

**IMPERIAL RUSSIA  
(1721-1917):  
DOSTOEVSKY: NOTES  
FROM UNDERGROUND**



# IMPERIAL RUSSIA (1721-1917): DOSTOEVSKY: NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of Dostoevsky's novella, *Notes from Underground*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, how the major characters in *Notes from Underground* solicit both sympathy and disgust from readers, and finally how the novella fits into the genre of 19th century existential philosophy.

## Subjects

English / Language Arts  
Philosophy  
World History  
European History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Dostoevsky Museum, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Monument, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Station, St. Petersburg
- Nevsky Monastery, St. Petersburg
- Dostoevsky Monument, Moscow

## Essential Questions

Who was Fyodor Dostoevsky?

What is the plot/story behind his short story *Notes from Underground*?

What political and social messages did Dostoevsky try to convey through *Notes from Underground*?

## Academic Summary

### Excerpts: Notes from Underground (1864)

The author of the diary and the diary itself are, of course, imaginary. Nevertheless it is clear that such persons as the writer of these notes not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed. I have tried to expose to the view of the public more distinctly than is commonly done, one of the characters of the recent past. He is one of the representatives of a generation still living. In this fragment, entitled "Underground," this person introduces himself and his views, and, as it were, tries to explain the causes owing to which he has made his appearance and was bound to make his appearance in our midst. In the second fragment there are added the actual notes of this person concerning certain events in his life. (From the Author's Note)

I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite. That you probably will not understand. Well, I understand it, though. Of course, I can't explain who it is precisely that I am mortifying in this case by my spite: I am perfectly well aware that I cannot "pay out" the doctors by not consulting them; I know better than anyone that by all this I am only injuring myself and no one else. But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is from spite. My liver is bad, well; let it get worse!

... Tell me this: why does it happen that at the very, yes, at the very moments when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is "sublime and beautiful," as they used to say at one time, it would, as though of design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things, such that ... Well, in short, actions that all, perhaps, commit; but which, as though purposely, occurred to me at the very time when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed. The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was "sublime and beautiful," the more deeply I sank into my mire and the more ready I was to sink in it altogether. But the chief point was that all this was, as it were, not accidental in me, but as though it were bound to be so. It was as though it were my most normal condition, and not in the least disease or depravity, so that at last all desire in me to struggle against this depravity passed. It ended by my almost believing (perhaps actually believing) that this was perhaps my normal condition. But at first, in the beginning, what agonies I endured in that struggle! I did not believe it was the same with other people, and all my life I hid this fact about myself as a secret. I was ashamed (even now, perhaps, I am ashamed): I got to the point of feeling a sort of secret abnormal, despicable enjoyment in returning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, acutely conscious that that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness, and at last; into positive real enjoyment!

"Well, even in toothache there is enjoyment," I answer. I had toothache for a whole month and I know there is. In that case, of course, people are not spiteful in silence, but moan; but they are not candid moans, they are malignant moans, and the malignancy is the whole point. The enjoyment of the sufferer finds

expression in those moans; if he did not feel enjoyment in them he would not moan. It is a good example, gentlemen, and I will develop it. Those moans express in the first place all the aimlessness of your pain, which is so humiliating to your consciousness; the whole legal system of nature on which you spit disdainfully, of course, but from which you suffer all the same while she does not. They express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish, but that you have pain; the consciousness that in spite of all possible Wagenheims you are in complete slavery to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will leave off aching, and if he does not, they will go on aching another three months; and that finally if you are still contumacious and still protest, all that is left you for your own gratification is to thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more. (Note: this section comes from Part 2. The narrator has gone to "visit" a prostitute.)

Now you are young, pretty, fresh, you fetch a high price. But after another year of this life you will be very different--you will go off."

"In a year?"

