered" the officer, but it is unclear what this actually means––the officer treated him in an entirely nonchalant, disinterested fashion, and thus it is difficult to imagine what there is to "expose."

This passage also highlights the fact that the Underground Man is continually out of step with the rest of society. The journal to which he sent his letter rejects it because "such exposés were no longer in fashion," and the Underground Man's reaction to this is to pursue the even more outdated, unfashionable gesture of trying to challenge the officer to a duel. The implication of these details is that the Underground Man's interest in literature has left him disconnected from the reality of contemporary society. His hope to be perceived as a bold, reckless individual results in him appearing flamboyantly and ridiculously pathetic.

Suddenly, three paces away from my enemy, I made up my mind unexpectedly; I closed my eyes and—we bumped into each other forcefully, shoulder to shoulder! I didn't yield an inch and walked by him on completely equal footing! He didn't even turn around to look at me and pretended that he hadn't even noticed; but he was merely pretending, I'm convinced of that. To this very day I'm convinced of that! Naturally, I got the worst of it; he was stronger, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I'd achieved my goal, I'd maintained my dignity, I hadn't yielded one step, and I'd publicly placed myself on an equal social footing with him. I returned home feeling completely avenged for everything. I was ecstatic. I rejoiced and sang Italian arias.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), The Officer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has concocted an elaborate plan to again bump into the officer, who he now considers his mortal enemy. He has even borrowed money for expensive clothes to wear during the act, yet repeatedly loses his nerve at the last minute. Finally he achieves his aim, and in this passage describes the triumph he feels as a result––although the officer does not seem to even notice. This episode is one of the most comic moments in the novel, showing the Underground Man to be a ridiculous, delusional character. To some degree, this may decrease the reader's sympathy for him, as his bizarre, destructive desires seem not only incomprehensible, but totally disconnected from reality.

On the other hand, this passage raises significant questions about the nature of perception and social interaction. Although the Underground Man's level of delusion is extreme, it nonetheless illustrates the fundamental impossibility of knowing what other people are really thinking. It certainly seems unlikely that the officer was "merely pretending" not to notice the Underground Man, but how could we determine this for sure? The Underground Man's assertion that he "publicly placed myself on an equal social footing with [the officer]" similarly highlights the absurd nature of social status. In all likelihood, nobody on the street noticed or cared that the Underground Man acted as he did; yet the Underground Man himself feels vindicated to the point of ecstasy. Given the Underground Man's joy, does it even matter what others around him think?

Once I even had a friend of sorts. but I was already a despot at heart; I wanted to exercise unlimited power over his soul; I wanted to instill in him contempt for his surroundings; and I demanded from him a disdainful and definitive break with those surroundings. I frightened him with my passionate friendship, and I reduced him to tears and convulsions. He was a naïve and giving soul, but as soon as he'd surrendered himself to me totally, I began to despise him and reject him immediately—as if I only needed to achieve a victory over him, merely to subjugate him.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has described his years in school, confessing that he was lonely and that his classmates taunted him. The Underground Man describes the way that the other boys' rejection and disdain for him made him feel disdainful to them in return. In this passage, he describes his one friendship, with a "naïve and giving" boy who the Underground Man ends up tormenting. The Underground Man's description of this episode creates a bleak and disturbing portrait of human relationships. Although the friend himself is described in positive terms, the Underground Man seems uninterested in these good qualities. Instead, the friend's appeal lies in the opportunity the Underground Man has to "subjugate him."

Indeed, in no sense does this friendship soften or redeem the Underground Man; rather, he uses it as an opportunity to drag his friend into his own misanthropic view of the world. The Underground Man's confession that he wanted to have a friend in order to "exercise unlimited power over his soul" is comically sinister, but nonetheless speaks to the idea that all human relationships are fundamentally governed by manipulation and the desire for power. The Underground Man's ruthlessness is illustrated by his seemingly uncaring attitude toward his friend's anguish, and the fact that as soon as the friend submits to him, he begins to "despise him."

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Naturally, it'll all be over after that. The department will banish me from the face of the earth. They'll arrest me, try me, drive me out of the service, send me to prison; ship me off to Siberia for resettlement, Never mind! Fifteen years later when they let me out of jail, a beggar in rags, I'll drag myself off to see him. I'll find him in some provincial town. He'll be married and happy. He'll have a grown daughter. . . . I'll say, "Look, you monster, look at my sunken cheeks and my rags. I've lost everything—career, happiness, art science, a *beloved woman*—all because of you. Here are the pistols. I came here to load my pistol and . . . and I forgive you." Then I'll fire into the air, and he'll never hear another word from me again. . . .
I was actually about to cry, even though I knew for a fact at that very moment that all this was straight out of Silvio and Lermontov's *Masquerade*.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), Zverkov

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has embarrassed himself at Zverkov's party, drunkenly making a toast in which he insults Zverkov. Although the other guests react furiously, he nonetheless decides to follow them when they go to a brothel after the party, and begs Zverkov for forgiveness. The Underground Man journeys to the brothel separately from the other guests, and as he does so he fantasizes about violently avenging himself against Zverkov. His idea of being exiled to Siberia and returning to kill Zverkov in a duel is clearly melodramatic, with the narrative arc and detail of a fictional story––and indeed, at the end of the passage the Underground Man reveals he has derived this fantasy from actual works of fiction: Pushkin's short story "The Shot" and Lermontov's play "Masquerade."

Once again, it is clear that the Underground Man's view of reality has been distorted by his indulgence in literature. The texts he mentions have evidently had such a great influence over him that he begins to confuse their plots with his own life. In one sense, this can be read as a subtle criticism of the literature the Underground Man describes. While these texts have given him grandiose ideas about honor, revenge, and dueling, these notions seem far from reality. The characters depicted in *Notes From the Underground*, rather than being courageous and noble, areinstead narrow-minded, conformist people who behave in an unglamorous, unappealing manner. Although this makes for a less dramatic narrative, it is arguably closer to the truth of human nature.

❝ It's a different thing altogether; even though I degrade and defile myself, I'm still no one's slave; if I want to leave, I just get up and go. I shake it all off and I'm a different man. But you must realize right from the start that you're a slave. Yes, a slave!

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), Liza

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has had sex with Liza, a prostitute in the brothel, and at two in the morning wakes up next to her, feeling nauseated. They discuss her life, and the Underground has encouraged her to leave the brothel and get married. When Liza comments that not all married women are happy, the Underground Man responds by telling her that she is "a slave," and at least he himself is not a slave. This passage shows the Underground Man's senseless and seemingly boundless cruelty. There is no obvious reason why he torments Liza, who is clearly vulnerable and in an inferior social position to him, and yet he does it anyway.

Furthermore, his cruel words to Liza contradict what he has claimed earlier in the narrative, which is that he is "a coward and a slave." This contradiction suggests that the Underground Man deliberately seeks out people who are weaker to him in order to increase his sense of his own superiority. Meanwhile, Liza's suggestion that she is not necessarily less free than a married woman is apt; under many circumstances, prostitutes did indeed have more freedom than married women. By calling Liza a slave just as he earlier called himself one, however, the Underground Man emphasizes that *everyone* is constrained by societal expectations, material conditions, and their own mind, meaning no one is truly free.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ For a while I felt that I'd turned her soul inside out and had broken her heart; the more I became convinced of this, the more I strived to reach my goal as quickly and forcefully as possible. It was the sport that attracted me; but it wasn't only the sport. . . . I knew that I was speaking clumsily, artificially, even bookishly; in short, I didn't know how to speak except "like a book."

