



A Psychoanalytical Reading of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*

Youcef Zineddine MOSTEFAOUI¹

Department of English- Univeristy of Saida

mostefaouiyoucefzineddine@gmail.com

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Abstract ;

*The mind, a complex and ever-changing entity, is a subject of continual study due to its inherent instability and ceaseless interplay of thoughts, ideas, images, signs, feelings, and emotions. Recognizing this inherent characteristic, attempts have been made to captivate individuals' senses and tap into their consciousness on various levels - auditory, visual, subliminal, and physical. This paper delves into the concept of the "Stream of Consciousness," a narrative tool that seeks to engage with and explore these attempts. The "Stream of Consciousness" represents a train of thoughts, an internal dialogue, which can be comprehended, discussed, and analyzed through a psychological lens, both in the context of individual experiences and within the realm of literature. In this research paper, we focus on Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* as a prime example of such an intricate "internal dialogue," encompassing themes of existentialism and mental disorders, with the "Stream of Consciousness" serving as a vital component of its analysis.*

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1. Introduction

Dostoevsky's literary masterpiece, *Notes from the Underground*, presents a profound exploration of the human psyche, delving into the intricate depths of the protagonist's mind. Through a psychoanalytical lens, the attempt is to unravel the psychological dimensions embedded within the novel, shedding light on the inner workings of the protagonist's consciousness and the underlying motivations that drive his actions. By employing concepts and theories from psychoanalysis, such as Sigmund Freud's

psychoanalytic theory and the exploration of the unconscious, this analysis aims to unveil the intricate layers of Dostoevsky's protagonist and offer a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind.

2. *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*

The human mind has always posed an issue when it comes to mannerism, behaviour, and conduct, and how it functions. Studies have been conducted in hopes of reaching solid grounds to help understand the human dynamism. In that matter, many articles, trials and experimental reviews attempted for cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, and therapeutic practices. Sigmund Freud being the founder of psychoanalysis had so much to offer concerning this theory of the human mind.

Psychoanalysis is the study of a particularity of the human mind; it attends to the reoccurring psychological problems that entrap the individual. These recurring psychic issues usually ensnare whoever is going through them within walls built of the inability to be happy, anxiety, stress, inhibition, laziness, and depression, etc...

Lauren M. Lipner, Robert Mendelsohn & J. Christopher Muran agreed on Psychoanalysis to be a term that serves for both; “psychological theories and techniques” (2017, p. 2). Each of what was noted puts a humongous emphasis on the “unconscious” when it comes to human beings’ adaptation and behaviour.

Freud leaned in his study of the human mind toward Charles Darwin’s idea of evolution, claiming that everything in the human body evolves including the sexual side (on psychological and physical scales). In this study Freud marked that the human body and mind in particular experiences blockages which could cause a certain kind of psychopathology (so-called; neurotic psychopathology). Simply put, this type of pathology is to be seen as an outcome of the failure of defence mechanisms that are naturally and biologically built to block hurtful memories and incidents. These defence mechanisms are usually manifested through what is defined literarily as “patience” (repression of harmful emotions and feelings), and instead of that, some symptoms celebrate their existence like panic attacks and anger episodes, etc...

What the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist stands on top for, in his research, is his idea on the use of psychoanalysis as a treatment for emotional distress, illnesses and disorders. This was actually the beginning of what is known lately as psychotherapy or “therapeutic talking”. These notions altogether just put an emphasis focus on the role of the “unconscious” in human mental life.

Sigmund Freud defines Psychoanalysis differently as he says that it is “a method of treating nervous patients medically” (2016, p. 9). This definition puts psychoanalysis as a treatment on a rather different sphere from that of traditional medicine; doctors usually inform their patients of the different steps of the treatment while leaving some specificities out. They also tend to keep their hopes up when it comes to the results of that treatment. Psychoanalysis for a treatment necessitates informing patients of the different steps of that treatment without leaving any particularity out (I.e. letting them be informed of the whole process including the excruciating parts). It also requires exactness just like medicine but with no promises of miraculous healing.

