FLIGHT BENEATH EARTH: THE ALIENATION THEME
IN THE FICTION OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY,
RICHARD WRIGHT, AND RALPH ELLISON

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Flight Beneath Earth: The Alienation Theme in the Fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison

If spontaneously called upon to render a definition of alienation, one would be on relatively safe grounds in saying that it is basically a portrayal of the battle between society and man, the social creature. Prominent writers, past and present, have given their accounts of this battle, in various forms and fashions. The account that has always interested me is the discussion of this universal confrontation via the alienation motif.

The subject of alienation—retreat, as it would be called in a battle between two great foes—is usually treated as a prevailing response to the wounds society inflicts upon man. Yet writers vary even in their treatment of the topic of alienation. Among the special treatments given this subject, the one most impressive to me was the underground theme. The pioneer of this unique consideration of alienation was the Russian literary giant, Fyodor Dostoevsky. He is deemed its pioneer because all the basic dimensions of underground man are found in his famous novella, "Notes From Underground."

A discussion of the underground theme is significant, first of all, because not many writers have dealt with this cogent expression of
alienation. Also, the theme in the fiction of Dostoevsky, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison is meaningful because the latter writers, using the former's "Notes From Underground" as a model, employed it specifically in their respective works, "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Invisible Man. Worthy of mention is the fact that Wright and Ellison adapted the theme to a different era and environment. Moreover, the noteworthy fact is that the characters in these three works literally stake claim to some form of underground existence.

Allowing for a few vital dissimilarities, there are many similarities between the underground men portrayed by our three writers, and those inexorable similarities quite demonstrably provided the great incentive to write this thesis. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze this unique expression of alienation, using the representative works of Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison.

Although much work has been done on each of the writers—the tentative bibliography will reveal this—not too much work has been done on a consideration of the three writers collectively, as practitioners of the underground theme. However, noteworthy among the works of some value were: Robert Louis Jackson's Dostoevsky's Underground Man in Russian Literature, Ronald Ridenour's "The Man Who Lived Underground: A Critique," and William Goede's "On Lower Frequencies: The Buried Men in Wright and Ellison."

Since the theme of flight into the underground can be examined from various angles, we will address ourselves to a few questions which I feel will direct our study towards a quite comprehensive understanding
of the theme. First, why do the characters take on an underground existence? What solutions does the underground offer to their problems? Also, do the undergrounders come up again? And, finally, has the underground experience better equipped them for life in society? The writer feels that the employment of these carefully-selected questions will not only illuminate the most conspicuous similarities and dissimilarities inherent in the varied treatments of their governing theme by our three authors, but will also shed some light on many of the smaller aspects of the theme which many readers consider important.

This cogent expression of alienation can itself be split into many forms. Therefore, we will limit our study to the treatment given it solely by our three authors. To foster a more meaningful scrutiny of the works themselves, the first chapter will deal with the underground theme itself, as it seems to be similarly defined by our three writers. This chapter will be followed by three succeeding chapters dealing with Dostoevsky, Wright and Ellison respectively. Detailed reference will be made to other works of the writers to further illuminate their renderings of the theme.

The questions that will be entertained in the conclusion are: Does the underground man in Russian society face the same problems as the underground man in American society? Are the underground men in the works of Wright and Ellison given the same psychological dimensions as Dostoevsky gives to his underground figure? Finally, are there any differences between the problems faced by the underground man of the nineteenth century and the problems confronted by the underground man
of the twentieth?

Attached is a tentative bibliography, certain to be expanded before research on this topic is completed. It is the hope of the writer that greater clarity will be provided for a theme that has not been widely discussed.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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A THESIS

Fyodor Dostoevsky, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison

OF

THE ALIENATION THEME IN THE FICTION

FLIGHT BENEATH EARTH
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INTRODUCTION

A close scrutiny of the fictions of many of the world's prominent writers will reveal that most of them deal with the topic of alienation. This subject is usually treated as a prevailing response to those wounds which society inflicts upon man, the social creature. Although the manipulation of the alienation motif varies among writers, one is safe in saying that it is basically a portrayal of man separated from the ordinary stream of societal life. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* is a classic example, as the false accusation forced upon Silas drives him violently from society. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* treats the subject in the person of Hester Prynne, who moves to the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts, unable to withstand the pressures of a staunchly puritan community. Add to these that memorable character known only by a single name, Heathcliff. How much love could this spitefully selfish but handsome figure in *Wuthering Heights* have for a society that denied him the one meaningful joy—if not the only happiness—that life afforded him? The list can easily be extended, for it is extremely difficult for one to overlook Henry Thoreau's *Walden* among the more marked treatments of the alienation motif.

