

Compounded Irony: Reactions to an Overdeterministic Existence

Dostoevsky presents his Notes from Underground as the fragmented ramblings of an unnamed narrator. On the surface, the character's narration appears disjointed and reaches no conclusive ending until the author intercedes to end the book. However, a close examination of the underground man's language reveals a progression in his collected ravings. After expressing dissatisfaction with the notion of determinism, the underground man perceives the irony of his ultra-deterministic reality. Through his narrative, the underground man discovers the truth about his predestined, fictional existence.

Dostoevsky's work is divided into two sections; throughout the first section, "Underground," the narrator discusses and resists determinism. The underground man compares deterministic life to a mathematical formula, two times two equals four. He suggests that, according to the deterministic model, life conforms to a set of predestined events and actions, and its outcome is inevitable. The underground man condemns the formula, asserting, "After all, two times two is no longer life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death"(24). In his essay Narrative and Freedom, critic Gary Saul Morson elaborates upon the narrator's statement, adding, "For life to be meaningful and for work to be more than robotic, there must be something not just unknown but still undecided" (Morson 196-7). According to the underground man, the pre-existence of the solution implies that no other conclusion may be reached; once one embarks on life, one cannot escape the inevitable outcome of death. Morson emphasizes the underground man's

resistance to determinism, stating, “Dostoevsky’s man from the underground believes in but resents such a closed world. The underground man’s rebellion against determinism and its consequences has become one of the most famous moments in modern thought, and with good reason”(196). Morson observes that, although the underground man denounces a deterministic world, he still believes that he lives in one.

The underground man’s resentment of determinism produces irony in that the underground man’s true existence as a fictional character epitomizes determinism, as Morson contends. Morson articulates the irony, stating:

“Here Dostoevsky makes shrewd use of metaliterary devices. For all of his struggles to be free, the underground man is doubly determined, not only from within the narrative world but also from without; not only by the iron logic of spite governing his actions but also by the fact that he is the creation of someone who has plotted all his actions in advance. His world is not just deterministic but overdeterministic. What Dostoevsky has done here is to make the very fact that the story is a story, that it has a structure and *has already been written*, a sign of failed choice and futile self-assertion”(199).

The underground man struggles against the idea that his actions have been pre-determined, yet the reader knows that the outcome has already been decided and already exists as words in coming chapters. The character makes no conscious choice in his existence because the author controls his

thoughts and actions. Morson uses a story that has already been written as an example of determinism. Although the underground man never directly makes a reference to books being examples of determinism, he alludes to books as a source of affected behavior. When evaluating the cause of the inexplicable emotions that hinder his social relationships, he ponders, “All my fastidiousness would suddenly disappear for no good reason at all. Who knows? Perhaps I never really had any, and it was all affected, borrowed from books”(Dostoevsky 31). The underground man realizes that his artificial behavior causes his inability to function in society; in order to understand and remedy his dysfunction, he critically examines his life through writing.

The underground man writes his notes in order to achieve a seemingly impossible goal of discovering his own true nature. At the end of the first section, the underground man states his purpose in recounting his memories, remarking, “Anyway, only recently I myself decided to recall some of my earlier adventures; up to now I’ve always avoided them, even with a certain anxiety. But having decided not only to recall them, but even to write them down, now is when I wish to try an experiment: is it possible to be absolutely honest even with one’s own self and not to fear the whole truth?”(28) To the reader, the underground man’s search for the “whole truth” about himself appears to be restricted by the confines of the book. The whole truth, as the reader knows, is that the underground man exists as a character created by Dostoevsky. As a product of ink on a

page, the underground man has no means by which to gain perspective from the external world. The underground man's experiment appears to be futile; not only does the narrator have no way to realize he is a product of fiction, but the fact that he proclaims disgust for determinism suggests that realization of his preconceived nature would give him a reason to reject the truth.

Throughout the second section, "Apropos of Wet Snow," the underground man alludes to a bookish existence as an explanation for his social failures. The narrator relates several events from his life and his reactions to them. In one instance, the underground man reacts to being ignored by a man who unknowingly insults him. He recalls, "I could never forgive his moving me out of the way and entirely failing to notice me. The devil knows what I would have given for a genuine, ordinary quarrel, a decent one, a more *literary* one, so to speak"(34). The underground man yearns for events to unfold as they would in a book because he would know how to handle them. Instead, his literary logic prevents him from coping with the actions of other people. The underground man resents his bookish qualities, equating them with artificiality. After insulting Liza, a woman who has offered to love and accept him, the narrator laments, "This cruelty of mine was so artificial, cerebral, intentionally invented, *bookish*, that I couldn't stand it myself even for one minute"(89). The narrator emphasizes "bookish" with Italics, as he did in an earlier passage with "literary." Furthermore, both words

appear at the end of lists of adjectives, as though the narrator was searching for a precise word and concluded that literary references were the most accurate.

