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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Notes from the Underground

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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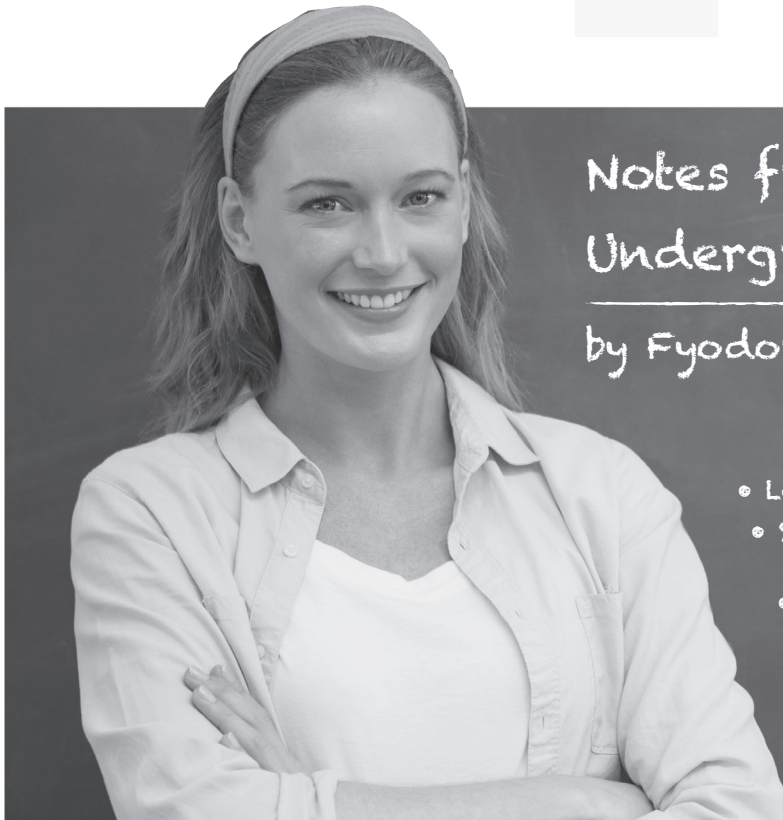
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Item No: 300765

Objectives

By this end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define point of view, metaphor, allusion, symbol, irony, simile, tone, motif, and personification, and point to examples of each in *Notes from the Underground*.
2. define all of the vocabulary words listed in the Study Guide.
3. write one-paragraph character sketches of the narrator, Zverkov, and Liza.
4. explain why the narrator is an unreliable one, using specific examples from the text.
5. articulate the tenets of realism as a movement in modern literature and explain why *Notes from the Underground* is a realist novel.
6. discuss the subject of “consciousness” as it relates to one’s ability to function in society.
7. evaluate the narrator as an anti-hero.
8. define rationalism and utopian socialism, and evaluate the narrator’s arguments against them.
9. discuss the narrator’s actions as they relate to his assertion that humans value the ability to exert their wills even when it runs contrary to their best interests.
10. discuss the importance of setting and the “wet snow” motif in the novel.
11. articulate the themes of the book in concise thematic statements.
12. explain Dostoyevsky’s conscious manipulation of the stock character in the figure of Liza.
13. discuss the relevance of the novel’s argument to our own society today.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Using specific examples from the text, compare and contrast the characters of the narrator and Zverkov. Make sure to include the qualities that do or do not enable each man to function well in society.
2. Discuss the significance of snow as a recurring motif in *Notes from the Underground*.
3. The narrator asks, “[W]hich is better—cheap happiness or exalted sufferings?” Using examples from the book, write a persuasive argument for the superiority of either “cheap happiness” or “exalted sufferings.”
4. The narrator argues that, rather than submitting to reason, humans will always wish to exercise their free wills, even when they are clearly not acting in their own best interests. Using specific examples from the text, explain how this is evident in the narrator’s own actions.
5. Re-read the fourth question. Do you agree with the narrator? Explain your answer, backing it up with your own observations of society and politics on the world stage.
6. The good-hearted young prostitute in need of someone to turn her life around is a stock character of literature. Discuss the way Dostoyevsky manipulates this stock character in the figure of Liza, and what her failing to remain true to stereotype implies about the narrator’s approach to life.
7. The narrator offers a searing indictment of society in this passage:

It would be worse for us if our petulant prayers were answered. Come, try, give any one of us, for instance, a little more independence, untie our hands, widen the spheres of our activity, relax the control and we...yes, I assure you...we should be begging to be under control again at once...we don’t even know what living means now...[l]eave us alone without books and we shall be lost and in confusion at once. We shall not know what to join on to, what to cling to, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise.

To what extent do you think this is a valid critique of our own society (if we substitute “the Internet” or “video games” or “music,” for example, for “books”)? Dostoyevsky tells us that his narrator is the inevitable product of the society in which he lives. Is such a narrator also the inevitable product of the society in which we live?

Notes from the Underground

Part I: Underground

VOCABULARY

acutely – keenly
affectation – a pretentious showiness
amour propre – pride; vanity; self-esteem
antithesis – complete opposite
apropos – with regard to; concerning
contumacious – willfully disobedient
depravity – moral corruption
despicable – worthy of hate; obnoxious
ennui – listlessness; boredom; disinterest
halcyon – peaceful; golden (as in “golden days”)
ignominiously – shamefully; disgracefully
impotence – powerlessness
inertia – unwillingness or inability to move or act
inevitably – unavoidably
innate – natural; essential (as in a quality one is born with)
l’homme de la nature et de la vérité – “the man of nature and truth” (French)
lacerating – distressing; paining; tearing
magnanimity – generosity and nobility of spirit
malignant – harmful
nonplussed – bewildered; puzzled
obliquity – deviation
obscurantist – person who is deliberately vague or unclear
oscillations – waverings back and forth
petitioners – those making pleas
recompense – compensation; “payback”
refinement – subtle distinction
spleen – bitterness; foulness of mood
superfluous – unnecessary
vexatious – aggravating; annoying

1. According to the author’s note, who or what has given birth to characters such as the narrator?

27. Briefly describe the narrator's attitude towards suffering.

28. The “crystal palace” the narrator begins speaking of takes its name from a real Crystal Palace built in London in 1851. The Palace was made using the most advanced technology available at the time, and came to represent the idea of the perfect living space for those in a society based completely on reason and the laws of mathematics—a society, therefore, that denies the importance of individuality and personal freedom. Just as an American flag is more than a physical flag—it represents a whole set of patriotic values, et cetera—the Crystal Palace stands for an idea larger than itself. What is the literary term for such a thing?

29. What is the narrator's beef with boiling everything down to reason and mathematical certainty?

30. Why, if he is writing only for himself, does the narrator address imaginary readers?

5. In what way is the narrator's conversation with Liza a success for him?

6. What treasure of hers does Liza take out for the narrator to appraise?

7. The narrator dreads that Liza will take him up on his offer and show up on his doorstep. As usual, however, he also has a conflicting impulse. What is it this time?

8. Read the following:

At times a thought occurred to me, to go to her, "to tell her all," and beg her not to come to me.

This is not the first time the narrator places certain phrases in his narrative in quotation marks. Why do you think he does this with the phrase "to tell her all" and elsewhere?

9. What is ironic in the narrator's referring to Apollon as a "pedant" who looks "down upon everyone"?
