

# How to Tell a Good Story: The Fictional Narrative of *Notes from the Underground*

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## ABSTRACT

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* foregrounds the constructed nature of narrative reality within the novel. The narrator dominates the narrative space, a technique that significantly deviates from traditional novelistic conventions. Unlike metafiction, which often aims to display narrative techniques, *Notes* employs a dialogic structure that facilitates the Underground Man's self-analysis. The plot is sparse, with emphasis placed on the narrative design and the dialogue between the narrator and the narratee. The identities of both remain in a state of flux, particularly that of the narrator. This instability is ultimately controlled by the voice of the implied author, which calmly reveals the irrational underpinnings of rational thought.

## KEYWORDS

Notes from the Underground; Narrator; Narratee; Implied Author.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling constitutes the essential core of fiction, reliant on three indispensable elements: character, plot, and theme—that is, who tells the story, how it is told, and what is told. A compelling story often necessitates fictional elements that embellish reality, akin to the evolution of the historical *Records of the Three Kingdoms* into the dramatized *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* through oral storytelling. Fictionalized characters and plots frequently become more engaging, leading readers to willingly suspend disbelief and immerse themselves in the narrative. However, Dostoevsky begins *Notes from the Underground* by declaring: "Both the author of these Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, entirely fictional"[1]. The narrator, the Underground Man, openly admits to fabrication, stating, "Of course, all these words of yours are improvised by me on the spot". In this brief, two-part narrative, a single narrator dominates the first part, while characters in the second part appear only through his recollections. The central question, therefore, is how this story of "self-abnegation" is effectively narrated.

This paper examines Dostoevsky's narrative techniques in *Notes from the Underground*, focusing particularly on how the author constructs a compelling story through unconventional means. By analyzing the roles of the narrator, narratee, and implied author, we can better understand how Dostoevsky achieves his philosophical and literary objectives. The novel's experimental structure challenges traditional notions of character development and plot progression, offering a unique case study in narrative theory and the psychology of literary representation.

## 2. CREATING DISTANCE FROM AN OBJECTIVE READING

As noted by Wood (2015), the novel's defining feature emerges when "monologue shifts inward", consequently changing "who ultimately sees the characters". While drama is performed for an audience, the novel reveals character psychology directly to the reader. Dostoevsky delved into extreme segments of ordinary humanity-pathological figures like drunkards, madmen, and fools-who embody the alter egos lurking within the modern individual. Thus, his work remains a form of realist literature marked by intense social critique and introspection.

Whereas traditional realist novels pursue verisimilitude-exemplified by Flaubert's demand for authorial effacement-*Notes from the Underground* employs a meta-fictional strategy that anticipates later rebellions against realism. Dostoevsky's blunt declaration of "fiction" creates an immediate distance between the reader and the text, severing the conventional empathetic connection. Readers are informed that this is a fabricated story, which instinctively discourages genuine emotional investment in a "liar's" testimony. This very distance, however, may paradoxically enable a more objective and authentic grasp of the narrative's philosophical arguments.

This narrative strategy reflects Dostoevsky's engagement with contemporary philosophical debates, particularly the tension between rational egoism and human irrationality. By foregrounding the fictional nature of his narrative, he invites readers to approach the text as a philosophical thought experiment rather than a mimetic representation of reality. This approach aligns with what Mikhail Bakhtin would later describe as the "dialogic" nature of Dostoevsky's novels, where multiple voices and perspectives coexist without resolution into a single authoritative viewpoint.

Furthermore, unlike purely metafictional works, the author's purpose here is not to demonstrate narrative technique but to engage in dialogic narration, providing the Underground Man a platform for intense self-analysis. This aligns with the characteristics of Russian "psychological realism," situating *Notes from the Underground* firmly within a realist, social-philosophical tradition, albeit with a distinct narrative approach.