Related Characters: Liza

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has continued to taunt Liza by describing how awful her life will be; he tells her that she will become old and ugly, that she will be beaten and humiliated, and that she will grow sick and die in the brothel, and that everyone will forget her once she's dead.

Having said all this, he announces that he has "broken her heart," and describes the process of having done so as "sport" and speaking "like a book." On one level this passage reveals the alarming extent of the Underground Man's cruelty; on the other hand, it suggests that his actions are somewhat beyond his control. His obsession with literature has left him unable to communicate normally or to care about Liza's feelings.

> I felt particularly reassured and relaxed after nine o'clock in the evening and even began to daydream sweetly at times. For instance: "I save Liza, precisely because she's come to me, and I talk to her. . . . I develop her mind, educate her. At last I notice that she loves me, loves me passionately. . . "Liza," I say, "do you really think I haven't noticed your love? I've seen everything. I guessed but dared not be first to make a claim on your heart because I had such influence over you, and because I was afraid you might deliberately force yourself to respond to my love out of gratitude. . . No, I didn't want that because it would be . . . despotism. . . . It would be indelicate (well, in short, here I launched on some European, George Sandian, inexplicably lofty subtleties. . .) . . . In short, it became crude even to me, and I ended by sticking my tongue out at myself.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), Liza

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has spent days in fear that Liza will come to visit him, and regrets giving her his address. However, after a few days pass he relaxes and begins to fantasize about behaving in a kind, loving manner to Liza. In this dream, the Underground Man adopts a different tone from the one he uses while addressing the reader; he speaks to Liza in a gracious, magnanimous manner, telling her that he noticed her love but that he was wary of having too much power over her. This is a stark contrast to the Underground Man's earlier behavior, as well as his opinions on interpersonal relationships. While he previously confessed to being a despot, in this passage he rejects despotism, and instead of taunting Liza wishes to "save her."

Note that these fantasies emerge only after the Underground Man has convinced himself that Liza will not see him in real life. This highlights the disconnect between the Underground Man's delusions about people (including himself) and the way in which people (and the Underground Man himself) actually behave. Indeed, the Underground Man was highly disturbed by the notion that Liza might actually come to his house, highlighting the fact that he doesn't want real people to shatter his delusions. This explains why the Underground Man is so obsessed with literature––it provides material for his fantasies (note the mention in this passage of the writer George Sand) while not threatening to destroy those fantasies in the way that real life inevitably does.

> But in those days I was so embittered by everyone that I decided, heaven knows why or for what reason, to *punish* Apollon by not paying him his wages for two whole weeks. . . . I resolved to say nothing to him about it and even remain silent on purpose, to conquer his pride and force him to be the first one to mention it. Then I would pull all seven rubles out of a drawer and show him that I actually had the money and had intentionally set it aside, but that "I didn't want to, didn't want to, simply didn't want to pay him his wages, and that I didn't want to simply because *that's what I wanted*," because such was "my will as his master," because he was disrespectful and because he was rude.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), Apollon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has described his servant Apollon, who is elderly, dignified, and rude. The Underground Man declares that he never hated anyone has much as he hated Apollon, and confesses that sometimes he used to withhold Apollon's wages, just to demonstrate that he could. He would even show Apollon the money to emphasize that he was not paying him purely out of his own "will as his master."

Again, the Underground Man appears to derive sadistic pleasure from bullying those who are in an inferior social position and are unable to retaliate. This passage throws the rest of the Underground Man's statements about free will into a new light. If honoring freedom and irrationality means endorsing the right to treat vulnerable people badly, does this change the value of this freedom?

> But, do you know what I really want now? For you to get lost, that's what! I need some peace. Why, I'd sell the whole world for a kopeck if people would only stop bothering me.

Related Characters: The Underground Man (speaker), Liza

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Liza has come to the Underground Man's house, and the Underground Man has shouted at Apollon before bursting into tears in front of Liza. He first feels ashamed in front of Liza and then pities her, before growing cruel again, yelling at her to leave him alone. While this passage hardly contains a sympathetic portrayal of the Underground Man, the reader might well still be drawn to feel sorry for him. His wild mood swings and unpredictable treatment of the other characters seem to stem from a powerful sense of anguish and other emotional forces beyond his control. The Underground Man's statement about "selling the whole world for a kopeck" for some peace may be comically melodramatic, but it nonetheless reveals the Underground Man's deep torment.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

> I know that I'll be told this is incredible—that it's impossible to be as spiteful and stupid as I am; you may even add that it was impossible not to return, or at least to appreciate, this love. But why is this so incredible? In the first place, I could no longer love because, I repeat, for me love meant tyrannizing and demonstrating my moral superiority. All my life I could never conceive of any other kind of love, and I've now reached the point that I sometimes think that love consists precisely in a voluntary gift by the beloved person of the right to tyrannize over him.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has told Liza he hates her, only to feel overwhelmed by an unfamiliar sensation––the catharsis that comes from making himself vulnerable in front of a sympathetic person. The two cry and embrace one another, but the Underground Man insists that he "hates" Liza even as he is drawn to her. In this passage he explains that, strange as it may seem, he could not return Liza's love because to him "love meant tyrannizing and demonstrating my moral superiority." This claim certainly makes the Underground Man a more sympathetic, pitiable character. If it is true that the only kind of life he's ever experienced or ever been able to imagine is "tyrannizing," can we really blame him for his cruel behavior or rejection of society?

At the same time, this passage leaves a key question unresolved. Is the Underground Man a unique case, with a particularly unhappy and desperate experience of life––or does he represent all of humanity? The Underground Man himself is certainly invested in presenting himself as an example of the typical well-educated nineteenth-century man. Yet especially at this point in the narrative, it is easy to diagnose him as an individual with an unusually sad and strange relationship to other people.

> Perhaps I should end these *Notes* here? I think that I made a mistake in beginning to write them. At least, I was ashamed all the time I was writing this *tale*: consequently, it's not really literature, but corrective punishment. . . . A novel needs a hero, whereas here all the traits of an anti-hero have been assembled *deliberately*.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

The Underground Man has confessed to the reader that he never suffered as much as he did during that night with Liza, and that after she left he never saw her again. He ponders ending his "Notes," and admits that he is ashamed of having written them. He claims that the Notes are "not really literature" because they do not have a hero but "an anti-hero" whose negative traits "have been assembled deliberately." This metafictional moment indicates a level of self-awareness different from the kind previously displayed in the novella, in which the Underground Man presupposes that the reader will laugh at or disagree with him.

Rather than express paranoid fears about being ridiculed, the Underground Man takes seriously the idea that literature needs a "hero" with different qualities from those displayed in his story. Indeed, the Underground Man's reference to his narrative as "not really literature" suggests that the Underground Man himself has a level of awareness of the innovative, avante-garde nature of the novella. As the Underground Man implies, works of art that seem strange and unconventional at the time in which they are produced can be the very works that push a medium forward into new, unexplored territory. The Underground Man's self-awareness about the literature he is writing here also has the effect of making him seem more human, less fictional – because of the way he analyzes his own work, his own writing, the Underground Man starts to feel in a way as "real" as Dostoevksy, the actual author of the book.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

A note from the author informs the reader that the following notes and their author (the underground man) are both fictional, but that people like the underground man must exist in society. The author says that the underground man is "representative of the current generation," and tells the reader that in the first part of the following book (called "Underground") the underground man introduces himself, while the second part ("Apropos of Wet Snow") contains the man's notes about "several events in his life."

The underground man is presented to the reader as representative to some degree of all human nature. The author's note foregrounds the notes to follow as the apparently authentic writings of the underground man, who writes about his own experiences.