Fictitious accounts of alienation take many forms, and it is many times a task to discover a label for a particular treatment of the topic. What name does one apply to Eliot's, Hawthorne's, or Thoreau's treatment of the subject? No doubt the question induces a measure of uncertainty. However, there are some literary treatments of the alienation
motif that carry a vivid and undisputed label. Noteworthy in this category is the underground theme, which is significant because the characters in the works which treat this theme actually stake a claim to some form of underground existence.

In reading the many works of fiction which manage the underground theme, one is rather forced to concede that standing paramount among them are Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground," Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Dostoevsky, the Russian literary giant, is the pioneer of this rare consideration of alienation. He is deemed its pioneer because all the basic dimensions of underground man are found in his famous novella. Edward Wasiolek, the Polish authority on Dostoevskian criticism, provides terse, but potent, support for this assertion in his words:

> The theme of freedom—the search for a way out of the "underground," the exploration of these paths and the dangers confronting man in this quest—is really begun in Notes from the Underground.1

The unique significance of the underground theme aside, a discussion of this unusual version of alienation merits consideration for other reasons. First of all, though Dostoevsky read and admired the works of the Romantics—Schiller, Rousseau, and Byron, among others—his "Notes" reveal that these writers sparked not a romantic tone in his writings. Instead, the works of these writers fostered Dostoevsky's realistic portrayals. When placed in juxtaposition, the protagonists in Rousseau's Confessions, Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and Dostoevsky's

"Notes" face, for the most part, the same basic problems. Yet Dostoevsky's spokesman, in contrast to the others, is quite unromantic. A brief comparison of Dostoevsky's narrator and Byron's Childe Harold should render an idea of the atypicality of Dostoevsky's treatment of the alienated man.

Childe Harold, the epitome of the Byronic hero, is melancholy, haughty, introspective, and wicked; he possesses an unyielding zeal for liberty. Dostoevsky gives the same characteristics to his narrator, and adds others. It is quite conceivable that both of these characters are guilty of an initial criminal act—seemingly the latter, more so than the former. Childe Harold's characteristics are the products of an appalling, mysterious crime that cannot be remedied. This fostered his unquestionable decision to leave England, never to return. However, it is here that we see the uniqueness of Dostoevsky's rendition of the alienated man as his protagonist's characteristics do not stem from any initial criminal act. In fact, he is not a criminal at all. Dostoevsky's figure possesses no such mysterious and tragic past; his psychological tortures are of a different nature.

If we compare Ellison and Wright along these same lines, we get somewhat the same contrast. While both Ellison's narrator and "freddaniels" are suspected of crimes, there is no need for Ellison to make his character a criminal, and he does not. Contrastly, Wright's protagonists—not only "freddaniels" in "The Man Who Lived Underground," but also Cross Damon in The Outsider—actually define the author's intentions by their being condemned to crime.
Also, the theme in the fiction of Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison is meaningful because the latter writers, using the former's "Notes From Underground" as a model, employed it specifically in their similar fictional renditions. Moreover, worthy of mention is the fact that Wright and Ellison adapted the theme to a different era and environment.

Allowing for a few vital dissimilarities, there are many similarities between the underground men portrayed by our three writers, and those inexorable similarities quite demonstrably provided the great incentive to write this thesis; thus its purpose is to analyze this novel expression of alienation, using the representative works of Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison.

Since the theme of flight into the underground can be examined from various angles, we will address ourselves to a few questions which I feel will direct our study towards a quite comprehensive understanding of the theme. First, why do the characters take on an underground existence? What solution does the underground offer to their problems? Also, do the undergrounders come up again? And, finally, has the underground experience better equipped them for life in society? The writer feels that the employment of these carefully-selected questions will not only illuminate the most conspicuous similarities and dissimilarities inherent in the varied treatments of their governing theme by our three authors, but will also shed some light on many of the smaller aspects of the theme which many readers consider important.

The underground theme can itself be split into many forms, but we will limit our study solely to the treatment given it by our three
writers. To foster a more meaningful scrutiny of the works themselves, the first chapter will deal with the underground theme itself, as it seems to be similarly defined by our three authors. This chapter will be followed by three succeeding chapters dealing with Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison respectively. Detailed reference will be made to other works of the writers to further illuminate their renditions of the underground theme. Necessarily, also, attention will be given to the humor in the three works, as it rather interestingly enhances their governing themes.