Diana T. Kenny approves of the idea that psychoanalysis holds two definitions, one that deems it a theory of the mind and a studying method on how its contents function, and the other that defines it as a therapy to modify mind's contents that are considered abnormal to reach a fulfilling result of how a normal mind and a normal behavior should be. (2017, p. 2).

Nothing remains constant, and the human mind is the perfect example for that. Studies and research evolve accordingly in order to meet with the newest forms of mental conduct and functioning. Freud's idea on psychoanalysis was the basis of studying the human mind but it was not the only one, or at least not only that form of it. Researchers tried to improve their understanding of human behavior and to accomplish the best version of that endeavor, they revolved around and detailed Freud's notions on psychoanalysis.

Some of these modifications that were conducted on psychoanalysis include; Kohut's “self-psychology” (1984) and Mitchell's “relational therapies” (1993) amongst others that helped identifying current strings of psychoanalytic psychotherapy (inner conflicts, childhood experiences, some of one's mental life, and personality development which englobes stabilising feelings, emotions and impulses to reach a certain level of completion (Westen, 1998, p. 333)

3. *Stream of Consciousness in Literature*

The human body goes through multiple events, and hence multiple states of mind; different feelings, emotions, thoughts and imagery that are created and which rev to life either on different time periods or simultaneously. These “thoughts” are manifested in a flow, with no barrier between one and the following. William James (1890) ascribed the nomenclature “Stream of Consciousness” to the former explication and commented upon it.

Rohimmi Nour, Rosli Talif, and Zanyar Kareem Abdul offered a series of names that were ascribed to “the stream of consciousness” such as “stream of thought, interior/internal monologue, and

soliloquy” (2013, p. 107-108). They also posed questions as to the appropriateness of the terms and their coherence/ cohesion. The two terms that were at the centre of study are “Stream of consciousness” and “Internal monologue”. To clear the miscomprehension, Souvage noted in his *Introduction to the Study of the Novel* that ‘interior monologue’ is mainly used in cases where a set of of certain thoughts is being released while ‘stream of consciousness’ is reserved for cases where “sensory experiences” overlies upon what is entitled to the interior monologue in the process (1965, p. 46).

Dujardin (1931, p. 154-155) made a halt at Larbaud’s notion on the definition of “internal monologue” who sees the latter generally as the unconscious and unorganised expression of intimate and spontaneous thoughts, as he explicates the definition by viewing “interior monologue” as an unintended speech by a character that makes one see directly through the “internal life” of this character without halts, explanations or commentaries by the author and, most importantly with disregard to “syntax”

Dujardin’s method “internal monologue” calls for “the whole of consciousness” which will necessitate including everything like imagery and sensations in the character’s internal speech, and that makes everything that the character goes through seen as “stream of consciousness” and not “internal/interior monologue” according to Bowling (1950). Additionally, The hidden speech that is to be communicated by a certain character is uniquely brought and thought by the latter themselves. For that, he criticised writers such as Dostoevsky and accused them of “interruption”. This would, according to Dujardin, make some of the ideas that are communicated by the character in their interior monologue, part of the author’s and hence he called for their omission as part of the character’s internal monologue (p. 339).

Bowling antagonised Dujardin’s ideas through his own definition of the stream of consciousness as he noted that Dujardin and many other modern novelists focus on the “meanderings of the mind, not as means to an end, but as an end itself”. He views stream of consciousness as a “direct quote of the mind”, as he specified that it is not of the “language area” only but of consciousness as a whole with attention to the only criterion that is of introducing the reader to the inner mind of the character with no interruption by means of commentary or otherwise (1950, p. 345).