The underground man begins by telling the reader, "I am a sick man. . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." He says he isn't sure what is wrong with him and refuses to be treated by doctors "out of spite." He says that he realizes he will accomplish nothing by refusing the treatment of doctors, but refuses nonetheless, saying, "My liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!"

The underground man immediately introduces himself as spiteful, one of his main qualities. He refuses doctors' treatment for no good rational or logical reason.

The underground man says he's been living underground for about twenty years. He used to be "in the civil service," and makes a joke about how he took pleasure in being rude because he had to have fun somehow since he wasn't taking bribes. He tells the reader that's a bad joke, but says he defiantly won't cross it out. He says he was rude and spiteful to whoever came to his desk, but "to no effect." Then he says he was lying and was not really a spiteful official. He says he often felt "contradictory elements" swarming inside him.

The underground man lives an isolated life underground. Through writing, the underground man approaches a kind of conversation with his imagined readers to compensate for his loneliness. He often contradicts or corrects himself, showing his illogical ability to hold contrary positions or opinions and the way his intelligence creates a kind of paralysis in him.

The underground man says that he couldn't be spiteful, but he couldn't be good either. He was "neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect." He says that anyone of intelligence in the 19th century cannot be a man of character or of action. He tells his readers that he can sense they are irritated with him, and says he will tell them who he is: he is a "collegiate assessor" in St. Petersburg. He says he will continue to talk about himself.

The underground man generalizes from his own predicament to say that anyone of intelligence cannot be a man of action. He provides an example by which to understand human nature more generally. Intellectual thought and action are presented as, at least to some degree, mutually exclusive.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

The underground man again says he couldn't even become an insect, even though he often wished he would become one. He says this is because he has more than "ordinary human consciousness," and says that "being overly conscious is a disease." Moreover, he was living in St. Petersburg, "the most abstract and premeditated city in the whole world." The more he knew about what was good, the worse person he became. He could, however, still find some pleasure in his despair, from the knowledge that he was a bad person, and "couldn't be otherwise."

The underground man has a low opinion of himself and most others, thinking that he is less than an insect. Being "overly conscious" is like a disease because it prevents him from taking action. The meticulously planned layout of the modern city of St. Petersburg represents the very overly conscious, rational thought the underground man struggles with. He irrationally finds pleasure in his despair.

The underground man says that he is not to blame for being a bad person, because "overly acute consciousness" results in inertia. He says there have been times when he would have been happy to have been slapped in the face. He says he is always "the first to be blamed for everything." He says if he were slapped in the face, he couldn't forgive the person who slapped him, because he "had slapped me in accordance with the laws of nature," but would also be unable to take revenge on him, because he can never decide on a course of action.

The underground man thinks so much that he never gets around to doing much. His "overly acute consciousness" results in so much boredom that he would enjoy even being slapped in the face, as this would at least be an event: in other words, pain would be preferable to boredom, though his highly developed sense of honor also wouldn't let him forgive such a slight. The underground man tends to see others as acting foolishly by "the laws of nature," which he attempts to deny.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Continuing to talk about taking revenge, the underground man says that those who are able to do so act on impulse like a bull and only stop when faced with a wall of "morally decisive, definitive meaning." He says that such a person is stupid, but he is envious of someone like this. By contrast, "a man of overly acute consciousness" thinks of himself as a mouse. Such a "mouse," says the underground man, can feel malice and a desire for revenge, but has too many questions and doubts for it to take action. So, it retreats "ignominiously back into its mousehole."

The underground man literally dehumanizes mankind by continually comparing people to animals, showing his low estimation of human character. His "overly acute consciousness" prevents him from acting on impulses and results in his isolation underground, comparable to the mouse's retreat to its hole.

The underground man continues to describe the mouse in terms that seem to resemble his own life: retreating underground for years, it remembers its humiliation in an "abominable state of half-despair and half-belief," in which there is nonetheless a "strange enjoyment." He then returns to the subject of the men who act impulsively like bulls. He says they give up when faced with impossibility, which he describes as a stone wall that represents "the laws of nature, the conclusions of natural science and mathematics." As an example, he mentions how people simply accept the fact that they are descended "from a monkey."

Through the mouse, the underground man essentially describes his own situation in life: he is isolated from society and finds a "strange enjoyment" in his despair. He is annoyed by the certainties of "the conclusions of natural science and mathematics," such as the Darwinian idea of evolution, which may contribute to the underground man's idea of mankind as simply an animal, like any other.

According to the underground man, most people see the laws of nature and mathematics as inviolable, thinking it is impossible to protest, for example, that "**two times two makes four**." He says that he is disgusted by the "impossibilities of stone walls," represented by scientific fact and as a result sinks "voluptuously into inertia" and spite.

The simple equation "two times two makes four" represents the oppressive rationality that disgusts the underground man. He reacts to the certainties of reason and logic with spite, attempting to prove his free will through his ability to resist reason and natural laws.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

The underground man anticipates that his reader might be thinking, "Ha, ha, ha! Why, you'll be finding enjoyment in a toothache next!" He answers that there is indeed some pleasure in a toothache. He says that when people have a toothache they moan more than they need to, even though this moaning doesn't help. He says that someone with a toothache will moan affectedly and loudly, preventing anyone in his house from getting any sleep, and this being "a nasty little man, a rogue," is pleasurable. The man with the toothache then moans louder and louder. The underground man says he hopes his readers are laughing at him and says he has no respect for himself. He asks, "can a man possessing consciousness ever really respect himself?"

By anticipating the reader's response and then responding to what he imagines his reader is thinking, the underground man's monologue approaches a kind of conversation, compensating for his lonely existence. He defies reason by arguing that there is some kind of pleasure in the pain of a toothache, locating this pleasure in spitefully annoying others (with affectedly loud moaning). In the underground man's opinion, someone with high consciousness thinks too much to respect himself unquestioningly.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

The underground man says he is generally incapable of apologizing. When he was a child, he would sometimes cry and repent when he did something wrong, but would then realize this "was all lies, lies, revolting, made-up lies." He says he would often get into trouble simply because he was bored, and says that boredom and inertia are the results of consciousness.

Unable to take action because of his hyper-consciousness, the underground man finds himself bored and because of this gets himself into trouble. Spitefully enjoying causing pain and annoyance, he is unable to feel true remorse.

Men of action, the underground man says, are all active because they are stupid. They take action because they think they have found "a primary cause," a reason for acting. By contrast, the underground man can think of multiple causes and does not settle for a simplistic reason for a particular action. He acts only out of spite. All he can do is "bash the wall even harder," and babble, "deliberately talking in endless circles."

The underground man elaborates on his theory of how thought actually prevents action. An intelligent man does not settle for simple explanations that could provide justifications for actions. Thus, all someone like the underground man has left is to act spitefully and talk endlessly.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

The underground man says that he does not do nothing simply out of laziness. He wishes this were the case, as then he could say what sort of person he was—a "sluggard." He thinks of a man he once knew who only cared about red wine, and wishes he could be a glutton, obsessed with the "beautiful and sublime."

Again, the underground man does nothing because of his high consciousness, not because of laziness. Because of his constant thinking and questioning, he cannot settle on a simple identity for himself. In fact, he wishes he could have a single identity, even if it were a bad one like a "sluggard" or glutton.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

The underground man, though, says that becoming such a person is only a dream. He talks about how some people believe humans only do "nasty things" because they don't know their "true interest," and that if people knew what was in their best interest, they would only act accordingly. The underground man disagrees and says that "man's advantage" sometimes consists "precisely in his desiring something harmful to himself."