The questions that will be entertained in the conclusion are: Does the underground man in Russian society face the same problems as the underground man in American society? Are the underground men in the works of Wright and Ellison given the same psychological dimensions as those Dostoevsky achieves for his underground figure? Finally, are there any differences between the problems faced by the underground man of the nineteenth century and the problems confronted by the underground man of the twentieth?

One assumes a delicate task in attempting rationally to interpret the underground motif, especially as Dostoevsky portrays it. Not only does an understanding of its intricate meanings solicit one's complete philosophical and aesthetic attention; a conscientious psychological engagement is also necessary. The writer hopes that greater clarity will be provided for a theme that has not been widely discussed.
CHAPTER I

THE UNDERGROUND THEME

The question is often asked: how is the protagonist in "Notes From Underground" considered an underground figure, while he does not, in the literal sense of the word, live underground? This is one of the major inquiries addressed to Dostoevsky's fictional conception of the underground man. The question is surely not an unfounded one for, inevitably, Dostoevsky's spokesman does not literally live underground. Moreover, the interrogative utterance takes on added logicality in light of the fact that the protagonists in the respective works of Wright and Ellison do inhabit an environment below earth. We could say at this point that while, for the most part, the underground is a psychological realm, it can in some respects be considered a physical dwelling. We could also offer the example of Jean Toomer's "Kabnis," as it portrays the Negro intellectual as an underground man coming to terms with his past. However, these statements would have little or no meaning for that scholar who does not fully understand the underground theme. Therefore, the discussion of the theme warrants careful attention, since the answers to a myriad questions owe their validity to our three writers' conceptions of the underground. The discussion will provide a thorough explanation of the underground theme.

If spontaneously called upon to render a brief definition of the underground theme, one would be on relatively safe ground in saying that it is any discussion, oral or written, whose chief focus is on the
underground and its inhabitants, as they struggle to live their conception of a meaningful life in the midst of a society which seems hostile towards them. The demand for brevity aside, the average scholar would offer a more encompassing explanation, one which would include not only substantial elaboration on the underground itself, but also an extensive elucidation of the underground inhabitant.

Research of a wide variety has revealed that most critics tend to view the underground, for the most part, as a psychological realm. It is a clearing in the soul where reason is not the governor. In this psychological domain the inhabitants are free to act as they please. Unlike the province we know as earth (reality), the world of the underground is void of that moral law which dictates that a man should practice the things he preaches; this world has neither the ears nor the eyes justifiably to condemn a man for lying, for deceiving others, for consciously placing himself in a position of suffering, for adhering to and living out a moral philosophy which is distinct—even in its most minute tenets—from all others. The only law enforced in this unique region called the underground is freedom. The person who once fails to act freely has committed the gravest and only crime this region recognizes. There is more to our analysis of the underground; thus a glance at some of the authoritative interpretations of the underground should enhance our investigation.

Stephan Zweig, a Dostoevsky authority, calls the underground "the underworld of the emotions....the submerged regions of the psyche."¹

Zweig adds further clarity through his comments:

Just as Odysseus was the only mortal who ever returned from Hades and told us of his experiences there, so Dostoevsky relates his voyages in the underworld of the soul.\(^1\)

In discussing Dostoevsky's protagonist, Richard Peace supplies the following remarks on the urban underground:

For him, St. Petersburg is the 'most abstract and contrived city in the world,' and his own private quarters in that city he calls his 'underground,' by which term he is really referring to his own mental state.\(^2\)

A look at the judgments of two authorities who support our assertion that the laws of reason have no place in the underground should augment our exploration into this fascinating zone. Edward Wasiolek, the Polish master of Dostoevsky criticism, sheds light on the status of reason in the underground. In talking of Dostoevsky's underground, he explains:

There is no 'reason' in Dostoevsky's world, only reasoners. Behind every rational formula, there is a formulator, and behind every generalization, there is a generalizer. There are no 'ideas' in Dostoevsky's world apart from the men who carry them.\(^3\)

As a final view in our concentrated discussion of the underground itself,

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1. Ibid., p. 204.
consider the verdict of Robert Louis Jackson:

There is an 'underground' in man without controls of reason or ethics, a darkness where suffering becomes malignant pleasure and humiliation is transmitted into rage and hate.¹

While a discussion of the underground itself is helpful, our most comprehensive impressions of the underground theme come from a thorough study of the underground man. He is the supreme manifestation of the underground, for without him there is no underground. He is the man with whom we can compare ourselves and determine the degrees between us of likeness, homogeneity, dissimilarity, and incompatibility. The amazing thing about the ensuing investigation is that it will not only expose ourselves as possessing underground traits, but will also show resemblances to many of our friends.