"Anyway, in a year you will be worth less," I continued malignantly. "You will go from here to something lower, another house; a year later-- to a third, lower and lower, and in seven years you will come to a basement in the Haymarket. That will be if you were lucky. But it would be much worse if you got some disease, consumption, say ... and caught a chill, or something or other. It's not easy to get over an illness in your way of life. If you catch anything you may not get rid of it. And so you would die."

"Oh, well, then I shall die," she answered, quite vindictively, and she made a quick movement.

"But one is sorry."

"Sorry for whom?"

"Sorry for life." Silence.

"Have you been engaged to be married? Eh?"

"What's that to you?"

"Oh, I am not cross-examining you. It's nothing to me. Why are you so cross? Of course you may have had your own troubles. What is it to me? It's simply that I felt sorry."

"Sorry for whom?"

"Sorry for you."

"No need," she whispered hardly audibly, and again made a faint movement. That incensed me at once. What! I was so gentle with her, and she ....

"Why, do you think that you are on the right path?"

"I don't think anything."

"That's what's wrong, that you don't think. Realize it while there is still time. There still is time. You are still young, good-looking; you might love, be married, be happy ...."

"Not all married women are happy," she snapped out in the rude abrupt tone she had used at first.

"Not all, of course, but anyway it is much better than the life here. Infinitely better. Besides, with love one can live even without happiness. Even in sorrow life is sweet; life is sweet, however one lives. But here what is there but ... foulness? Phew!"

I turned away with disgust; I was no longer reasoning coldly. I began to feel myself what I was saying and warmed to the subject. I was already longing to expound the cherished ideas I had brooded over in my corner. Something suddenly flared up in me. An object had appeared before me.

"Never mind my being here, I am not an example for you. I am, perhaps, worse

than you are. I was drunk when I came here, though," I hastened, however, to say in self-defense. "Besides, a man is no example for a woman. It's a different thing. I may degrade and defile myself, but I am not anyone's slave. I come and go, and that's an end of it. I shake it off, and I am a different man. But you are a slave from the start. Yes, a slave! You give up everything, your whole freedom. If you want to break your chains afterwards, you won't be able to; you will be more and more fast in the snares. It is an accursed bondage. I know it. I won't speak of anything else, maybe you won't understand, but tell me: no doubt you are in debt to your madam? There, you see," I added, though she made no answer, but only listened in silence, entirely absorbed, "that's a bondage for you! You will never buy your freedom. They will see to that. It's like selling your soul to the devil .... And besides ... perhaps, I too, am just as unlucky--how do you know--and wallow in the mud on purpose, out of misery? You know, men take to drink from grief; well, maybe I am here from grief. Come, tell me, what is there good here? Here you and I ... came together ... just now and did not say one word to one another all the time, and it was only afterwards you began staring at me like a wild creature, and I at you. Is that loving? Is that how one human being should meet another? It's hideous, that's what it is!"

Fyodor Dostoevsky has been called the social conscious of 19th century Imperial Russia. Born in Moscow in 1821 to a lower middle class family, he and his brother were orphaned by their teens. Over the course of his life, Dostoevsky wandered from city to city and job to job searching for a personal and financial stability he would never really find. He was married twice, fathered four children (two of which died very young), and even spent five years in a Siberian prison camp, sentenced to hard labor with many other "radical thinkers." Most were there because of Tsar Nicholas I, who feared the authors' writings might serve underground interests in the wake of the Revolutions of 1848 that had swept across the continent. Throughout his adult life, Dostoevsky turned to reading and writing as a way to get away from reality, and yet his novels and short stories often explored the depths of the human condition in the context of the troubled social and religious atmosphere he saw in Imperial Russia.

Dostoevsky's writings have sometimes been compared to those of Charles Dickens, and yet their styles and content were certainly different. Dostoevsky wrote with a sense of "naturalism", a 19th century literary movement opposed to Romanticism. This movement sought to depict the reality of its characters through an examination of their pessimism, poverty, prejudice and filth, a description which seems to fit the characters in most, if not all, of Dostoevsky's works. Known best for his novels (such as *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*), many of which are read today in dozens of languages and across the globe, perhaps the tale that epitomizes Dostoevsky's writing is one of his early novellas, *Notes from Underground*.