Others believe that human nature is inherently rational and good. The underground man rejects this idea, championing man's irrationality and ability to do "something harmful to himself." Part of the underground man's pleasure in pain may be in its proof of human irrationality.

The underground man says he is sure his readers are laughing at him, but he insists that he is right. He says that those who think people only behave in their best interests neglect something more important to men than any advantage like wealth or honor. Before naming this thing, the underground man digresses and says that most people think mankind has gotten kinder over time, but he thinks civilization has made men crueler. As examples, he points to recent historical events: the American Civil War, the Napoleonic wars, and other European military conflicts.

The underground man's writings are not structured like a logical argument. He insists on his point about something more important than wealth or honor, but then digresses to speak of human civilization and history. He pessimistically focuses on violent historical events, supporting his negative estimation of human nature.

The underground man says that most people think that as science advances, more people will live peacefully in accordance with the "laws of nature," in a perfect **crystal palace**. But he thinks such an existence would be horribly boring and that people would prefer to live according their "own stupid will," instead of pure rationality. The underground man says that occasionally one must "desire something opposed to one's own advantage," simply to exercise one's freedom of desire.

This is one of Dostoevsky's most direct allusions to the views of the Russian writer Nikolay Chernyshevsky, who idealized an existence of rationality symbolized by a crystal palace. The underground man rails against such excessive rationality and the "laws of nature," pointing out how a place in which everyone acted according to laws of nature is both dull and a kind of slavery to those laws, so that acting contrary to those laws and to one's own instincts becomes a kind of freedom.

PART 1, CHAPTER 8

The underground man imagines that his readers think science can explain man's desires and free will. But he insists that without desire and will, man is only "a stop in an organ pipe." He returns to his earlier assertion that there is one thing mankind desires more than any advantage: the right to desire something stupid "and not be bound by an obligation to desire only what's smart." Through this, he claims, people assert their individuality. He says that desire can coincide with reason, but doesn't necessarily do so.

If all of life is dictated by scientific fact and logic, then there is no room for free will. Mankind's irrationality is thus his only defense against a life without free will. This argument accounts for the underground man's illogical, irrational behavior. He argues, though, that his irrationality is simply an extreme version of what is in every human being.

The underground man defines man as "a creature who walks on two legs and is ungrateful." He says that human history has been violent and irrational and claims that people will "commit some repulsive act" only to rebel against the rationality of the world. According to the underground man, "the whole of man's work seems to consist only in proving to himself constantly that he's a man and not an organ stop," in fighting against the rationality of "two times two makes four."

The underground man does not have a high opinion of humans, seeing them as simple creatures. He claims that the violence of human history bears out his theory of mankind's essential irrationality. He believes that he is not the only one who struggles against reason by committing repulsive acts, but rather that he is representative of a general human tendency to do so.

PART 1, CHAPTER 9

The underground man says that his readers probably think they can "cure man of his old habits" with science. But the underground man questions whether this kind of improvement would really be good for mankind. He claims that man likes "destruction and chaos" as much as creation.

The underground man continues his tirade against scientific reason and logic. He has previously argued that man could not become purely rational, and here argues that such a development wouldn't be desirable even if possible.

The underground man describes how mankind "loves only the process of achieving his goal and not the goal itself," which is "none other than **two times two makes four**, that is, a formula." He says that "two times two makes four is no longer life," and says that "two times two makes five" can be a valuable thing.

"Two times two makes four" again symbolizes the oppressive rationality the underground man despises. This equation is "no longer life," because it robs man of free will, which can be exercised by believing irrationally in "two times two makes five."

Continuing to dispute the idea that mankind only acts in his own best interest, the underground man says that suffering can be just as advantageous as pleasure. He claims, "man sometimes loves suffering terribly," and says that suffering is the foundation of consciousness, which mankind loves even though it is his "greatest misfortune."

The underground man again treats consciousness as a kind of malady. Part of the reason he earlier argued that there is some pleasure in pain and suffering (with the example of the toothache) is because this perverse love of suffering proves man to be more than just rational.

PART 1, CHAPTER 10

The underground man says his readers believe in the ideal world of the **crystal palace**, but says that the palace is a hoax. He says he'd rather crawl into a chicken coop than the crystal palace. He says he'd reject the crystal palace because he wouldn't be able to stick out his tongue rudely there. Continuing to ramble on, he says that men like him—"we underground men"—should be "kept in check," as they tend to talk "on and on and on."

The crystal palace symbolizes an ideal place where mankind behaves totally rationally. The underground man rejects such a utopia on the grounds that he wouldn't be able to exercise his free will by indulging in spite, sticking out his tongue. He generalizes about "underground men" in the plural, suggesting that he is representative of a large number of people.

PART 1, CHAPTER 11

The underground man says that it's best simply to do nothing, to live in "conscious inertia" underground. He tells his readers that he doesn't believe "one word, not one little word" of what he's written, but writes because he has nothing to do underground by himself. He imagines his readers criticizing him for wanting to seem like he doesn't care about them, but still trying to impress them with his wit and clever jokes.

The underground man's hyper-consciousness results both in his boredom (lack of action) and isolation underground. He irrationally contradicts himself, saying that he doesn't believe in his own writings, but still uses his writing to have someone (an imagined reader) to talk to.

The underground man asks why he is even addressing his readers, and says that he has no plans to print these confessions of his. He says that he is writing only for himself and will "write down whatever comes to mind," without "any order or system." In any case, he says that writing offers him some relief from his boredom. He says that it is currently snowing out, and that the snow reminds him of an episode. So, he prepares to tell, in part two, "a tale apropos of wet snow."

The underground man writes in order to alleviate his boredom, but perhaps also to alleviate his loneliness. Through writing, he can have a kind of conversation with both himself and his readers. His writings reflect his penchant for the irrational and illogical, as they ramble on without any logical "order or system."

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

The underground man's story takes place when he is 24, living a very solitary life. He doesn't even really look at other people in his office and feels that his coworkers dislike him. He hates his coworkers, but sometimes thinks of them as superior to him. He calls himself "a coward and a slave," and says that "a decent man must be a coward and a slave." He tells his readers he felt completely alone, and thought no one at the office was like him.

Even when not physically isolated from society underground, the underground man is socially isolated from others, such as his coworkers. He vacillates between wanting their acknowledgment and rejecting them. He generalizes from his own experience to claim that "a decent man must be a coward and a slave."

At times, the underground man would try to talk with those in his office and make friends, but at other times he would remain aloof. He would often criticize himself for being overly Romantic, and digresses about Romanticism. He says that Russian Romantics have more common sense than those in Germany or France, who he sees as foolish, impractical, and overly idealistic. He says that as an example of how he was different from other Romantics, he didn't quit his job, because he needed the money.

The underground man cannot decide whether he wants friends or wants nothing to do with those less intelligent than himself. He criticizes himself for sometimes being caught up in Romantic fantasies from literature and prizes his own practicality in contrast to German or French Romantics.

The underground man says that he spent most of his time at home reading, but "sank into dark, subterranean, loathsome depravity." He says he did this because of depression and "a hysterical craving for contradictions and contrasts." First he tells his readers that he is not trying to justify his behavior, but then he says he is. He says that he was "carrying around the underground in my soul."

Reading literature offers the underground man some escape from his boring, lonely life. His "hysterical craving for contradictions" is exemplified when he first says he is not trying to justify himself, but then says he is. Such self-contradiction proves his ability to behave illogically.

One night, the underground man sees a man get kicked out of a bar for fighting. He goes into the bar thinking that he could also get into a fight. He gets in an officer's way, but the man simply moves him without saying anything, as if he didn't even notice him. Instead of the fight he was hoping for, the underground man says he was treated "as if I were a fly." He thinks of challenging the officer to a duel, but goes home and says he retreated because he was afraid that everyone at the bar would laugh at him when he spoke in literary Russian about duels and honor.