A study of the various fictional treatments of the underground theme, coupled with a close scrutiny of the critical and interpretive views levied on them, revealed that the underground man seems to fit four readily recognizable descriptions. First, he is the little man in society—if not poor, he is below the level of affluence. Second, he seems to live his life in complete defiance of reason. Third, while his principal place of inhabitation is near a city, it is usually an alienated or isolated spot which lacks society's attention. And, fourth, he is the existentialist anti-hero. Nonetheless, from these four characteristics others follow. At this point, however, we will provide only a brief discussion of each, since our examination of the respective

renditions of our writers will present a clearer picture.

Because the underground man is the little man in society, we should not be surprised that he holds a sub-affluent, if not a below-average, position on the economic ladder; that he is not recognized socially; that he often experiences suffering and deception; that in general he seems the victim of societal oppression. Yet research has forced us to add that he was not always this way. As we will see in our examination of the three works, life at one time did offer him some contentment, if not much; but society, his ever-present foe, inexorably stripped him of his former status. Robert Louis Jackson, in discussing Dostoevsky's underground man, sheds much light on our present glance at the underground man. Observe his words:

The Underground Man, while historically linked with the "superfluous man," is a different social type. He is the first, fully conscious representative of a line of little men, clerks, dreamers, poor folk, who appear in Russian literature.1

Just as complete freedom to wilful action held a pivotal position in our discussion of the underground itself, an obsessive defiance of reason occupies a pivotal position in our consideration of the characteristics of the underground man. In essence, his defiance of reason sparks all of his characteristics, since an adherence to reason prevents his complete expression of freedom. As Wasiolok so cogently put it:

The Underground Man is determined above all to follow his sweet, foolish, capricious will. Before the implacable laws of nature, which reason discerns and by which it destroys freedom and erects the universal social

1 Ibid., p. 26.
anthill, the Underground Man will stand up with no weapon but his puny will, put his arms akimbo, stick out his tongue, and give the whole edifice one shattering kick.¹

Because the underground man defies completely the dictates of reason, there are very few people in society with whom he can identify, very few people who appreciate his company; thus the underground man, in most cases, has to turn to himself for consolation. We are not surprised, then, that he is very introspective. His introspection not only fosters acute sensitivity on his part, but also causes him to be overly-conscious of his every thought and action.

Another characteristic we discern from his defiance of reason is his paradoxicality. On first glance we find it quite difficult to understand him. Yet this is exactly what he wants. He feels that if we readily understand his nature, then his actions will in some way be reasonable ones; this is surely not what he wants. His saying one thing and doing another and his constant self-contradiction are the probable sparks behind one critic's assertion that "paradox is the natural element of the underground man."²

The underground man's tendency towards ambivalence paves the way for a reflection on another of his interesting characteristics, his practice of acting against his self-interest—more specifically, against Bentham's doctrine of utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham asserted that man's happiness and welfare should be the goal of all human activity.

¹ Wasiolek, op. cit., p. 39.
² Peace, op. cit., p. 8.
Bentham theorized that all the actions of men bring them either pleasure or pain, and that, accordingly, pleasure is morally good and pain evil. It is quite clear that Bentham's philosophy is a product of reason. Nonetheless, it should not come as a great surprise that the underground man wilfully chooses a life of suffering, pain, and self-deprivation. In the words of one writer,

The underground man maintains that there is, in fact, a greater self-interest which the advocates of 'rational egoism' have left out of account. This 'most advantageous of advantages' is the freedom to do exactly as one chooses even if it means acting against one's own self-interest.¹

The selection of an isolated spot for his principal place of habitation is surely one of the underground man's more visible characteristics. One has to read only a few pages to learn that Dostoevsky's protagonist lives in a remote corner of Petersburg; one has given very little consideration to "freddaniels'" relationship to the criminal charges against him before this undergrounder descends into the open manhole; Ralph Ellison's narrator tells us quite early in his prologue that he lives in a coal cellar lighted by 1,369 bulbs. How many varieties of habitats does society afford a man whose life-philosophy frowns upon all of society's codified rules for living? The nature of society forces the underground man to isolate himself.