Humphrey (1954) defines stream of consciousness in fiction as focusing primarily on the “exploration of pre-speech levels of consciousness” in order to decipher the “psychic being of the characters”. According to him, the stream of consciousness is concerned with the mental/spiritual experience in relation to: certain mental processes such as imagination and memory which are hinted to

as “Whatness”, and feelings and symbolism to which he refers “Howness” (Cited in Rohimmi, N, Rosli, T, and Zanyar, K.A., 2013, p. 109).

It is inarguable amongst researchers that stream of consciousness is a method or a technique that provides an inner view of what a certain character has in mind. These scholars are required to stand on common grounds when it comes to explanation through, and commentary upon providing readers with a view of the characters' internal life. They are also needed to comprehend that the term deals with a “pre-speech level of consciousness”, but they are also required, as Humphrey puts it, to add as little from the “external/alien” as possible (1954, p. 155).

4. *Psychoanalytical Reading of Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground*

Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground" is an intricately complex and a work psychologically rich. It lends itself well to psychoanalytical interpretation. As it was published in 1864, the novella delves into the mind of its unnamed narrator, who represents a profoundly, emersed, alienated and self-destructive individual. Through the lenses of psychology, one can uncover various themes and symbols, unveiling the unconscious motivations and conflicts that conduct the narrator's actions.

The term “consciousness” was mentioned more than twenty-five (25) times, and this implies the importance of the concept and the necessity to take it into consideration.

One momentous aspect to shed lights on is the narrator's introspective nature and his tendency to engage in self-analysis. He constantly examines his own thoughts and desires. He often contradicts and opposes himself which reveals the internal struggle within his psyche. This self-consciousness can be viewed as a manifestation of the ego's attempts to reconcile conflicting desires and societal expectations. These notions are expressed in a peculiar manner if one is allowed to comment upon them. One example of these contradictions is what the Underground Man drew: "I have many times tried to become an insect. But I was not equal even to that. I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness- a real thorough-going illness." (1864, p. 7)

The Underground Man, as the narrator is often referred to, displays traits of what Sigmund Freud termed the "death instinct" or "Thanatos." The idea is unveiled through the quote where he questioned this feeling: “can a man who attempts to find enjoyment in the very feeling of his own degradation possibly have a spark of respect for himself?” (1864, p. 21) He seems to derive a certain pleasure from self-sabotage and finds a perverse satisfaction in his own suffering. This self-destructive tendency may well be regarded as a form of masochism, where the “Man” derives pleasure from his own pain and humiliation. This masochistic aspect can be viewed as a manifestation of repressed guilt or unresolved

conflicts within his own unconscious. As noted, his enjoyment mostly comes from moments of weakness desperation; an idea that he shared quite abundantly throughout the whole work: “in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of one's position.” (p. 10).

The Underground Man's alienation from society is a central theme in the novella and can be thoroughly examined from a psychoanalytical angle. The “Man” tends to distance himself from his surroundings and would deem it a ‘pleasurable punishment’. He would deem himself different from the rest of people around him “‘I am alone, and they are EVERYONE,’ (p. 58) This could be seen in the novella in different places, some examples include; “I had cut off all relations. That, however, only happened to me once. As a rule, I was always alone. (p. 62), “I wanted ‘peace,’ to be left alone in my underground world” (p. 162). His inability to connect with others and his tendency to isolate himself can be seen as a defence mechanism against his fear of rejection and abandonment.