The underground man wishes for some kind of interesting event in his action-less life, something from a story like a bar brawl or duel. Even some kind of suffering would be preferable to his normal inaction. But he only thinks of such action, and doesn't actually do much of anything. The officer ignores him completely, showing the degree to which the underground man is both isolated from and neglected by society.

The underground man would frequently see the officer on the street after this event, and would often stare at him "with malice and hatred." He writes a story about the officer and sends it to a journal, but it is not published. He thinks again of challenging the officer to a duel, and writes a letter to him. He says that if the officer had "even the smallest understanding of the 'beautiful and sublime,'" they would become friends as a result of his well-written letter. But ultimately he does not send the letter.

The underground man tries to channel his spite and malice toward the officer into a story. He imagines challenging the officer to a duel (he seems to be obsessed with the idea of duels, from old literature), but never carries out this action. It is not clear whether the underground man completely hates the officer, or envies him and wants his friendship, as he imagines his letter might bring them together. It may not even be clear to the underground man.

The underground man describes how he used to stroll along a particular street sometimes, and "darted in and out like a fish among the strollers," constantly stepping out of people's ways. This made him feel humiliated, like "a fly in the eyes of society," forced to get out of everyone else's way. He occasionally sees the officer on this street, and steps aside whenever he and the officer walk into each other's paths. He devises a plan to walk into the officer, not change his path, and bump into him.

Even when among others, the underground man feels isolated and neglected by others, who treat him like a fly. His recurrent animal similes (often comparing himself to a fly) serve to denigrate both himself and mankind and bring human nature down to the level of an animal. At the same time, his pride makes him take offense at being treated as a "fly."

First, though, the underground man wants to get nice clothes, ones that would make him look respectable. He buys all new clothes, and even has to borrow money from his office chief, Anton Antonych Setochkin, to pay for them, which is embarrassing for him. The underground man sets out to bump into the officer, but finds he kept stepping out of the way at the last second.

The underground man's embarrassment shows that he cares to some degree what Anton thinks, suggesting he has some desire for friendship or companionship of a sort. He devises a plan of action with the officer, but has trouble turning his thought into actual action.

One time, the underground man trips and falls, and the officer merely steps over him. Finally, he carries out his plan, and bumps into the officer. The officer acts as if he didn't notice anything, but the underground man says he is sure the officer was simply pretending. He feels as though he has kept his dignity and feels "avenged for everything."

The underground man finally takes action, but in a rather pathetic way. Yet he feels that he has asserted himself in society and upheld his honor simply by bumping into the officer. In believing that the officer is just pretending not to notice him he attributes to the officer some of his own hyper-consciousness. It seems just as likely that the officer actually doesn't notice him.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

The underground man's happiness wears off soon after this, though. He seeks escape into "all that was beautiful and sublime," in his dreams, and says he dreams for three months straight. In his dreams, he is a hero. The happiness he finds in his dreams makes him optimistic that something will "suddenly appear" in the world and allow him to leave his isolation. Since this never happens, he instead becomes the worst person he can, because he wants to be "either a hero or dirt."

The underground man retreats from society into isolation and the world of his dreams, made up by his overactive consciousness. He can be a hero only in his dreams; in real life, the underground man has a much more pessimistic conception of human nature.

The underground man alternates between feeling like a hero and feeling in "the lowest depths." Nonetheless, he finds "fantastic love" in his dreams. He says he is a hero in his dreams, like Manfred (a Romantic hero in a work by Lord Byron), and everyone loves him. He guesses that his readers think it is repugnant of him to describe his tasteless dreams, but he insists he is not ashamed of his dreams.

The underground man models his dreams—and to some degree his life—on fantasies from literature he has read. He insists he is not ashamed of sharing his dreams, suggesting he doesn't care what others think of him, but nonetheless addresses readers in an attempt to reach out to others.

After three months of such dreams, though, the underground man feels "an irresistible urge to plunge into society." He says that he would normally alleviate this urge by going to see his office chief, Anton Antonych, who entertained guests at his home on Tuesdays. The underground man found conversation with these guests boring and each time after visiting Anton Antonych he says he would "postpone for some time my desire to embrace all of humanity."

The underground man often tries to act entirely superior to mainstream society, but occasionally still desires some kind of community. He alternates between feeling tragically rejected by society and wanting to "embrace all of humanity" and feeling as though he wants nothing to do with others.

The underground man describes another acquaintance, a former schoolmate named Simonov. He absolutely hated school, but still knows of a few former schoolmates, including Simonov. One night, "unable to endure" his isolation, the underground man pays a visit to Simonov's apartment. It has been a year since they have last seen each other.

School is another environment—like his office—where the underground man was lonely and isolated even when around others. The underground man is so fed up with his loneliness that he actually takes action, rather than just thinking about visiting Simonov.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

The underground man enters Simonov's apartment. Some other former schoolmates are also there, but no one seems to notice him, treating him like "some sort of ordinary house fly." They are planning a farewell dinner for a friend named Zverkov, an army officer who was leaving St. Petersburg. The underground man had hated Zverkov in school because "he was such an attractive, lively lad," and would often arrogantly brag about himself.

The underground man's schoolmates completely ignore him: again he is isolated even among others. It is unclear whether his spiteful disdain for Zverkov arises from a feeling that he is better than Zverkov or from envy for Zverkov's attractiveness and popularity. The answer, as is typical for the underground man, is probably both.

The underground man remembers how once Zverkov was bragging about his romantic exploits with peasant girls and how if the girls' fathers protested, he would have them flogged. The underground man had attacked Zverkov, not out of pity for the girls but because everyone else around him was applauding and encouraging Zverkov, whom the underground man calls "a little insect."

The underground man remembers attacking Zverkov for no noble reason, but simply out of spite (and perhaps jealousy). He refers to Zverkov as an insect, continuing his pattern of denigrating humanity by comparing people to insignificant animals.

One of Simonov's guests at his apartment is Ferfichkin, who had been the underground man's "bitterest enemy" in school. Ferfichkin was "a despicable, impudent show-off." Also there is Trudolyubov, a military man who had always treated the underground man "as a nonentity." They are all planning Zverkov's party, and the underground man invites himself to it, offering to help pay. He thought everyone would respect him for offering to pay, but they are simply surprised that he would want to come along at all.

The underground man despises his former schoolmates, from whose community he has been continually excluded and by whom he has been ignored. There is thus little rationale behind his inviting himself to the party. His behavior seems to be irrational and seems to set him up for pain and social awkwardness, and yet his rejection of society is melded with a need for friendship and respect.

Simonov and the others reluctantly agree to let the underground man come to their party and tell him to meet them the next day at five in the evening. Simonov asks him if he could pay his share of the money for the party now, but the underground man doesn't have any money on him. He embarrassedly remembers that he owes Simonov money anyways, which he had never paid back.

The underground man's embarrassment at owing Simonov money shows that he cares to some degree about his reputation and what his former schoolmates think of him (even though he tries to act completely above them, as if he doesn't care about their friendship or respect.)

The underground man leaves Simonov and berates himself for interfering with the party. He is angry with himself and thinks he shouldn't go, but then admits to himself that he is really so upset because he knows that he is going to go, even though he has no money—what little money he does have he has to pay to his servant Apollon, whom he promises to tell his readers about later.

The underground man simultaneously holds contradictory opinions about whether he should go to the party. He seems to be setting himself up for suffering by deciding to go. In his loneliness and isolation, he again addresses his readers directly.