We get a substantial view from Stephan Zweig, as he discusses our final interpretation of the underground man's more visible distinctions, the underground man's portrayal of the existentialist anti-hero:

Their forms have not yet cooled and acquired

¹ Peace, op. cit., p. 8.
definitive shape, their physiognomies have not been smooth-
ed and polished. They are unfinished, and are therefore
endowed with twice the amount of vitality granted to ordi-
nary men.1

Because of his existentialist personality, the underground man sees in-
finite possibilities in life. The dictates of reason will not, as the
underground man in his every action portrays, channel his life in any
one direction. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, in its portrayal of Rine-
hart, the numbers man, the preacher, the lover, does present a clear
picture of these infinite possibilities that the underground man sees in
life.

While we usually expect one protagonist—especially our existential-
ist protagonist—to come off at the novel's end with some semblance of
hero status, we find quite the contrary result after the underground
figure has given us his story. Robert Louis Jackson supplies some men-
torious comments on this rather ambiguous protagonist:

In argument, he exposes the rationalists' naive and
mechanistic conceptions of human behavior; at the same
time he is himself exposed in his amoral, asocial role
as anti-hero.2

Moreover, in order for any protagonist to achieve heroism, he must con-
quar in some form or fashion the foes against whom he is fighting. How-
ever, the underground man is inevitably destined for anti-heroic status,
since his foes for the most part are unconquerable. Who can substantial-
ly defeat reason and the laws of nature? As Richard Peace describes the

1 Zweig, op. cit., p. 143.

2 Jackson, op. cit., p. 27.
underground man's attempts:

He refuses to allow human desires to be thwarted either by the dictates of reason or the laws of the natural world, in spite of the fact that both these forms of restraint appear as intractable as mathematical formulae.¹

At this point, we can reasonably attempt to answer the question concerning the underground nature of Dostoevsky's figure, as we simultaneously consider the physical aspect of the underground. While the underground is psychological for the most part, it takes on physicality when we view it as the spot the underground man chooses as his isolated habitation. It does not have to be an environment below earth, as Wright and Ellison portray it. Nonetheless, the underground takes on physicality in another respect, that of the living accommodations the underground man chooses in his defiance of reason. He wilfully deprives himself of all luxuries in life and, indeed, desires suffering. This pattern of existence is undertaken mainly because, contrary to the laws of reason, he consciously works against his own self-interest. Observe the words of Robert Louis Jackson:

In the end of ends, the Underground Man will have neither peace nor war; he will rather sink back into inertia and impotent malice; he will rather choose suffering than submit to an inhuman doctrine of necessity. The Underground Man rebels with his whole being against rationalism—against reason, and advances in its stead an irrational will-philosophy of his own.²

In examining the works of our three writers for other characteristics,

¹ Peace, op. cit., p. 10.

² Jackson, op. cit., p. 41.
the fact that all of the protagonists are nameless seemed puzzling. On first impression, one would think that the absence of a name is a basic characteristic of the underground man. When considered more closely, however, the underground man's namelessness lends itself more to the aesthetic aspect of the works than to the philosophical. Nevertheless, before we discuss the reason for this portrayal, it is necessary to explain the namelessness of Richard Wright's underground figure.

There should be no questions in our minds about the namelessness of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*. He is, for the most part, either referred to as the "narrator" or the "invisible man." Although he probably has a conventional name, it is never mentioned in the novel. On the same basis, the only name we can give the protagonist in "Notes From Underground" is the "narrator." The protagonist in Wright's short story, on the other hand, is seemingly depicted as having a name, "freddaniels," yet one seems forced to say that he is nameless, because it is only by accident that he types his name on the stolen typewriter; otherwise the name is not used. Our assertion is given support by Ronald Ridenour:

> The invisibility of the protagonist to the world about him is sharpened by his essential namelessness. Although it is learned that his name is freddaniels, it is not actually recognized, even by himself.1

Further substantiation is given by William Goede:

> The man who lived underground is "freddaniels," a name he types on a stolen typewriter, but Wright

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does not use his name. In effect he has none.¹

Underground men do have names, even though the authors do not use them. The authors avoid the use of names to stress the point that there are many undergrounders in society. To use names might leave the impression that the authors see only a few undergrounders in society. A look at some enlightening criticisms should enhance our discussion. One critic says of Ellison's protagonist: "Though the protagonist of Invisible Man is a southern Negro, he is, in Ellison's rendering, profoundly all of us."² Also, observe the words of a critic of Dostoevsky's "Notes:"

The underground man does not have a proper name, he could be anyone living in the same circumstances. In fact, the author insists in a note, the Underground Man 'not only may but positively must exist in our society, when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed.'³