The underground man's reaction to a statement of Liza's further illustrates his association of literary nature with failed endeavors. He attempts to win Liza's respect by lecturing her in the manner of literary heroes such as the narrator of the Nekrasov poem cited in the text(29). Instead of deferring to the hero as her counterpart does in the poem, Liza undermines the underground man, "You somehow...it sounds just like a book," she said, and once again something which was notably sarcastic was suddenly heard in her voice. Her remark wounded me dreadfully" (69). The underground man interprets Liza's observation as an insult. Her recognition of the narrator's artificiality reinforces his theory that his bookish qualities dominate his actions, and her confirmation troubles him.

In his article, "The Symbolic Game," critic Tzvetan Todorov explains that the underground man's social endeavors fail because he cannot interpret symbolic actions. As one who views himself as a literary figure, the underground man lives in ideas. The narrator admits to living through ideas, stating, "I used to think up adventures for myself, inventing a life so at least I could live"(12). Thus the underground man builds his existence on internal thoughts rather than external sensations. He realizes his life must consist of some action, concluding, "Of all the external sensations available, only reading was possible for me. Of course, reading

helped a great deal-it agitated, delighted, and tormented me. But at times it was terribly boring. I still longed to be active”(34). When in society, the underground man suffers from an inability to transfer internal ideas into external actions. As a result, he is unable to interpret meaning in actions beyond words. In order to show her acceptance and love of the underground man, Liza offers herself in an embrace without any verbal explanation. Todorov explains, “This gesture, varied and repeated throughout Dostoevsky’s work, takes on a specific value. The wordless embrace, the silent kiss transcend language without renouncing meaning”(Todorov 253). Liza’s action communicates through symbolism; she not only literally embraces his body, but she embraces his whole being. The underground man, who lives within words and ideas, fails to understand the profound significance of Liza’s gesture. He admits, “I’d become so accustomed to inventing and imagining everything according to books and picturing everything on earth to myself just as I’d conceived it in my dreams, that at first I couldn’t even comprehend the meaning of this strange occurrence”(Dostoevsky 86). As a result of his failure to appreciate Liza’s nonverbal indication of love, the underground man drives her away, depriving himself of an opportunity to successfully abandon his limiting sphere of thought for the realm of action.

The events described by the underground man lead him to awareness of his existence as a fictional character. Todorov argues that the story of Notes from Underground ends with Liza’s token of

acceptance. He writes, "It is this outburst of light that makes Notes a much clearer work than it is usually considered to be; it is this very scene that allows the narrative to come to a close...In fact the book could not have ended earlier, and there is no reason for it to go further"(Todorov 251). However, the underground man's narrative *does* go further.

Although Liza's action is significant, it does not answer the question the narrator poses as the purpose of his writing. Her gesture does not resolve whether one can understand the whole truth about oneself without fear; however, his failure to comprehend her embrace guides the narrator to a solution. In each episode he recalls the underground man recognizes his inability to connect ideas with executed actions. In essence, he lives not through actions but only in the ideas themselves. Just before the omniscient author interrupts the underground man's tirade, the main character states, "We're stillborn; for some time now we haven't been conceived by living fathers; we like it more and more. We're developing a taste for it. Soon we'll conceive of a way to be born from ideas"(Dostoevsky 91). The reader understands that, as a fictional character, the underground man is in fact born from Dostoevsky's ideas. Dostoevsky hints that the character understands that fact as well. In his final diatribe, the narrator accurately describes the whole truth of his existence. The answer to whether he can discover the truth about himself without fear is apparently no, as the underground man recoils from this statement. He abruptly states, "But enough; I don't want to write any

more 'from Underground...'"(91), and the external author ends his narrative. Although the narrative ends in ellipses and appears to be fragmented, the purpose of the underground man's writing has been satisfied.

The underground man succeeds in his endeavor to discover the truth about his existence; he ascertains that he exists only in ideas. His self-awareness compounds the irony of determinism Morson emphasizes. The underground man initially believes that by identifying the cause of his defectiveness, he will be able to correct his seemingly doomed life. Instead, he discovers that his real defect, his existence as fiction, prevents him from ever altering his circumstances. After heralding self-awareness as the key to controlling his own life, he finds that self-awareness only allows him to perceive how little control he could ever have.