The underground man recalls his school years. He was "a lonely boy," and didn't get along with any of his schoolmates, who teased him. He grew to consider them as beneath him and "hated them terribly." As years went by, he became more and more successful academically in school, but still felt a need for friends. He tried to make friends with some schoolmates, but says he "was already a despot at heart," and, when he made one friend, simply wanted to "exercise unlimited power over his soul." After the friend "surrendered himself" to the underground man, he despised the friend.

It is unclear to what degree the underground man's isolation at school was by choice: at times, he desired a friend, but would then realize the futility of such attempts. He is such a spiteful, malicious person that even as a child he only saw friendship as an opportunity for power. It is irrational and illogical that the underground man should want to exercise power over a friend, and then despise the friend for submitting to him.

The next day, the underground man plans anxiously for the party. He doesn't want to arrive first, because then he would seem overly eager. As he is getting dressed, he sees that there was a yellow spot on his pants, and worries that the spot will make him appear undignified. But, he thinks to himself, "this isn't the time for thinking. Reality is now looming." He imagines how horrible the party will be, but wants to go to prove he isn't a coward and isn't intimidated by Zverkov and the others. He finally leaves his home and hires a cab to take him to the party, "in order to arrive at the Hotel de Paris in style."

The underground man thinks excessively about the party. He evidently cares what his former schoolmates think of him and wants some part in their group. He realizes that he needs to take action and stop thinking, but it is ironic that he should think about how he needs to stop thinking so much. His desire to impress the others by arriving at the party in style is further evidence that at least part of him wants the approval of the others from whom he is isolated.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

The underground man arrives at the party before anyone else, and finds that the table isn't even set for their dinner yet. He learns from a waiter that dinner has been ordered to start at six, not five. The underground man feels embarrassed and shamed as he sits for an hour, waiting, while a waiter sets the table. At last, Zverkov, Simonov, and the others arrive. Simonov apologizes for forgetting to tell the underground man that they had changed the time of the party. Zverkov and Ferfichkin laugh at the idea of the underground man waiting for an hour before the party, irritating him.

The underground man's feelings of shame and embarrassment suggest he has some interest in society: if he truly did not care about anyone else, he wouldn't feel ashamed or embarrassed in front of them.

Zverkov asks the underground man about his work, speaking with long, drawn-out words, and the underground man mockingly imitates this manner of speaking. Zverkov comments that the underground man does not make very much money at his job. After some tense conversation, all the other guests start talking amongst themselves, leaving the underground man "completely crushed and humiliated." He thinks of leaving "out of contempt," but ends up staying and getting drunk.

The underground man spitefully teases Zverkov for his manner of speaking. Before long, he finds himself excluded from the group of party guests, isolated yet again. Despite thinking of leaving "out of contempt," the underground man stays to suffer through the party for no clear or apparent reason.

The underground man watches the other guests as he drinks more and more wine. He comments that they "have forgotten all about me." He breaks into the conversation once, and the others notice how drunk he was. He says that Zverkov looks at him "as if I were an insect."

Continually ignored and neglected by others, the underground man again feels reduced to the status of an insignificant creature—here an insect.

The underground man stands up to make a toast and makes a comment about how he hates "obscene stories and the men who tell them," alluding to Zverkov's habit of telling such stories. Everyone is upset at this, and Ferfichkin says the underground man should be "whacked in the face for saying such things." The underground man responds by challenging Ferfichkin to a duel, at which everyone simply laughs.

The underground man attempts to inflict some of the pain he is feeling on Zverkov by humiliating him in front of his friends. Everyone laughs at his idea of a duel, because it is an excessively literary idea, drawn from stories, and duels are not a common occurrence anymore in real life.

The underground man stays at the party, where he continues to drink. He tells the reader about how he "smiled contemptuously and paced up and down" the room. He stomps his boots loudly, but no one pays him any attention. He says he understood that he was humiliating himself, but didn't care. He says that his "enemies behaved as if I weren't even in the room." Finally, Zverkov suggests they all go to a brothel.

Demonstrating what he argued in part one, the underground man seems to behave not in his own best interest, staying around the awkward party for no apparent reason. He alternates between caring and not caring about his own humiliation and what others think of him. Meanwhile, everyone else continues to neglect him.

The underground man asks Zverkov and everyone else for their forgiveness, apologizing for his behavior and for insulting them. Zverkov replies that he could never feel insulted by the underground man. The underground man says he "stood there as if spat on." He decides to go with them to the brothel, grabs Simonov by his coat, and demands that he lend him some money for the occasion. He imagines that if he follows the others to the brothel, either they will "all fall on their knees, embracing me, begging for my friendship. . . or else, I'll give Zverkov a slap in the face."

Zverkov's reply suggests that the underground man is so insignificant that nothing he could do would ever insult him. Feeling his dignity impugned, the underground man still vacillates between wanting the others' respect (imagining them begging for his friendship) and despising them (imagining slapping Zverkov), though both fantasies involve him having a social power that he clearly doesn't. The underground man imagines what action he will take, but doesn't actually end up doing much.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

Everyone else has left without the underground man, so he follows after in a cab, talking to himself. He resolves to slap Zverkov in the face and plans how to go about doing it. Zverkov was going to meet a prostitute named Olympia, who had once ridiculed the underground man, so he thinks he will "drag Olympia around by the hair and Zverkov by the ears." He thinks that by slapping Zverkov and challenging him to a duel he can regain some honor.

The underground man finds himself alone again, and resorts to talking to himself. He now makes up his mind and, settling on spite, thinks of how he is going to slap Zverkov. He is still fixated on the idea of a duel, drawn from literature and his own literature-fueled sense of honor.

The underground man says that even then he was aware of "the disgusting absurdity of my intentions," but nonetheless kept going toward the brothel, telling his driver to hurry up. Feeling that he needs to "wipe out" the disgrace of his behavior at the party, he fantasizes about confronting Zverkov. Even if he is arrested and sent to prison for attacking him, he images tracking Zverkov down fifteen years later for revenge. He realizes, though, that all of these thoughts are drawn from a short story by the Russian writer Alexander Pushkin.

The underground man is capable of contrary thoughts at the same time: he realizes the absurdity of his plan, but nonetheless wants to go through with it. He imagines elaborately what he will do to Zverkov, continuing to think more than to act. His imagination and fantasies are heavily influenced by what he has read. He is to some degree removed from reality, as well as from society.

It is snowing outside as the underground man finally arrives at the brothel. He goes inside, but Simonov and the others have already left. The underground man walks around the room, talking to himself. He is glad that he doesn't have to slap Zverkov, though he insists to himself that he would have done it. He sees a young girl and walks up to her. He sees his reflection in a mirror and thinks he looks "extremely repulsive." He thinks to himself that he is glad he will "seem so repulsive" to the prostitute.

After so much thinking about what he will do to Zverkov, the underground man arrives too late to actually do anything. Filled with anger, he irrationally decides to channel some of it into spitefully annoying the young prostitute with his "extremely repulsive" appearance.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

The underground man resumes his story at two in the morning, when he wakes in the dark next to the girl. As he gathers his senses, he says that "misery and bile were welling inside me, seeking an outlet." He looks at the girl next to him and feels that his having sex with her was absurd and revolting. He asks her what her name is, and she says it is Liza. He asks about her family and where she was from. She tells him that she just came to the brothel two weeks ago.

The underground man again lashes out because of the spite "welling inside" him. He does not direct his ill will at the prostitute for any rational reason, but simply because she is there next to him.