Finally, consider Ronald Ridenour's words on Wright's short story:

Particularly does Wright, in this lengthy short story, transcend the now common theme of the lack of identity of Negroes to embrace that of the struggle to find meaning and worth for all mankind.⁴

⁴ Ridenour, op. cit., p. 55.
When we consider the many aspects of the Underground theme, we are forced to agree that the theme cannot be defined in a few words. Almost the same line of thought is evoked when we think of the many personalities and literary movements which brought the theme to fruition. Although Fyodor Dostoevsky was probably the first to call the theme by its present name—and the one who provided the best elucidation of that theme—there were others before him who vaguely saw the prevalence of the theme. Because the theme deals with man in his relationship to society, we know immediately that we are concerned with a topic which has been discussed since almost the beginning of time. Since Dostoevsky is the oldest of our three writers, a few words about his incentive to write on the theme are illuminating.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a young man when the Romantic Movement had gotten to the point of losing much of its influential power—Romanticism did not and could not die, considering certain permanent human tendencies of mind and emotions. While the proponents of Romanticism were feeling the loss of thrust in the 1830's—surely by the year 1840—young Fyodor reluctantly entered, in the year 1838, the military engineering school in Petersburg. Having little or no interest in engineering, he escaped to his reading. His study centered on the German, English and French pre-Romantics, Romantics and Realists: Schiller, Goethe, E. T. A. Hoffman, Victor Hugo, George Sand, Balzac, Byron, and Dickens. Nonetheless, Dostoevsky had a special preference for Gogol, who represents the transition from Romanticism to Realism; and it is interesting to examine Dostoevsky's feelings during this important period.
in his literary and philosophical development.

Being at least sufficiently aware of the psychosocial tone of the times, Dostoevsky could understand how Romanticism had dealt a crushing blow to classicism, for widespread European industrialization had produced a group of people who could only find happiness in reading of their romantic heroes. Somehow this group had lost its former status and identity. They were now oppressed, and looked forward to a return of their days of glory. Unable to bring their romantic heroes to life, and too sensitive and intelligent to engage in fantasy for an extended period of time, the members of this group found themselves living a life which alternated between dreams and reality. It was this group that Dostoevsky called the underground people; it was his feelings concerning this increasingly universal group that flowed from his soon-to-be famous pen.

With the advent of realism, the Romantic Movement had undeniably lost its former status, and many writers rose to the occasion. We should bear in mind that Dostoevsky was not the only one who was concerned about these underground people. Although viewing the problems of these underground people from different angles and calling their views by various names, there were others. Dostoevsky's predecessors (Bentham, Fourier, Proudhon) should not be complete strangers to us, nor should his descendants (Kafka, Gide, Sartre, Camus) produce surprise in our minds. However, the importance of our three writers (Dostoevsky, Wright, Ellison) lies in the fact that their renditions of the theme seem to be the most acutely akin. In addition, Dostoevsky has thus far been given
seemingly overwhelming consideration as a result of his position and influence in the development of the underground theme. He was the writer who possessed the ability not only to show the double life led by these people, but also to undertake a thorough scrutiny of their actual thought-processes. In the words of George Lukacs:

Dostoevsky was the first—and is still unsurpassed in drawing the mental deformations that are brought about as a social necessity by life in a modern city. The genius of Dostoevsky consists precisely in his power of recognizing and representing the dynamics of a future social, moral and psychological evolution from germs of something barely beginning.¹

The age-old definition that a work of fiction is no more than a modified narration of a human experience still stands unmodified when we consider our three writers. They were all victims of a society that seemed to turn its back on them, the only difference being that on the one hand the society is Russian and on the other it is American. Their works reflect the oppression they experienced in life. As evidence of this reflection in the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky, consider the fitting words of Albert Murray:

Writers have always thrived on oppression, poverty, alienation and the like. Feodor Dostoevski, for example, was very poor, much oppressed and, in addition to all sorts of personal problems, he was epileptic. He was certainly alienated. He was imprisoned, and one time he came within minutes of being officially lynched.²


Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground" (1864) is the oldest of the three works, and one should not be surprised to find that Wright and Ellison came under his influence. Because these writers shared similar experiences in life, we can understand why Wright and Ellison looked for a model of expression and found one in Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground." In the revealing words of Robert Bone:

It is not very difficult to understand why Wright and Ellison were fascinated by this extraordinary book. Dostoevsky's protagonist is a man of morbid sensitivity, prone to resentment and offense and consumed with self-hatred. Convinced that he excites aversion, his constant study is revenge. Yet, on this score he feels quite helpless.... Against the historical backdrop of 19th Century Russia, Dostoevsky is describing a socially patterned neurosis which has an obvious parallel in the psychic life of the American Negro.1

Having given the characteristics and origin of the underground theme, we might still find ourselves in doubt as to its exact nature and message, but it has been conjectured that fiction has a way of expressing reality where plain, hard-core facts fail. Let us hope that the examination of the three works lends some validity to the conjecture. One thing of which we can be certain is the fact that we are not dealing with amateur artists. They are writers whom the world will always remember.