## 3. NARRATIVE WITH A DILUTED PLOT

### 3.1. Establishing the Narratee

Dostoevsky creates distance not only between the reader and the narrator but also between the narrator and his own narrative. Part One of *Notes from the Underground* features almost no characters besides the "I," instead directly introducing a "you" as a dialogic partner.

This technique differs from, for instance, Dante's objectification of his emotions in *La Vita Nuova*. Dante cedes interpretive authority to the audience[2], whereas the narrator of *Notes* exhaustively imagines the thoughts and attitudes of the "you" within the text, leaving little room for readerly interpretation. The reader is forced to endure the views and ideas he projects onto this "you." This "you" aligns with the narratological concept of the "narratee," a figure to whom the narrative is addressed and through whom narrative elements are mediated .[3]

The Underground Man addresses this narratee in the second person. As the "you" is not a specific character, readers often project themselves into this role, forming a complex emotional connection with the narrator. For example, when the Underground Man writes, "I may live more 'vividly' than you do. Take a closer look!", it can provoke the reader's competitive spirit or irritation, thereby maintaining engagement in the absence of a conventional plot. Even upon later recognizing that "you" represents Russia's "rationalists, utilitarians, and utopian socialists"[4], the emotional resonance of the reading experience persists.

The narratee serves multiple functions within the text. Firstly, it provides a structural counterpart to the narrator's monologue, transforming what might otherwise be a solipsistic rant into a dialogic

exchange. Secondly, it positions the reader as both observer and participant in the narrative, creating a dynamic relationship that evolves throughout the text. This technique anticipates reader-response theories that would emerge in literary criticism decades later, emphasizing the active role of the reader in constructing meaning from the text.

### 3.2. The Evolving Narrator

The narrator in *Notes from the Underground* is a contradictory, evolving figure. The "underground" represents "a harmful, powerless split-a perpetually unstable self where boastful pride may suddenly and without warning collide with its opposite: fawning inferiority".[5] As a quintessential character torn between conflicting impulses, the Underground Man embodies both fragile inferiority and rational arrogance.

Through repeated self-denial and external pleas, the narrator is crafted with a unique vulnerability. His discourse is chaotic, with each statement often contradicting the previous one, yet accompanied by seemingly plausible justifications. These opposing elements torment him and constitute his identity, leading to his conclusion that he can be no one. While "you" represents the philosophical opposition, the narrator's occasional pleas, such as "please help me resolve this," reveal a paradoxical dependence on this very adversary.

His rationality manifests in a relentless interrogation of contemporary philosophies, subtly channeling the author's critical voice. His pride is inextricably linked to his inferiority. He employs the "Crystal Palace" as an allusion to the utopian socialist society depicted in Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, thereby layering the conflict between reason and desire. However, the Underground Man's unstable psyche renders his rational discourse verbose and obsessive, as seen in the internal turmoil provoked by a minor incident with an officer.

The psychological complexity of the Underground Man represents a significant development in literary characterization. Unlike the relatively stable protagonists of earlier novels, he embodies the fragmented consciousness of modern urban existence. His contradictions reflect the psychological pressures of a society undergoing rapid modernization, where traditional values collide with emerging ideologies. This psychological depth anticipates the stream-of-consciousness techniques that would later characterize high modernism, demonstrating Dostoevsky's innovative approach to representing inner experience.

### 3.3. Connecting with the Narrator

Real individuals are often contradictory. Readers may not only identify with the narratee but also find moments of empathy with the narrator, perhaps recognizing similar hidden corners within themselves. The Underground Man speaks without restraint; he is vulnerable, occasionally rational; he believes himself mature yet remains immature; he is educated yet superstitious. He lays bare humanity's ugly and hidden facets. As the text states, "Heine once asserted that a true autobiography is nearly impossible, for people inevitably lie extensively when speaking of themselves"-and they do so out of vanity. The Underground Man boldly affirms himself while bluntly confessing every sordid aspect of his being, offering a dissection of human depravity that is neither a foil for virtue nor a celebration of the grotesque.