*Notes from Underground*, written in 1864 during a time of tremendous social strife and chaos in Russia after Tsar freed the serfs, tells the story of a retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg. The work reads like a diary told from the point of an unnamed angry and spiteful narrator. As the dark story progresses, readers catch a glimpse into the mind of a deeply tortured and troubled man, one who hates himself and his surroundings. The "Underground Man" not only suffers, but he also seems to enjoy the suffering. Along the way, the narrator attacks Russian and Western society as he slowly slips into despair and madness.

And yet, in the midst of his misery, the narrator is somehow comforting to readers. It is as though Dostoevsky has tapped into a place where none of us want to go, and yet where we have all been. That is the power and message of *Notes from Underground*. At the same time, the author criticizes socialist and liberal ideas as to the dignity of individuals. One feels sympathy for the plight of the "Underground Man", but at the same time readers are left with a bitter taste in their mouths because of his actions and ideology. If he died, would

anyone miss him? Would he even be noticed?

It would be a theme repeated in many of Dostoevsky's works throughout his career. He was an existentialist, adhering to a 19th century philosophy where one looks at society with confusion and despair in the face of what he or she perceives as an apparently meaningless and absurd world, where individuals wander through life always standing on the precipice of tragedy and suicide. Yet, as a firm believer in Russian Orthodox Christianity until the day he died, Dostoevsky himself struggled throughout his life with the role of God in society and with human redemption through beliefs in the almighty. In many ways, *Notes from Underground* is the best example of this inner struggle. Perhaps that is the novella's true purpose. Perhaps that is why it is Dostoevsky's most well known literary work, read by countless high school and college students each year.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, including a full reading of Dostoevsky's novella, *Notes from Underground*, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, how the major characters in *Notes from Underground* solicit both sympathy and disgust from readers, and finally how the novella fits into the genre of 19th century existential philosophy.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the story and characters of Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* sends a warning to what he saw as a moral depravity inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century Russia.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the characters in Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* solicit both sympathy and disgust from readers.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from Underground* fits into the larger genre of 19th century existential philosophy.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Can literary works (novels, short stories, etc.) change society? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Dostoevsky and his Writings (20 min)
- Video – Why Dostoevsky is Important (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Dostoevsky and *Notes from Underground*, taking notes as appropriate. (25 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Suggestion: AP and Advanced students should read the entire novella over the course of several days (perhaps a week).
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: *Notes from Underground* (25 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how Dostoevsky's works focused on the moral depravity he saw as inherent in the emerging industrial society of mid-late 19th century urban Russia, how the major characters in *Notes from Underground* solicit both sympathy and disgust from readers, and finally how the novella fits into the genre of 19th century existential philosophy.