The underground man tells Liza about how earlier in the day he saw people carrying a coffin out of a "house of ill repute" (that is, a brothel) who dropped the coffin. He comments that it was a "nasty day to be buried," as it was raining and the grave likely had water in it. The underground man tells Liza that the dead woman in the coffin was a prostitute who died of consumption, but worked up until the day of her death. He says that her former acquaintances were all laughing at her as she was buried. He admits to the reader that he made up "a great deal" of this story.

The underground man can't help but embellish and fictionalize his account of the dead prostitute. Maliciously, he exaggerates the bad fate of the prostitute in order to impress upon Liza the hopelessness of her situation.

The underground man tells Liza that she will grow older, "fade," and eventually end up like this deceased woman. Liza begins to become upset, as the underground man tells her that she can still get out of the brothel, "fall in love, get married, be happy." Liza quips that not all married women are happy. He tells her that even being unhappily married would be preferable to being a prostitute. He says that he is "no one's slave," whereas she is essentially a slave.

The underground man continues to spitefully exaggerate Liza's unhappy situation, trying to make her upset. Despite his low opinion of himself and of human nature generally, he still takes comfort in not being a slave and in being able to exercise his free will.

The underground man says that it is "a disgrace" how he and Liza just slept together, and she agrees. He asks her why she came to the brothel. She doesn't answer, so he goes on talking about how he grew up without a family, and tells her that if he had a daughter he would love her more than any sons. Liza makes a comment about how some fathers "are glad to sell their daughters," and the underground man realizes that this must have been how Liza ended up in the brothel.

The underground man's mention of possibly having a daughter suggests that he may not be an entire misanthrope, and perhaps desires some kind of family, community, or companion in some form.

The underground man says that families in which children are sold off are unfortunate, but that such unhappiness is the result of poverty. Liza suggests that there is unhappiness among wealthy people, as well. The underground man agrees but says that there can be happiness even among sorrow, especially in marriages. He tells Liza that "one can torment a person intentionally out of love," and speaks about women who intentionally fight with their husbands.

The underground man insists to Liza on his irrational idea that suffering is not entirely bad, and can coexist with love and pleasure. His conversation with Liza began as a spiteful attempt to irritate her, but their conversation has now become the deepest connection the underground man has had with any other person in the novella.

The underground man continues to speak about marriage, and optimistically talks about the endurance of love between husband and wife, especially after having children. He describes the "pure bliss" of a husband and wife with a small child. He stops talking and after a long silence, Liza tells him that he "sounds just like a book." The underground man is hurt by this comment, but thinks that she is "intentionally disguising her feelings with sarcasm."

The way the underground man speaks of marriage may suggest that he does not actually desire complete solitude in life. However, he may be playing a part in order to make Liza upset. Liza's comment emphasizes how the underground man's excessive reading (evidenced by his literary speech) marks him out as different and prevents him from bonding with others socially. When he thinks that she is hiding her own true feelings behind sarcasm, he seems to be projecting his own way of being upon her. He seems to crave connection and to hate the idea of it, perhaps out of fear.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Encouraging Liza to realize her sad situation as a prostitute, the underground man asks her, "Do you seriously think that you'll never grow old, that you'll always be pretty, and that they'll keep you on here forever and ever?" He tells her that when he arrived at the brothel he was "disgusted to be here with you," but says that if she left he could fall in love with her. He asks why she is making a slave of herself and allowing herself "to be defiled by any drunkard."

The underground man resumes a more malicious mode of speaking, trying to make Liza upset by emphasizing all the negative aspects of her life in the brothel. He seems to be trying to make himself feel and seem better by making her feel and seem worse.

The underground man continues to emphasize the sadness of Liza's life, saying that none of her lovers respect her, and telling her that she will be in debt to her madam and she'll eventually be kicked out of the brothel. He tells her, "You'll lose everything here, everything, without exception—your health, youth, beauty, and hope." He says she'll wind up beaten and humiliated by "cabbies and drunken soldiers," and tells her she'd be lucky to die quickly of consumption.

The underground man continues in his spiteful attempt to make Liza upset. He elaborately imagines her future life in detail, as if thinking of a fictional story.

The underground man says that perhaps Liza will grow sick in the brothel, and no one will care for her. Everyone will simply wait for her to die and shove her "into the filthiest corner of the cellar. And someone will bury her as they did the prostitute he saw earlier. He tells her, "There'll be slush, filth, and wet snow in your grave," and says that there will be no memory of her on earth.

There is no particular rational reason for why the underground man is so cruel to Liza. Perhaps on some level he is trying to help her by getting her to want to leave the brothel, but perhaps he is merely a spiteful, misanthropic person.

The underground man stops talking to Liza and says he felt like he had "turned her soul inside out and had broken her heart." He says he could not help but speak "like a book." He then realizes that Liza is lying on the bed in despair, crying into her pillow. He feels remorse and tells her to forgive him. He gives her his address and tells her to come see him.

The underground man cannot help but have aspects of the books he reads influence his manner of thinking and speaking "like a book." In a somewhat startling reversal, he feel some remorse for having inflicted pain on Liza.

Before the underground man leaves, Liza shows him a love letter to her from a medical student she had met at a dance, as proof that "she too was the object of sincere honest love, and that someone exists who had spoken to her respectfully." The underground man then leaves the brothel and walks home in the wet snow, feeling that he is aware of "the ugly truth."

The "ugly truth" of which the underground man is aware is left ambiguous: perhaps it is the truth that Liza is alone and in a horrible situation, or that the underground man himself is, or that life itself is irrational and full of suffering.

PART 2, CHAPTER 8

The next day, the underground man awakes and is surprised to remember his "sentimentality" the previous night. He decides that he must "rescue at all costs" his reputation with Zverkov and Simonov. He borrows money from Anton Antonych so that he can pay back Simonov and tells Anton "casually that on the previous evening 'I'd been living it up with some friends at the Hotel de Paris.'"

The underground man's concern for his reputation, as well as his casual bragging to Anton, suggests that he cares what others think and has some desire to be involved in society.

Back home, the underground man writes a letter to Simonov, asking for his forgiveness and saying that he was extremely intoxicated the night before. The underground man pauses and thinks that maybe he did only act so rudely because of the wine, but then says, "Hmmm. . . well, no, it wasn't really the wine. . . . I lied to Simonov; it was a bold-faced lie—yet I'm not ashamed of it even now." He gives the letter to his servant Apollon to deliver to Simonov.

The underground man vacillates in terms of how much he cares about other people: he wants to apologize to Simonov, but is not ashamed to tell his readers that he lied in his letter. He says that he did not act the way he did because he was drunk—his behavior was without rational explanation.

The underground man worries that Liza might pay him a visit and regrets giving her his address. He thinks that he appeared like a hero before her last night, but worries that his dirty apartment will show him how revolting he truly is. He continues to worry about Liza coming into the night and keeps thinking of her "pale, distorted face with its tormented gaze."

Having made some connection with Liza the previous night, he now worries that she will interrupt his mostly solitary existence. Yet the fact that he worries about her seeing how revolting he is suggests he cares what she thinks of him and on some level desires some sort of relationship with her.

The next day, the underground man is still thinking about Liza. He is angry at her "damned romanticism" that allowed him to persuade her so easily, and thinks to himself, "how little idyllic sentiment. . . was necessary to turn a whole human soul according to my wishes at once."

The underground man insists to himself that his behavior toward Liza was all out of spite, an attempt to manipulate her, and was not any reflection of genuine kindness.

Several days pass, though, without Liza coming to visit him. The underground man imagines himself saving Liza, Liza declaring her love for him, and him accepting her as his wife with an elaborate speech reminiscent of the French author George Sand. He begins to find this fantasy "crude" and ends up "sticking my tongue out at myself."