However, this empathy is transient. Whenever his vulnerability elicits sympathy, his subsequent actions promptly re-establish his fundamentally twisted nature, severing the reader's connection. This dynamic prevents sentimentalization and maintains critical distance. The narrator's inability to be easily categorized is a testament to Dostoevsky's narrative skill, avoiding the homogenization that plagues many "anti-hero" narratives.

The reader's fluctuating relationship with the Underground Man mirrors the character's own internal contradictions. At times, we sympathize with his critiques of rationalist utopianism and his defense

of human irrationality. At other moments, we recoil from his petty cruelties and self-destructive behavior. This ambivalence reflects Dostoevsky's complex moral vision, which resists easy categorization or didacticism. Rather than presenting a straightforward moral lesson, the novel immerses readers in the messy reality of human psychology, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and society.

#### **4. THE AMBIGUOUS NARRATOR AND THE IMPLIED AUTHOR**

Having lived underground for decades, the Underground Man observes society with piercing insight, mocking the perspectives of his imagined audience. His unstable, pathological state renders his narration unreliable; even when his satire is logically sound, readers may question its credibility.

The emergence of another voice at the story's conclusion—that of the implied author—resolves this tension. The text states, "However, this eccentric's 'Notes' do not end here. Unable to resist, he continued writing. Yet we believe it is best to stop here". On one hand, the Underground Man narrates on behalf of the implied author, channeling a critical understanding of social realities. On the other hand, his unreliability prevents him from fully embodying the implied author's voice. Compounded by his "tyrannical nature, social isolation, and inability to love, all influenced by the narcissistic mechanisms inherent in modernity's 'internal framework'", the narrative boundaries become blurred.

The final interjection by the implied author demonstrates that the Underground Man is not merely a madman but a vehicle through which the author reveals his ethical intentions. This technique underscores that at a higher level, human irrationality surpasses a simplistic rationality, thereby expanding the depth of a rational understanding of humanity itself.[6]

The relationship between the Underground Man and the implied author exemplifies what Wayne Booth would later term the "rhetoric of fiction." Dostoevsky employs the narrator's unreliability not as a flaw but as a sophisticated narrative strategy that allows him to explore complex philosophical ideas while maintaining critical distance. The implied author's final intervention serves as a framing device that contextualizes the preceding narrative, guiding readers toward a more nuanced interpretation of the text's philosophical implications.

This narrative structure also reflects Dostoevsky's engagement with existential philosophy. The Underground Man's obsessive self-analysis prefigures existentialist concerns with authenticity, freedom, and the construction of meaning in an absurd universe. By allowing the narrator to articulate extreme positions that the implied author neither fully endorses nor completely rejects, Dostoevsky creates a philosophical dialogue that resists closure and invites ongoing interpretation.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The narrative strategy of *Notes from the Underground* demonstrates how to successfully tell a compelling story. Its layered narration interweaves the voices of the narrator, the narratee, and the implied author, creating a rich, textured discourse. Readers are positioned to be both immersed in and detached from the narrative. By viewing the rational world through a pathological lens and using a pessimistic, despairing form of expression, Dostoevsky shatters shallow optimism. The novel prompts a re-evaluation of life, giving readers the courage to confront the complexities and contradictions within themselves and the world, and to face the future with clear-eyed sobriety.

Dostoevsky's innovative narrative techniques in *Notes from the Underground* have had a profound influence on subsequent literary developments. The novel's psychological depth, philosophical complexity, and formal experimentation anticipate key aspects of literary modernism and existentialist literature. By challenging conventional notions of character, plot, and authorial voice, Dostoevsky expands the possibilities of the novel as a form of philosophical inquiry and psychological exploration.

Ultimately, *Notes from the Underground* remains a vital text for understanding the relationship between narrative form and philosophical content. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to capture the psychological tensions of modern existence while simultaneously reflecting on the nature of storytelling itself. The novel demonstrates that the most compelling stories are not necessarily those with the most dramatic plots or sympathetic characters, but those that most authentically engage with the fundamental questions of human existence.

## REFERENCES

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