## Extension

### **On tour: Dostoevsky Literary and Memorial Museum, St. Petersburg**

While on tour in St. Petersburg, students can visit the Dostoevsky Literary and Memorial Museum where they can see for themselves the apartment in which he lived twice during his lifetime, including the last few years of his life. The museum contains memorabilia from the author as well. On Sundays, the museum also shows a Dostoevsky-inspired film and a discussion on his impact on Russian society. Of special note in the museum is Dostoevsky's study, where late in life he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Little Orphan*.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [books.eserver.org/fiction/dostoyevsky/](http://books.eserver.org/fiction/dostoyevsky/)  
Notes from Underground (full text)
- [www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/way-health-and-hope-and-love](http://www.thomasaquinas.edu/a-liberating-education/way-health-and-hope-and-love)  
Why We Study Dostoevsky (website) – from Brian Kelley, Dean and Tutor at Thomas Aquinas College (CA)
- [www.eckerd.edu/academics/qfm/qfm%20files/Foltz%20-%20Dostoevsky%20Study%20Guide.pdf](http://www.eckerd.edu/academics/qfm/qfm%20files/Foltz%20-%20Dostoevsky%20Study%20Guide.pdf)  
Dostoevsky Reading and Study Guide (PDF study guide) – from Bruce V Foltz, Professor of Philosophy at Eckerd College (FL)
- [community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/novels/UGMan/ugman.html](http://community.middlebury.edu/~beyer/courses/previous/ru351/novels/UGMan/ugman.html)  
Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground: A Study Guide (website). From Tom Beyer, Professor of Russian Studies at Middlebury College (VT).
- [www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/09/notes-underground-dostoevsky-review-pierre](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/09/notes-underground-dostoevsky-review-pierre)  
Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky – review (website). From the Guardian newspaper (UK).
- [www1.umn.edu/lol-russ/hpgary/Russ3421/lesson8.htm](http://www1.umn.edu/lol-russ/hpgary/Russ3421/lesson8.htm)  
Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground: Study Notes (website). From Gary R. Jahn, Morse-alumni. Distinguished university professor of Russian Language and Literature at the University of Minnesota.
- [www.auburn.edu/~mitrege/ENGL2210/study-guides/dostoevsky.html](http://www.auburn.edu/~mitrege/ENGL2210/study-guides/dostoevsky.html)  
Notes from Underground: Reading Guide (website). From George Mitrevski, Associate Professor of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Auburn University.
- [germslav.byu.edu/perspectives/2008/Stephanova\\_Victoria.pdf](http://germslav.byu.edu/perspectives/2008/Stephanova_Victoria.pdf)  
A Question of Credibility: The Subjective Narrator of Notes from Underground (speech / academic paper). From a speech given by Victoria Stephanova at the Department of German and Russian at Brigham Young University.
- [nvr.mvnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/World\\_Lit\\_II/Fyodor%20Dostoevsky.ppt](http://nvr.mvnu.edu/faculty/trearick/english/rearick/World_Lit_II/Fyodor%20Dostoevsky.ppt)  
Dostoevsky (PowerPoint) – from Tad Rearick, Professor of English at Mount Vernon Nazarene Univ (OH)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYmUUT8XfI4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYmUUT8XfI4)  
Why Dostoevsky is Important (video) – great video that discusses Dostoevsky
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyH6SPtDOEE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyH6SPtDOEE)  
Existentialism: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground (video). From Gregory B. Sadler, noted author and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Marist College (NY). This 60-minute video lecture is too long for in-class showings, but is highly recommended for out-of-class showings, especially for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayh-ehvFVfU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayh-ehvFVfU)  
Irwin Weil on Dostoevsky (video). This 70-minute video, an interview on Dostoevsky with Irwin Weil, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at Northwestern University, is probably too long for in-class showings, but it is well worth watching. Professor Weil does a great job explaining Dostoevsky's works and his place in society. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.



## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor\\_Dostoyevsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky)  
Fyodor Dostoevsky – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Themes\\_in\\_Fyodor\\_Dostoyevsky%27s\\_writings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Themes_in_Fyodor_Dostoyevsky%27s_writings)  
Themes in Fyodor Dostoevsky's Writings – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary\\_naturalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_naturalism)  
Naturalism (literature) – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notes\\_from\\_Underground](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notes_from_Underground)  
Notes from Underground – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism)  
Existentialism – Wikipedia article

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/crimean-war-1853-to-1856](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/crimean-war-1853-to-1856)  
The Crimean War 1853-56
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/dostoevsky-notes-from-underground](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-notes-from-underground)  
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: Notes from Underground
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/dostoevsky-grand-inquisitor](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-grand-inquisitor)  
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: Brothers Karamazov - The Grand Inquisitor
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/dostoevsky-little-orphan](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/dostoevsky-little-orphan)  
Imperial Russia – Dostoevsky: The Little Orphan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/imperial-russia-panslavism)  
Imperial Russia – Pan Slavism

## Key Terms

- Dostoevsky
- Existentialism
- Industrialization
- Literary
- Naturalism
- *Notes from Underground*
- St. Petersburg

