



[Notes from the Underground](#), by Fyodor Dostoevsky

In A Nutshell

Notes from the Underground is a fictional, first-person "confession" told by a hateful, hyper-conscious man living "underground." Fyodor Dostoevsky, a Russian thinker living in St. Petersburg, wrote *Notes* in 1864. His wife was dying at the time, so you can speculate on how that might have affected his work. When writing, Dostoevsky said of the work: "It will be a powerful and candid piece; it will be truth."

Later, *Notes from the Underground* was hailed as a forerunner to existential literature of the 20th century. Dostoevsky explores themes of absurdity, isolation, and radical personal freedom. Philosophers and writers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Samuel Beckett would take these ideas and run with them, developing more fully an entire school of thought, the seeds of which can be found in *Notes*. Existentialism, the philosophical belief that individuals (rather than a god or a government or authority) define the meaning of their own lives, blossomed in the 20th century. In other words, Dostoevsky was way ahead of his time.

Even outside of existentialism the impact of *Notes from the Underground* is staggering. It made popular a distinct and often imitated approach to the novel: the fictional "confession." We see it again in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; in fact, the first paragraphs of Ellison's novel are an explicit reference to *Notes*. Since Dostoevsky published *Notes*, we've seen everything from homage to parody, and a mountain of literary criticism.

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Of course, all of this criticism, being good criticism and all, isn't just talking about *Notes from the Underground* itself. It's viewing the work in the context of its intellectual history. As you'll soon find out, to study one piece of Russian literature often means studying many pieces of Russian literature. This stems from the fact that guys like Dostoevsky were carrying out their arguments on the written page. It worked like this: someone would write a treatise or argumentative novel, and instead of disagreeing in person, some other guys would just write a treatise or novel back. (This is why there are so many Russian texts.)

Before Dostoevsky wrote *Notes*, Ivan Turgenev published *Fathers and Sons*. Go back for a minute to Russia in the 1840's, where, according to Turgenev, there's a growing divide between the older generation (the traditionalist liberal "fathers") and the younger (the growing group of nihilist "sons"). Traditionalists are steeped in Russian Orthodoxy (i.e., a belief God and morality), while the nihilists reject any notion of God or objective truth. Turgenev picks up on this growing divide, makes it the focus of the aptly-named *Fathers and Sons*, and publishes his earth-shattering novel in 1862.

Meanwhile, big changes are going down in Russia. Feudalism is coming to an end, the plight of the peon is finally brought to light, and governing this all is the European Enlightenment blowing in from the West, bringing with it social, political, and scientific change. (As one example, Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and first translated into Russian in 1864. This is a big rejection of the classic, age-old idea that God made everything.) The Enlightenment introduces rational egoism, the idea that man will always act reasonably and according to his own best interests.

So in 1863, a year after Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Nikolai Chernyshevsky publishes his response to the work, a novel called *What Is to Be Done?* This becomes known as "the handbook of radicalism" (source). It embraces the Enlightenment, praises socialism and



rational egoism, and promises to turn all of society into "a Crystal Palace," a technologically-advanced utopia (or ideal society).

Now what about Dostoevsky? Well, back in the 1840's he's hanging out with radical socialist thinkers and loving the idea of reform for Russia. Great, until 1849 when he gets thrown into prison for his intellectual troublemaking. When he finally gets back to St. Petersburg in 1859, he is singing a different tune. Rather than praising the virtues of reform, Dostoevsky is Mr. Traditional Russian Values – just in time to rail on Western European values for changing Russian institutions. Talk about being in the wrong intellectual camp at the wrong time.

And so, finally, in 1864, Dostoevsky writes *Notes from the Underground*, at least in part as a response to Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* from a year before. Remember, Chernyshevsky was all about rational egoism and the Crystal Palace – both of which are slandered and mocked in *Notes from the Underground*. *Notes* argues that man can never be confined to reason – to think as much would be to ignore free will, which, you will soon see, is quite the force of nature.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Should we read the "Author's Note" as Dostoevsky's genuine message to us, or is that, too, part of the fictional work? What purpose does it serve? What effect does it have on the way we read the novel?

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- 2 In the first half of the text, how does the Underground Man transition from one section to another? Does this tell us anything about his mindset or character?
- 3 Is there any aspect of the Underground Man that we identify with as readers? If so, what aspects and why? If not, how can we be expected to deal with a story that seems so foreign to us?

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