This fear might be rooted or rather ingrained in his early experiences as a child or through traumatic events and despised past events, which have shaped his worldview and generally influenced his relationship with others. Many examples he gave that he considered hateful like him moving away from his old school acquaintances and “to cut off all connection with my hateful childhood” (p. 76). The instance that shows why he became rather ‘apathetic’ is explained in a quote where he (the Man) decided to tell Lisa about himself, and that explication may be the primary reason why he turned out to be the way he is:

See, Liza, I will tell you about myself. If I had had a home from childhood, I shouldn't be what I am now. I often think that. However bad it may be at home, anyway they are your father and mother, and not enemies, strangers. Once a year at least, they'll show their love of you. Anyway, you know you are at home. I grew up without a home; and perhaps that's why I've turned so ... unfeeling.’ (1864, p. 120)

The theme of power and control also plays a significant role in "Notes from the Underground." The Man often engages in struggles over might and power, both with himself and with others. A good instance is of the “Man” showing what he endured (insults, degradation, and ill-treatment), his reaction to that was: “I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate; I had been treated like a rag, so I wanted to show my power” (1864, p. 155). This can be seen as a reflection of his unawareness over his desires for dominance

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and control, which may stem from unresolved childhood conflicts or a need to compensate for his feelings of powerlessness.

Furthermore, this work presents a complex exploration of sexuality and desire. The Underground Man's relationships with women (or with people in general) are shifting from the two binaries; fantasies of dominating to fear of intimacy and rejection. One example is of him speaking about this one friend that he dominated fully just to leave him with a feeling of victory just because he exercised such power over him:

He was a simple and devoted soul; but when he devoted himself to me entirely, I began to hate him immediately and repulsed him—as though all I needed him for was to win a victory over him, to subjugate him and nothing else (1864, p. 87)

These dynamics can be analysed through a psychosexual lens, examining how unconscious desires and fears shape his interactions with the opposite sex. This basically reveals the deep-seated conflicts and unconscious motivations that drive the narrator's actions. Through the exploration of themes such as self-analysis, self-destructiveness, alienation, power, and emotions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the psychological intricacies at play in this work that is compelling to a certain extent.

One aspect worth exploring is the Underground Man's constant self-analysis and contradictory nature. It is more of a Dystopian representation of since the most prominent characteristics seem to be seen unlike what they are (pleasure in being hurt, finding enjoyment in the bad and intricate parts of human life. It could be seen clearly in the previous example (p. 87) but there are multitudinous examples of the sort that show the contradiction within the Man's self and how there are shifts from a certain feeling to another as if he were "schizophrenic".

He often engages in introspection, examining his thoughts and motivations, but frequently contradicts himself and acts in ways that seem to sabotage his own happiness. This is obvious in an example just one page back throughout the story where he was met with feelings of hatred and unacceptance, yet he "longed" for their despicable behaviour "though he was worse than any of them" (p. 86). This contradiction and binarism in feelings would be seen and considered as a defence mechanism because it pushed him to better himself in a way that called for their respect regardless of their degrees and acquisitions.

This self-sabotage can be seen as a manifestation of the unconscious mind's function. For instance, he said "But what can a decent man speak of with most pleasure? Answer: Of himself. Well,

so I will talk about myself” (p. 6) but right before in page 3 he considered himself sick and a spiteful man because he The Underground Man may have repressed many emotions, including unresolved conflicts that manifest in his contradictory behaviours. Psychoanalysis suggests that the unconscious mind often influences our actions unwantedly, and the character’s contradictory nature may be studied as a reflection of these nestling conflicts. This may be Dostoevsky’s way to state that human beings require both; the good that belongs to Utopia and the bad that pertains to Dystopia to have a pleasant, enjoyable life.

Power dynamics and control play a significant role in the novella. The Underground Man frequently engages in power struggles, both with himself and with others as given in the previous examples (the one with the friend and with his past relationships with women). This can be seen as a manifestation of his unconscious desires for dominance and control. Psychoanalysis suggests that individuals may develop a need for control as a defence mechanism against feelings of powerlessness. By asserting control over others, the Underground Man may have attempted to compensate for his own perceived powerlessness. comprehending these unconscious desires for control can shed light on his interactions with others and the hidden motivations behind his inexplicably power struggles.

Overall, this allows us to unveil the unconscious motivations, conflicts, and desires that drive the narrator's actions. By exploring themes such as self-destructiveness, alienation, and power through the lens of psychoanalysis, we can gain a more nuanced and a neater understanding of the psychological intricacies of Dostoevsky's work.

