

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Notes from the Underground

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

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Notes

While *Notes from the Underground* is one of Dostoyevsky's shorter works, it is by no means his least difficult. The novel's unreliable narrator speaks in fits and starts, qualifies every statement, and takes great pains to avoid being misunderstood (while certain he will be) by his audience. There are no real "events" in Part I; teachers may feel the need to assure students that Part II is less a philosophical monologue and more like a traditional narrative.

Notes from the Underground is an example of the movement towards realism in the modern novel, a movement in which Dostoyevsky was a pioneer. As such it focuses on "real" people, such as the poor, disaffected, city-dwelling narrator and the prostitute Liza. Dostoyevsky's narrator serves as a mouthpiece for the author's concern over one of the prevailing theories of his time: that all human ills can be solved through reason. The novel's narrator exists in part to "prove" that such a theory ignores humankind's urge to act freely, willfully, and individually upon the world.

Teachers looking for a poem to pair with their classes' reading of the novel might consider Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover." The poem's narrator has much in common with Dostoyevsky's when it comes to relationships and competing urges.

All references come from the Dover Thrift Edition of *Notes from the Underground*, translated by Constance Garnett and published in 1922.

Objectives

By this end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define point of view, metaphor, allusion, symbol, irony, simile, tone, motif, and personification, and point to examples of each in *Notes from the Underground*.
2. define all of the vocabulary words listed in the Study Guide.
3. write one-paragraph character sketches of the narrator, Zverkov, and Liza.
4. explain why the narrator is an unreliable one, using specific examples from the text.
5. articulate the tenets of realism as a movement in modern literature and explain why *Notes from the Underground* is a realist novel.
6. discuss the subject of “consciousness” as it relates to one’s ability to function in society.
7. evaluate the narrator as an anti-hero.
8. define rationalism and utopian socialism, and evaluate the narrator’s arguments against them.
9. discuss the narrator’s actions as they relate to his assertion that humans value the ability to exert their wills even when it runs contrary to their best interests.
10. discuss the importance of setting and the “wet snow” motif in the novel.
11. articulate the themes of the book in concise thematic statements.
12. explain Dostoyevsky’s conscious manipulation of the stock character in the figure of Liza.
13. discuss the relevance of the novel’s argument to our own society today.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Using specific examples from the text, compare and contrast the characters of the narrator and Zverkov. Make sure to include the qualities that do or do not enable each man to function well in society.
2. Discuss the significance of snow as a recurring motif in *Notes from the Underground*.
3. The narrator asks, “[W]hich is better—cheap happiness or exalted sufferings?” Using examples from the book, write a persuasive argument for the superiority of either “cheap happiness” or “exalted sufferings.”
4. The narrator argues that, rather than submitting to reason, humans will always wish to exercise their free wills, even when they are clearly not acting in their own best interests. Using specific examples from the text, explain how this is evident in the narrator’s own actions.
5. Re-read the fourth question. Do you agree with the narrator? Explain your answer, backing it up with your own observations of society and politics on the world stage.
6. The good-hearted young prostitute in need of someone to turn her life around is a stock character of literature. Discuss the way Dostoyevsky manipulates this stock character in the figure of Liza, and what her failing to remain true to stereotype implies about the narrator’s approach to life.
7. The narrator offers a searing indictment of society in this passage:

It would be worse for us if our petulant prayers were answered. Come, try, give any one of us, for instance, a little more independence, untie our hands, widen the spheres of our activity, relax the control and we...yes, I assure you...we should be begging to be under control again at once...we don’t even know what living means now...[l]eave us alone without books and we shall be lost and in confusion at once. We shall not know what to join on to, what to cling to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise.

To what extent do you think this is a valid critique of our own society (if we substitute “the Internet” or “video games” or “music,” for example, for “books”)? Dostoyevsky tells us that his narrator is the inevitable product of the society in which he lives. Is such a narrator also the inevitable product of the society in which we live?

Notes from the Underground

Part I: Underground

VOCABULARY

acutely – keenly
affectation – a pretentious showiness
amour propre – pride; vanity; self-esteem
antithesis – complete opposite
apropos – with regard to; concerning
contumacious – willfully disobedient
depravity – moral corruption
despicable – worthy of hate; obnoxious
ennui – listlessness; boredom; disinterest
halcyon – peaceful; golden (as in “golden days”)
ignominiously – shamefully; disgracefully
impotence – powerlessness
inertia – unwillingness or inability to move or act
inevitably – unavoidably
innate – natural; essential (as in a quality one is born with)
l’homme de la nature et de la vérité – “the man of nature and truth” (French)
lacerating – distressing; paining; tearing
magnanimity – generosity and nobility of spirit
malignant – harmful
nonplussed – bewildered; puzzled
obliquity – deviation
obscurantist – person who is deliberately vague or unclear
oscillations – waverings back and forth
petitioners – those making pleas
recompense – compensation; “payback”
refinement – subtle distinction
spleen – bitterness; foulness of mood
superfluous – unnecessary
vexatious – aggravating; annoying

1. According to the author’s note, who or what has given birth to characters such as the narrator?

2. Briefly describe what the narrator was like at twenty-four, with regard to his self-esteem and his relationships with others.

3. When the narrator speaks of being “romantic,” he does not mean “romantic” in the Valentine’s-Day sense that we often ascribe to the word today. What does he mean when he calls himself a romantic?

4. What is the chief difference, according to the narrator, between Russian romantics and German and French ones?

5. What did the young narrator spend most of his free time doing?

6. Why do you think that, after seeing a young man thrown out of a tavern window in a brawl, the narrator envies the man and goes into the tavern with the hope that he, too, might get into a fight and get thrown out the window?

Part II: À Propos of the Wet Snow—Sections VI-X

VOCABULARY

assented – agreed

audibly – able to be heard

censure – severe criticism; official disapproval

extricate – disengage

idyllic – charmingly simple

imperiously – arrogantly, in the manner of a king addressing his lesser

integral – essential

pedant – one who puts on scholarly airs and shows off his or her book-learning

petulant – irritable; peevish

prosaic – dull and commonplace

1. Describe the tone the narrator takes with Liza when they begin talking.

2. The narrator tells Liza a number of stories of husbands and wives and fathers and daughters he has known. From where can we assume the stories come?

3. What comment of Liza's utterly deflates the narrator?

4. How does the thrust of the narrator's conversation change after Liza (perhaps unwittingly) offends him?