CHAPTER II

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S TREATMENT OF THE
UNDERGROUND THEME

Although the pen of Fyodor Dostoevsky breathed its last breath on January 28, 1881, the impact of that pen on literary trends and thoughts is still felt today. Whenever or wherever Russian literature is discussed—particularly in a discussion of the Russian novel—the names Tolstoy and Dostoevsky seem quite unavoidable utterances. Some critics say that the wings of Dostoevsky were clipped by the Russian literary giant, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). This assertion might have held much weight in the closing years of the nineteenth century, but since that time the wings of Doestoevsky must have healed, for, from early in the twentieth century until today, scholars have expressed a view in favor of the older writer. Observe the words of D. S. Mirsky, an authority on the nature of Russian literature:

Twenty years ago there was no difference of opinion outside Russia as to who was the greatest of Russian writers—Tolstoy dominated a national literature in the eyes of the world since the death of Goethe, or even, if we think of the enormous extra-literary prestige of Tolstoy, since the days of Voltaire. Since then the wheel of fashion, or the laws of growth of the occidental mind, has displaced Tolstoy from his place of ascendancy and substituted for his the idols of Dostoevsky.1

In 1846, Dostoevsky wrote his first novel, Poor Folk. This work

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was a great success, and the author was viewed as the most promising young novelist in the country. In fact, the early acquisition and use of a reputation by Dostoevsky resulted from the praise the novel received from Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), revered as Russia's greatest literary critic. Belinsky's praise was very enthusiastic. His words after reading the novel ran:

Honor and glory to the young poet whose muse loves people in garrets and basements and tells the inhabitants of gilded palaces: 'look they, are also men, they are also your brethren.'

However, immediately after his initial success, Dostoevsky's career was shattered not only by the ill success of his next two major novels—The Double (1846) and "The Landlady" (1847)—but also by his association with a secret radical society. Since 1846 the author's reputation seemed a series of ups and downs. A sententious glance at the life of this prominent literary figure should aid in our understanding of Dostoevsky, man and artist.

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born on October 30, 1821, in a Moscow prison hospital for criminals who could not be dispatched to other prisons. The place of his birth is a result of the fact that his father was a physician at the prison hospital. Although his parents owned no property during Fyodor's early childhood, the family was a member of the gentry, and their circumstances were typical of the middle class. When young Fyodor was born, his family occupied a flat in the

hospital buildings; thus, some of the youngster's earliest impressions were those of pain, poverty, and disease. These impressions were gathered from the patients he saw, as his family was not poor.

Ironically, Fyodor's father (Mikhail Andreyevich) often complained of poverty. These false complaints often disturbed his wife, Mariya Fyodorovna, as she replied:

Tell me, my life, what is this depression, what are these melancholic thoughts and what torments you, my dearest love? My heart sinks when I imagine you in such a depressed state of mind.  

Konstantin Mochulsky adds economic and social details:

His poverty was purely imaginary. Mikhail Andreyevich received a salary of 100 paper rubles, had a private practice, a rent-free apartment from the government, seven servants, and four horses. In 1831 he purchased an estate consisting of two villages, Darovoye and Chermashnya, in the province of Tula.  

Emphasis is here given to the fact that the Dostoevskys were not poor, since we will see later that it will play a part in Dostoevsky's conception of himself as an underground man. Also, the father's occasional feelings of acute depression and melancholy are also significant, because Fyodor often felt this way.

Dr. Dostoevsky supervised his son's early education at home. Noting his seclusion from other children, we can understand the early development of Fyodor's acute self-consciousness. Also, we should not


be surprised at his early passion for reading, since his early childhood
education lacked the distraction afforded by the ways and whims of other
children. This is not to say that he had no brothers or sisters. He
had three brothers and three sisters. Nonetheless, the point is that
not only was there no outside peer group to deter his progress; in addi-
tion, the children were the offspring of a forcefully domineering father
who instilled in them that education—especially his attempts at teach-
ing—was quite serious business.