Freud's structural model is of relevance to The Underground Man's psyche. The latter, according to Freud (1923, p. 38) consists of the Id (primitive, unconscious desires), the ego (rational consciousness), and the superego (internal societal and moral standards). The Underground Man's actions often reflect the conflict between his id-driven desires for self-gratification and the superego's demands for conformity and social acceptance. His ego attempts to mediate between these opposing forces, resulting in internal struggles and psychological tension.

One could also bring about the notion that psychoanalysis places importance on symbolism and dreams as avenues for exploring the unconscious mind. Symbols in "Notes from the Underground," such as the underground space (p. 68), the toothache in pages 18, 19, 23, or the crystal palace (p. 47), can be analyzed for their deeper psychological meanings. Similarly, the Underground Man's dreams or fantasies can offer insights into his hidden desires and fears.

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Throughout the novella, there are instances of catharsis as the character engages in acts of self-reflection, often driven by a desire for self-examination. Interpretation recognizes the therapeutic potential of self-exploration and introspection as means to possess insight into one's unconscious motivations and inner struggles as the following example shows “I, for instance, have a great deal of AMOUR PROPRE. I am as suspicious and prone to take offence as a humpback or a dwarf.” (p. 9). The character's tendencies and behaviour in general can be seen as a manifestation of his need for self-understanding and emotional release as it exhibits the two spheres of Russian “intelligentsia”; the sentimental 1840s (p. 141, 143, 147) and the utilitarian 1860s (p. 33, 34, 37, 39, 47).

The presence of fatherhood (parenthood) and authority figures in *Notes From the Underground* can be examined from a psychoanalytical perspective. Freudian psychoanalysis and studies emphasize the role of the father's presence/absence in the development of the superego, which internalizes societal norms and values (p. 122). The main character's relationship with authority may reflect unresolved issues related to his father or authoritative existence in his past, influencing his feelings of powerlessness or rebellion alike which takes us back to a part of the work we already quoted (p. 120)

The study of the main character's psyche and behaviour with people could well be done through the binarity of transference and countertransference; it simply means that the character's current behaviour is an accumulation of reactions to past experiences since childhood and early adolescence and which would, in return, influence their conduct and behaviour toward those around at the present time. This could also be introduced as an unending chain of impact. This chain of effect starts from a certain person or a particular experience in the family or in the societal environment (it is almost impossible to figure out who that person could be or what that specific experience might be beyond reasonable doubt) as in the case of the “Man” who blames the inexistence of a “Childhood house” for what he became (Ibid).

While not explicitly within the realm of psychoanalysis, existential themes in *Notes from the Underground* are sort of related to the psychological study of the protagonist. The Underground Man's existential crisis, his search for meaning and authenticity, and his wrestling with free will and determination resonate with psychoanalytical concepts. Psychoanalysis as a realm can shed light on the underlying psychological processes that contribute to the Underground Man's existential predicament and shed light on his subjective experience of existence.

Dostoevsky's use of symbolism provides an opportunity for interpretation. studying signs and symbols such as the underground space itself, the toothache, or the crystal palace as marked before,

would present deep meanings. For instance, the underground space might represent the unconscious mind that keeps being hinted at or the repressed desires that are almost omnipresent through every statement and every action done by the Man, while the toothache may or may not stand for the hidden pain or unresolved aching struggles and hurting issues within the protagonist.

Fyodor Dostoevsky utilises elements of the stream of consciousness, that is a narrative technique that aims to depict the continuous flow of thoughts. This technique was later known to be used by writers such as Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. This technique would explore the flow of thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations within a character's mind. Although the novel precedes the formal nomenclature of it as a literary technique, it contains elements that can be interpreted in such manner.

