

Pain of isolation



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Notes from Underground written by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Grendel written by John Gardner are both novels which contain characters who suffer immensely as the novel progresses. Notes from Underground is a novel about a man, deprived of beneficial social interactions, who is trying to relate the world to European literature but is failing completely. The novel Grendel reflects Grendel's twelve years at war and his inability to accept the beauty of the human mind. What both of these characters are suffering from is leading to their isolation from the rest of the world and this is ultimately their weakness. " Why, we don't even know where this " real life" lives nowadays, what it really is, and what it's called. Leave us alone without books and we'll get confused and lose our way at once—we won't know what to join, what to hold on to, what to love or what to hate, what to respect or what to despise" (Dostoevsky 91). This is a perfect example of the underground man choosing to isolate himself from society and contemplate all the things that could happen if humans were left alone without books. He is choosing to suffer by trying to figure this out because it does nothing but frustrate him. " I understood that the world was nothing; a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears. I understood that, finally and absolutely, I alone exist." Grendel has this thought when he is being attacked by a bull and thinks that because he is being attacked, the whole world is destructive just like the bull. Although Grendel is suffering from being attacked by the bull, he is using it as something more to suffer from, He is making himself feel like he is alone and the only one who suffers. He then uses this experience to find the existence of such patterns, the patterns being suffering. Both these examples show readers that Grendel and the underground man are suffering to an extent further than necessary.

They are using their personal experiences and isolating themselves to turn the situation around to feel like it is them against the world when in reality everyone suffers.

Suffering is the main concept the authors are trying to incorporate throughout their texts. In *Grendel*, we get to see what Grendel goes through and how he actually feels rather than what was portrayed of Grendel in the novel *Beowulf*. In *Grendel*, Grendel truly does suffer. Grendel is suffering the pain of isolation. Grendel has his mother to build a relationship with but she lacks the ability to speak leading him to feel alone. Throughout the novel we find Grendel speaking to nonliving elements and never hearing a response, trapping him in his own thoughts. “ So childhood too feels good at first, before one happens to notice the terrible sameness, age after age” (Gardner 9). Here, Grendel is talking about being a child and even then feeling like an outsider. Age after age, he finally starts realizing that he is going through the same circle of isolation, and this is what he suffers from most. At first he is so happy to be experiencing what he is because it is all new but once he had experienced it and realized he was alone through it he figured out it was not what he wanted. “ I would feel, all at once, alone and ugly, almost—as if I’d dirtied myself—obscene. The cavern river rumbled far below us. Being young, unable to face these things, I would bawl and hurl myself at my mother and she would reach out her claws and seize me, though I could see I alarmed her (I had teeth like a saw), and she would smash me against her fat, limp breast as if to make me part of her flesh again” (Gardner 17). This is when Grendel talks about suffering even as a child. Grendel, unable to control his ugliness and not able to face it at such a young age, would throw

himself at his mother, scaring her. He knew this scared her, yet he did it. This shows readers that Grendel did not care to make the relationship with his mother better and because he could not control his ugliness he would try to make the case worse. Grendel is humanized in this section so readers do not judge him for his poor choices and so they can see how he is suffering but it is still hard to have pity on such a creature who has no desire to interact positively with his surroundings.

In *Notes from Underground*, the underground man considers himself a free man. He is suffering from self-inflicting pain, which he is choosing to do. This is shown when he will not accept the fact that $2+2=4$, when it has been proven by mathematicians. The choice of whether or not to accept this is his own but contradicting it after knowing it has been proven is what makes him suffer. What is the point of doing this one might ask? The underground justifies this with logical arguments, which is very confusing for the readers since his “logical arguments” are rather illogical to us. “Of course, what don’t people think up out of boredom! Why, even gold pins get stuck into other people out of boredom, but that wouldn’t matter. What’s really bad (this is me talking again) is that for all I know, people might even be grateful for those gold pins” (Dostoevsky 18). This is evidence here that the underground man is choosing to suffer as an alternative to being bored. This is the difference between the underground man and Grendel. Grendel actually suffered from isolation while the underground man is suffering because he is overthinking and trying to find an explanation for everything and anything. Maybe this is telling readers that the underground man actually enjoys suffering and is enduring it because he can and realizes the

pain of it. “ And why are you so firmly, so triumphantly convinced that only the normal and positive—in short, only well-being is advantageous to man? Doesn’t reason ever make mistakes about advantages? After all, perhaps man likes something other than well-being? Perhaps he loves suffering just as much? Perhaps suffering is just as advantageous to him as well-being? Man sometimes loves suffering terribly, to the point of passion, and that’s a fact.” (Dostoevsky 25). Here we see that the underground man is trying to justify that man could possibly enjoy suffering. When one is suffering they are conscious of what is happening to them. They know that what they are going through is not something they would let happen willingly. Then he suggests that the consciousness of knowing is causing the suffering.

Both novels, *Notes from Underground* and *Grendel*, contain characters which suffer immensely. Although readers notice that in *Notes from Underground*, the underground man is choosing to suffer because of his boredom and isolation from mankind, we can see that *Grendel* is suffering because of his inability to communicate with others. Both characters are suffering but it is evident that one is suffering without the choice. Gardner is using human characteristics to make *Grendel* more relatable to humans and make us sympathize with him. We have clear evidence that *Grendel* is suffering and unable to fix it while we see that the underground man could just stop by overthinking and analyzing everything. The meaning of the texts is to show readers the different types of suffering. This is shown using their personal experiences and isolating themselves to turn the situation around to feel like it is them against the world when in reality everyone suffers.