

Subverting  
chernyshevsky,  
anticipating the  
avant-garde: the de-  
centered modernist...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There has been a lot of critical investment on the lines of drawing parallels, comparisons and contrasts between Notes From Underground and Chernyshevsky's sensationally Utopian novel What Is To Be Done?, but the primary importance of Dostoevsky's novel can also be traced from the perspective of how its protagonist, the Underground Man, has become a point of convergence — an emblem, if we may say so from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, for a number of traits characterizing the so-called Modernist movement. Dostoevsky, however, despite his individual brilliance, was evidently a product of his time. Virginia Woolf opined in her essay 'Modern Fiction' that the "most elementary remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence" (Woolf 57). There are many reasons why the "Russian influence" in general, and Dostoevsky's influence in particular, was readily felt by many Modernists.

If the disintegration of the personality and society, that marks the boundary of the modern age, was triggered in much of Europe by the First World War, in Russia it had been sensed and expressed fifty years earlier with the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (Russell 211). Moreover, a prevalent socialist ethos in Russia attracted the attention of many European Modernists who sensed it to be a viable alternative to the crisis of capitalism in the early twentieth-century. In Notes, on another level, there can be located a discernible metatextual element at moments such as the one when the obsessively self-reflexive narrator professes: "I didn't know how to speak except 'like a book'" (Dostoevsky 72). The Underground Man's literariness is thoroughgoing (as is his cultural erudition that pans global literary boundaries), and as such, his notes might tell much about

<https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>

Dostoevsky's own literary standpoints. His revolt against a sterile predictability of reason can make him be seen as presciently anticipating a formal revolt against rational masculinity that calibrated much of the formal divergence of Modernist literature. Indeed, it might be safely asserted that no book or essay on the situation of the modern culture would be complete without some allusion to Dostoevsky's figure (Frank 1). The long stretches of interior monologues by this introspective, spitefully polemical, questioning and tentative "anti-hero" that Dostoevsky deploys, function not just as caricaturist subversions of various scenes in Chernyshevsky's novel, but usher the sinister spatial location from where they are being delivered — i. e., the "Underground" as the underbelly of every city life — into the anxious arena of Modernist literary compositions. In this light, St. Petersburg here characteristically provides the backdrop both for horrified fascination and a sense of lurking danger as the anonymous city space that entraps as well as enraptures the Underground Man's imagination. As Robert Russell points out, "from Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* (published in 1841) onwards, St. Petersburg has been presented in literature in terms of the juxtaposition of opposites, struggle, contradiction, lack of certainty, madness: a place where the strangest things can and do occur" (212). He goes on to note that this "spectral" metropolis, a place which the Underground Man describes as "the most abstract and intentional city in the world" and which Dostoevsky himself referred to as "the most fantastic city," was for many Russians and visitors to that country the physical embodiment of modernity, the symbol of a break with the past (Russell 211-12). From these it becomes apparent that

spatial verisimilitude for Dostoevsky is not just a realist exigency but a reflector of the psychological coordinates of the characters' minds.

The use of snow in *Notes* at once strikes us as a realist topographical detail and an existential trope signifying the psychic frigidity of the Underground Man. The anonymity of city scenes finds consequential ramifications in matters of readability too, an issue which increasingly shapes the insidious narrative movement. The restlessly agitated half-confessional and half-polemical structure of the work strikes a new relationship between the reader and the author that is remarkably efficacious in dismantling traditional authorial control as such: much of the story unfolds as dialogic reactions anticipated or assumed by the author, though the idea of any real readership is denied vehemently; also denied is any real agency of the reader. But such denials are paradoxically pivoted at the centre of "a vicious circle of dialogue which can neither be finished nor finalized" (Bakhtin 155). Sometimes the narrator is afraid that the reader will find that he is "joking" (Dostoevsky 33), sometimes he is afraid that he might be seen as an entertainer; at other times he debunks the authors of romantic morality by parading a structured approach calculated to elicit the right response from Liza, who in this instance becomes reader surrogate for his "book". This ironic reversal and parody of the sentimental social Romantic cliché of the Forties (Frank 24) satirizes the theme of rescuing fallen women by equating it with a mere rhetorical exercise — rather, a dialogic perpetuation of a conversation simply for moral triumph. Both within and without the text, an anxious awareness of the readability of the word, of the human face, or of reality, inform Dostoevsky's novel — which is suspicious even of its status as <https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>

a novel — such that the narrator complains: “ a novel needs a hero, whereas here all the traits of an anti-hero have been assembled deliberately” (Dostoevsky 91). These nagging concerns make him vulnerably dependent on an imaginary other’s response which further traps him, as “[He] fears that the other might think he fears that other’s opinion” (Bakhtin 154). When the Underground Man claims “ I’ve only taken to an extreme that which you haven’t even dared to take halfway” (Dostoevsky 91), he talks mostly about performing an act of self-scrutiny taken to acute extremes. The range of emotions he explores is common enough; they appear bizarre because they have been calculatedly blown out of proportion so that otherwise imperceptibly weak strands of thought get amplified enough to be closely analyzed.