The Underground Man's narrative is characterized by a sectioned structure that mirrors the chaotic nature of human thought. The story unfolds through the protagonist's internal monologue, where he freely digresses, jumps between past and present events, and exhibits a strangely connected stream of associations. This stream of consciousness technique allows readers to directly access the Underground Man's inner existence, experiencing his thoughts, doubts, and conflicting emotions, and struggles as they arise in his mind. It is present mostly in the first of two parts of the work. The Man expresses whatever crosses his mind unstintingly like he did in the beginning where he introduced himself as a sick, hateful man and then took the medicinal meaning of "sick" to carry on talking about his liver disease (p. 3). This, thus, offers a clean slit into psychological realism

The narrative often presents the Underground Man's thoughts in an unfiltered and unedited manner, reflecting the character's inner turmoil and psychological complexities. It captures the raw and sometimes contradictory nature of human thought, revealing the protagonist's insecurities, resentments, social anxieties, and self-reflections like the Man's behaviour toward his understanding of and his "friends" (p. 59, 87) or "lovers" (p. 128). Through this narrative style, Dostoevsky provides a deeply introspective portrayal of the protagonist's psychology and the existential predicaments he grapples with between to binarities;

Addedly, the use of rhetorical questions, internal debates, and self-addressed remarks further reinforces the stream of consciousness as a technique. The protagonist engages in prolonged and "introspective" self-analysis, questioning his own motivations, beliefs, and actions (p. 107, 128). The narrative often deviates from the linear plot, with the protagonist frequently interrupting his own thoughts to offer explanations, justifications, or contradictory viewpoints. This reflects the fragmented and non-

linear nature of human consciousness, where thoughts can arise spontaneously and unpredictably to blend and clash.

Dostoevsky allows readers to intimately experience the main character's inner world, shedding light on his complex psychological state and the existential dilemmas that torment him. This narrative technique captures the character's fragmented and contradictory thoughts, offering a unique perspective on the human psyche and the complexities of human existence.

In *Notes from the Underground* the theme of isolation is intertwined with the protagonist's mental state, suggesting that it is a sign of his condition that is 'mental disorder'. The protagonist's self-imposed isolation and social withdrawal reflect his psychological struggles and contribute to his overall sense of alienation and despair. His withdrawal from society reflects a sense of detachment, indicating his inability to establish meaningful connections with his surroundings for some reasons that he deems valid. The protagonist's isolation is scarcely a choice but rather a symptom of his condition. As he becomes increasingly distant and disconnected from the outside world, His mental state deteriorates, further mirroring his sense of despair and contributing to his self-destructive behaviour. This may well be seen as a momentous sign of his troubled psyche and illustrates the detrimental effects of social detachment on his mental well-being –something that is reoccurring in society.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, a psychological reading of Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground" unveils and reflects a deep exploration of the human psyche and the complexities of the protagonist's mental state. The novella delves into themes such as alienation, self-destructiveness, existential crisis and angst, and the impact of social isolation on one's mental well-being. Through the protagonist, Dostoevsky presents a psychologically complicated individual whose inner turmoil, suffering and conflicting desires mirror the contradictions of human nature.

The main character's self-obligated isolation divided and sectioned stream of consciousness, and self-destructive conduct all direct the reader toward psychological disorders. His constant introspection, internal debates, and twisted perception of reality reveal a mind consumed by existential bug and a profound sense of alienation from society. Dostoevsky's exploration of the protagonist's psychology urges readers to contemplate arduous questions about the nature of human existence, the consequences of isolation, and the intricate functioning of the human mind.

In a nutshell, *Notes from the Underground* offers a psychological portrait that travels through the width and delves into the depths of the human psyche, illuminating the abyss of the protagonist's mental

state and providing insights into the broader human condition. It serves as a mighty look on the psychological challenges hindering individuals when met with societal norms, existential dilemmas and crises, and the relentless, incessant, and rigorous struggles within their own minds.

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