# In Which We Sacrifice Our Sanity To Dostoevsky

By Deacon Lipsmeyer

In modern pop culture, there is no shortage of stories in which a curmudgeonly old man is shown the error of his ways by some bright-eyed and ambitious younger character. Whether your favorite portrayal of these tropes is Scrooge in, *A Christmas Carol*, or you prefer more modern adaptations such as, Otto Anderson, in *A Man Called Otto*, there is no denying that the storytelling structure has been around for centuries at this point. One such interpretation, however, that always seems to be overlooked in this regard is that of the Underground Man, from Dostoevsky's novel *Notes From Underground*. A story which introduces us to a roughly forty-year-old hermit (old for the time) who has spent the last twenty years isolating himself from a society that he believes to be both out to get him, as well as below him, all at the same time.

Truly, the only difference between Dostoevsky's nameless protagonist and those examples listed above is that for the Underground Man, there is no plucky side character who exists only to shake him out of his funk. Instead, he is allowed to marinate within his current miseries for the first eleven sections of the writing, in addition to the miseries of his past for the last ten sections. This provides him with a drastically different perspective than his more reformed peers, which, while consistently inconsistent, can be identified from the very first page: "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." A quote so important to understanding the themes and psychology of the writing, that its inclusion serves as an almost central nervous system to the entire piece.

While on the surface this quote might appear only apply to matters physical, due to its reference to a doctor, I would argue that the line serves more as a metaphor for what is to come throughout the rest of the novel. Whether his “injuries” as he calls them, are physical or mental, he remains unable to solve them because he refuses to take even the most basic steps in treating them. Furthermore, oftentimes our protagonist actively makes decisions with the express purpose of creating a life that is only more painful and miserable to himself. This idea can be seen most strongly in section seven of the first half of the book, where he spends the whole segment arguing that the truest advantage of man is the ability to go against his own best interest. As he phrases it “There is a most advantageous advantage which is more important and more advantageous than all over advantages, for the sake of which a man if necessary is ready to act in opposition to all laws; that is, in opposition to reason, honor, peace, prosperity, in fact, in opposition to all those excellent and useful things…” The argument for this train of logic being that when a man acts in opposition to his own best interest, he is demonstrating his freedom in the truest sense. While the idea he poses here is an interesting one, it is mealy because we are on the outside looking in, and to live this way, against your own best interest constantly, only exemplifies the ideas that have been present from the first page. That he is only injuring himself and doing so out of a misguided sense of spite.

Thankfully for the reader, our Underground Man not only continues this line of thought into his next section (8), but also seemingly pulls back on its intensity just a little bit. This time choosing to say “There is one case, one only, when a man may consciously, purposely, desire what is injurious to himself, what is stupid, very stupid. Simply in order to have the right to desire for himself even what is very stupid and not to be bound by an obligation to desire only what is sensible. Of course, this very stupid thing, this caprice of ours, may be in reality,

gentlemen, more advantageous for us than anything else on earth…" From this we are able to decipher several new additions to the argument. First and foremost, we learn that he himself believes this way of living to be injurious when applied in day-to-day life, something for which he has been passionately arguing since the very first page. Beyond that, however, he finds a way to broaden the anti-establishment argument started in the last section, by choosing now to say that man's greatest advantage isn't only to act against our own best interest, but also to possess the freewill that allows us to diverge from the path of what is objectively the correct choice. This provides us a new layer with which to look at the quote from page one. Spite in this context no longer represents spite for an individual, but instead for the idea of always being forced to make the right decision. An anger which only leads our protagonist further down the path of misery.

It is not just the first part of the novel, however, which treats us to such a clear picture of the path of spite embarked on by our Underground Man. For it is actually through reading *A Propos of the Wet Snow* (which is to *Notes from Underground* what *Revenge of the Sith* is to Star Wars) that we are treated not only to some of the most overt examples of self-chosen misery from our protagonist, but also an explanation as to just why this guy is so fucking odd. Take this excerpt from section four as an example, in which after weaseling his way into a going away party for an old classmate he doesn't even like, he decides to overindulge in liquor and make a fool of himself simply to ruin everyone else's time: "Nothing will induce me to go. I'll go on sitting here and drinking to the end, on purpose, as a sign that I don't think you of the slightest consequence… I'll sit here and drink, for I look upon you as so many pawns, as inanimate pawns." Even almost 20 years removed from the incident, our protagonist describes the event still with so much detail that it is nearly impossible to imagine he has spent his time thinking of anything other than those who he believes to have wronged him. When in all reality the section

only serves to once again show the pouty and spiteful nature of a man who intentionally alienates himself simply because that's what he believes the key to free will is. The saddest fact, however, though, is that the mental injuries that this event has clearly caused him, were all self-inflicted, the result of a misguided sense of FOMO and jealousy.

Make no mistake, the Underground Men separates himself by leagues and miles from his more emotionally adaptable peers. His hatred and spite for the world around him would put Scrooge, Carl Fredricksen (*Up)*, and Otto Anderson, all to shame. While that could be the result of some doe-eyed and passionate child showing each of them the error of their ways, I think it actually goes deeper than just their quality of side characters. Scrooge, even for being a penny pinching and easily opportunistic capitalist, did genuinely believe that he was doing the right thing. Whereas, the Underground Man, from the very beginning of the novel, makes it crystal clear to readers that he knows the decisions he makes are against his own best interest. He chooses to ignore the paths which could lead to his own salvation, because he finds it more valuable to moan about his problems to anyone who will listen.  Fundamentally he believes that the world has wronged him in every one of his encounters with it, and that the only way to correct this travesty is to be continuously spiteful, and envious of those who choose to keep moving on with their lives. Thus the central nervous system of this piece is then one inherently more acidic than the other faces of the trope, filled with bile and contempt. Now a normal person would usually see a doctor for these kinds of issues, you know, someone who could help them take steps to correct the problem. As was made so clear to us by our narrator on the first page though, "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." So, I doubt that he will be changing his ways anytime soon.