The second part of the work substantiates the ideas spitefully expressed in the first part, in a way that the reader can relate to the illogic of human behavior, which stems from dichotomously alternating alienation from and attraction to the society. The duality of contrary pulls can be felt at every level in the narrative. For example, the bitter awareness of having committed some revolting act in a “ disgusting Petersburg night” finally turns into “ some kind of shameful, accursed sweetness” and “ earnest pleasure”, because “ the most intense pleasures occur in despair, especially when you’re very acutely aware of the hopelessness of your own predicament” (Dostoevsky 6-7). In a learned way, in what comes across as a most direct criticism of Chernyshevsky’s rational egoism, the narrator problematizes the concept of linear progress in history and the doctrine of the “ human advantage.” Progress of civilization has not brought with it a <https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>

cessation of war, as Buckle argued in his *History of Civilization in England* (Dostoevsky 16-17). Instead, anticipating a fin de siècle reaction against the positivist ethos, Dostoevsky maps out the power of the unconscious unreason that could counteract all notions of human advantage and seek “one more advantageous advantage . . . on behalf of which, a man will, if necessary, go against all laws . . . reason, honour, peace, prosperity” (Dostoevsky 16). In this connection, it can be said that the *Underground Man* in a way hints at something like the failure of the conscious mind to either understand or control the unconscious drives, which Sigmund Freud would later diagnose. Chernyshevsky’s “crystal palace” too can turn into a boring breeding ground for sadomasochist tendencies. Not just actual historical wars; for Dostoevsky, war is psychological. In the modern space, even social alienation can escalate quickly into a war; apparently innocuous farewell parties can turn into battlefields. Apparently small decisions (and indecisions) assume disproportionately weighty consequences as every single thought is given an overwhelming political edge.

Dostoevsky begins his parody of Nihilism by having the *Underground Man* use Chernyshevsky’s deterministic philosophy as an excuse for his moral flaccidity (Frank 8). Caught in this vortex of determinist solipsism, moral considerations become all but impossible. “Stifling” and “stabbing” the pain in his heart, he broods that his ill-treatment and insult of Liza will finally “elevate and purify her” (Dostoevsky 90) in the novel’s climactic moment of his ultimate retreat into his shell. The notion of freedom, it would appear, appears in many shapes and forms in the novel. In his numerous attempts to set himself free by revolting against all forms of compulsion — social, or <https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>

ideological — the Underground Man time and again ends up reinforcing the very menaces that he wishes to prove worthless. This dialectic of failure makes Turgenev comment that he is the ultimate Hamlet-type, as it were, in his revolt accompanied by an innate inability to believe in any viable alternative. The clarity of his dissent, though, lacks a firm resolve in the opposite direction, spells out an yearning of a soul in pain in a language all too transparent to be misunderstood. All this chaos actually gravitates towards an overwhelming question around which all the incidents gyrate. If “people like the author of these notes not only may, but actually must exist in our society” (Dostoyevsky 3), then is there any way out for such self-immured underground prisoners? Or is it really worth escaping if the other option comprises of rakes like Zverkov? When mathematical certainties like “twice two is four”, enlightened self-interest, or “laws of nature” all collapse together, what can satisfactorily fill the void? Clearly, the Underground Man’s doctrine that what a man needs is simply and solely independent volition — whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead — goes kaput in the light of his disastrous experiences which epitomize his utter inability to live up to his ideal in this social scenario. As an answer to these problems, Dostoevsky’s original manuscript version reportedly incorporated a “necessity for faith and Christ” (Dostoevsky 96) whose deletion was bitterly lamented by him in a letter to his brother.

It may be that Dostoevsky — a highly mystic and tormenting religiosity was always one of whose essential parts — wants the Underground Man’s tragic plight to demonstrate our need to choose God over self (Barstow 32).

However, despite his displeasure at the bewildering omission by the censor, <https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>

no change was made by Dostoevsky in subsequent editions of the work. Though the reason why he chose not to change anything remains unknown, his decision has added to the work's delicious ideological complexity and richness by incorporating a certain degree of open-endedness to the Underground Man's acerbically-blurted-out discourse. This loophole in the text, this lack of a centred discursive structure, even if accidentally induced at first, was maintained as a conscious choice, and has finally immortalized the Underground Man by leaving his questions unanswered. Efforts at filling the void shall continue and the ideological battleground inaugurated by Dostoevsky shall continue to witness newer methods of combat. Notes merely acted as the first novel where Dostoevsky found his true vein as a writer of the novel of ideas. Its relevance has not diminished even one bit as the unfinished project of Modernism keeps on inventing newer strategies. The Underground lives on in the consciousness of every cosmopolitan individual.

## **Works Cited**

Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in Dostoevsky." *Notes from Underground: An Authoritative Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Responses, Criticism*, 2nd ed., Norton, 2001, pp. 152-61.

Barstow, Jane. "Dostoevsky's 'Notes from Underground' versus Chernyshevsky's 'What Is to Be Done?'" *College Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1978, pp. 24-33. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25111196](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111196).

<https://assignbuster.com/subverting-chernyshevsky-anticipating-the-avant-garde-the-de-centered-modernist-discourse-in-dostoevskys-notes-from-underground/>



Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground: An Authoritative Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Responses, Criticism*. 2nd ed. Trans. and ed. by Michael R. Katz. W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. Norton Critical Editions.

Frank, Joseph. "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground.'" *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 69, no. 1, 1961, pp. 1-33. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27540632](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27540632).

Russel, Robert. "The Modernist Tradition." *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel*, ed. V. Jones Malcolm and Robin Feuer Miller, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 210-229. Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 53-58.