Alone, the underground man retreats into his literature-tinged fantasies, imagining what he might do with Liza but taking no real action. Prone to self-contradiction, the underground man both desires what he fantasizes about and finds it crude and repulsive.

The underground man describes his servant Apollon, whose rudeness distracts him from thinking about Liza. He talks of the mutual hatred between them and describes Apollon's arrogance. Apollon has a lisp, which he thinks gives him "enormous dignity." He says he could not get rid of Apollon and describes how he has in the past withheld Apollon's wages in order to exercise his will as Apollon's master.

The underground man despises his only companion at his home and spitefully tries to exercise his power over Apollon.

The underground man wanted Apollon to have to ask for his wages, but the plan never worked. Apollon would come to the underground man's room and simply stand there in silence, staring at him, until the underground man broke down and gave him his money. This precise thing has been happening today, with Apollon following the underground man around, staring at him.

The underground man tries to assert his dignity and power over Apollon, but Apollon ends up asserting his own power.

The underground man finally confronts Apollon, calling him a "torturer," and demands that Apollon show him respect before getting his money. Apollon threatens to complain to the police. Furious, the underground man tells him to go to the police. Just then, though, Liza arrives, looking for the underground man, who then tells Apollon to leave them alone together.

The malicious feud between Apollon and the underground man gives the underground man so much pain that he refers to Apollon as his "torturer," though it is his overactive mind that makes enduring Apollon's behavior so difficult.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9

The underground man feels ashamed in front of Liza. He tells her not to assume anything from the apparent poverty of his home, and tells her, "I'm poor, but noble. . . . One can be poor and noble." He sends Apollon to go get tea for Liza and him. Apollon ignores him for a few minutes and the underground man stares at him until he finally goes off to get the tea.

The underground man apparently cares about his relationship with Liza, feeling embarrassed in front of her and not wanting Apollon to humiliate him in front of her.

The underground man suddenly shouts that he will kill Apollon and refers to him as his executioner. He bursts into tears, shocking Liza. He asks Liza if she despises him and then blames Liza for his behavior and vows not to speak to her for the rest of her visit. After a long, painful silence, Liza tells the underground man that she wants to leave the brothel.

The underground man behaves irrationally, bursting into tears for no clear reason, and taking out his frustration on the person who is trying to comfort him (Liza).

The underground man tells the reader that he felt pity for Liza, but that "something hideous immediately suppressed" his pity. After another long silence, he asks Liza why she came to him. He tells her that he was laughing at her the night before and has no pity for her now. He guesses that she thought he would save her, and says that he will do no such thing. Liza is crushed.

The underground man struggles between his normal tendency for spite and his human ability for pity. He defensively attempts to maintain his personal isolation by not allowing any intimacy between Liza and himself, claiming that he was only toying with her at the brothel.

The underground man tells Liza to leave him alone, wishes the world would stop bothering him, and tells her that he is "a scoundrel, a bastard, an egotist, and a sluggard." He tells her that he is ashamed of what he said the night before and says he will never forgive her "for coming upon me in this dressing gown as I was attacking Apollon like a vicious dog."

The underground man insists on his nature as a "scoundrel" as a defensive attempt to maintain his solitude and keep Liza at a distance from himself. He irrationally takes out his anger on her for putting him in a painfully embarrassing situation.

The underground man tells Liza that he hates her, and then he tells the reader that something strange happened. He says that he was so used to imagining everything as it happens in books, that he didn't know what to think of this strange thing. He says that Liza understood more than he thought she would.

Real life defies the expectations the underground man has from books. His attempt to push Liza away and maintain his lonely life seems to fail.

Liza embraces the underground man, as the two both cry. He says that he can't be "good," and then continues crying as Liza continues to embrace him. After the underground man's "hysterics" pass, he realizes that he is now ashamed of having broken down and that he has made Liza a sort of heroine. He tells the reader that it is possible he even envied her in this position. He tells the reader he "hated her and felt drawn to her simultaneously."

Liza is the only person in the novella who attempts to break through the underground man's wall of spite to make a meaningful connection with him. The underground man has conflicted feelings: part of him hates and fears Liza and wants to stay alone, while part of him is drawn to her and wants some company in his life.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10

About fifteen minutes later, the underground man has stopped crying and is watching Liza. He tells the reader that he could not return any love to Liza because for him, "love meant tyrannizing and demonstrating my moral superiority." Watching Liza, he doesn't hate her anymore, but wants her to leave so that he can have "peace and quiet," by himself. He tells the reader that real life "oppressed" him.

The underground man is so devoted to his spiteful, isolated life that he cannot conceive of genuine love. He only desires "peace and quiet" without interruption from anyone else, so that he can retreat into his reading and fantasizing, escaping the oppressions of real life.

Liza finally prepares to leave, and before she goes, the underground man slips some money into her hand "out of spite." He says that he did this cruel action done cerebrally, from his head, not from his heart. Embarrassed, immediately after giving Liza the money, the underground man runs to the corner of the room and doesn't look at her. She leaves and he calls after her, but too late.

The underground man spitefully sabotages any meaningful relationship between Liza and him by giving her money (and thereby reminding her that she is a paid prostitute), that their relationship is a thing of commerce and not connection. His spite defies logical explanation, as Liza has only been kind to him.

The underground man sees that Liza has left the money he gave her on a table. He decides to run after her and goes outside, where it is snowing. He stops himself, though, and thinks that it would be better to have her "carry away the insult with her forever," than to find her, "fall down before her, sob with remorse, kiss her feet, and beg her forgiveness." He asks the reader, "Which is better: cheap happiness or sublime suffering?"

The underground man justifies his action by suggesting that he has given Liza the "sublime suffering" of an insult, which is preferable to the "cheap happiness" she would have had if he had been kind to her instead of malicious. Still somewhat conflicted, he almost runs after her, but, as is typical for him, decides not to pursue her and to maintain his solitude.

The underground man tells the reader that he had "never before endured so much suffering and remorse" as that night. He says he never saw Liza again afterwards, and that he looks back on the event as "very unpleasant." He thinks that he should end his notes, and says, "I think that I made a mistake in beginning to write them."

The episode with Liza was a source of great suffering for the underground man—but was it "sublime" suffering in which he could find some form of pleasure? Writing has offered the underground man a way of speaking to others (his readers) and alleviating his boredom, but now he appears to reject even writing.

The underground man says that he has been ashamed while writing these notes, and that a novel "needs a hero," whereas he is an unpleasant anti-hero. Speaking of all people, he says, "we've all become estranged from life, we're all cripples, every one of us." He says that life would be even worse "if all our whimsical desires were fulfilled."

The underground man rejects his enterprise of writing, and speaks of himself as a despicable anti-hero. He extrapolates from his own situation to a pessimistic conception of mankind generally.

The underground man guesses that his readers think he speaks only for himself, and not for mankind in general, but he responds, "in my life I've only taken to an extreme that which you haven't even dared to take halfway." He says that all people "are oppressed by being men," and says, "we're stillborn." He stops his tirade against mankind to say that he doesn't want to write anymore. The novella ends with a note similar to the one at the beginning. It calls the underground man a "paradoxalist" and says that his notes go on more, but "it also seems to us that we might as well stop here."

Even though he has just expressed dissatisfaction with writing, writing still offers the underground man the ability to speak to others, having a conversation with his imagined readers. He insists that he is not just an outlier, and instead that he is an example of human nature in general, and simply does not hide the qualities of mankind that others suppress. He has a very pessimistic conception of mankind. The author brings an end to the self-contradictory notes of the "paradoxalist," which end without any logical conclusion.

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