When we consider Fyodor's position as the middle child in a large
family and the contrastive difference in the personalities of his parents,
we have added new dimensions to our impression of his mature personality.
A word about his parents should be injected here. His mother was very
kind, but his father was quite stern and somewhat ruthless. As Konstan-
tin Mochulsky puts it:

One of the peasants in recalling the elder Dostoevsky,
stated: 'The man was a beast. His soul was dark—that's
it... The master was a stern, unrighteous, lord, but the
mistress was kind-hearted. He didn't live well with her;
beat her. He flogged the peasants for nothing.'1

The biographer adds more on the subject as he describes the relationship
between the father and the children:

The children used to tremble before their father,
fearing his angry outbursts. He taught Latin to Mikhail
and Fyodor. Andrey Mikhailovich, Dostoevsky's younger
brother recalls: 'When my brothers were with father,
which was frequently for an hour or more, they not only
did not dare sit down, but did not even lean their elbows
on the table. They used to stand like little idols,

1  Ibid., p. 6.
declining in turn, mensa, mensae, or conjugating amo, amas, amat.'

Obeying the wishes of Dr. Dostoevsky, the family never visited anyone, nor were guests received; the young Dostoevskys had no playmates of their own age, and experienced little contact with the outside world. However, two or three times the children did attend the theatre. A performance of Schiller's 'The Robbers' made a profound impression on young Fyodor. 'From that time on--he was then ten years old--he expressed a passionate enthusiasm for Schiller. Fyodor and Mikhail, being isolated from life, began early to immerse themselves in fantasy.' The boys read and admired their romantic and sentimental heroes. Young Fyodor's love of literature was so intense that he often exclaimed after the death of Alexander Pushkin: "If our own family had not been in mourning [their mother died in 1837], I would have asked father's permission to wear mourning for Pushkin." Not only did he know the writings of Schiller and Pushkin; he also nurtured a great wealth of knowledge on Gogol, Sir Walter Scott, and the entire Bible. Observe the words of Mochulsky again, as he reflects on the influence of literature on the young Dostoevsky:

The impressions which the young Dostoevsky gleaned from literature were far more important to him than those offered by life. His acquaintance with Scott or Schiller determined his inner formation to a much greater degree.

1 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

2 Ibid., p. 9.

3 Ibid.
than the influence of nature or the atmosphere of his family life. By his very nature he was an introspective, withdrawn individual. The intense always prevailed in his personality over the exterior. The intensity of his inner life posed a threat to equilibrium, and set the stage for the tragedy of the dreamer vainly searching for 'living life.' The problem of the 'underground man' is contained in the writer's 'abstract.' bookish youth.¹

In 1833, at the age of twelve, Fyodor and Mikhail were sent to a boarding school in Moscow, run by a poorly-educated Frenchman. Since the school offered little or no challenge to the brothers, they were transferred to the boarding school of Leonty Chermak, which was staffed by Moscow's best professors. While the education here was better, Fyodor could not get along with his peers. Thus, every weekend the boys went home, knowing their books were waiting for them. They attended this school until 1837, when their mother died of consumption.

After the death of his wife Mariya Fyodorovna, Dr. Dostoevsky moved the rest of the family to the country, but placed Fyodor and Mikhail in the School of Military Engineers in St. Petersburg. His reading habits continued at this school, for, rather than associate with the other students he would sit in corners off to himself, fascinated by some piece of literature. His alienation was enhanced by his father's neglect. The letters he received from home were always filled with chastising remarks. In 1839, Fyodor wrote his father, fully expressing his negative feelings toward him. However, before he could send a reply, the senior Dostoevsky was murdered by the family's serfs. Upon hearing the news of his father's death, according to tradition, Fyodor had an epileptic

¹Ibid., pp. 9-10.
seizure, the first of those he was to suffer for the rest of his life. Thus, at the early age of eighteen, Fyodor had lost both his strict but concerned father and his lovable mother.

After spending five years at the military school—Dostoevsky spent more time reading than learning engineering—Fyodor chose not to spend more than his obligatory two years in the military. Instead, he decided on a literary career. He had a little money, for while in the military he was receiving about 5000 paper rubles a year when he combined his military pay with his share of his father's estate. However, before we discuss his literary career, a few words about his activities while in military service for two years should be enlightening.

Squandering money and leading a disorganized existence would be the best way to describe not only Dostoevsky's life during this two-year period, but also during most of his later life. However, it is interesting to note that this did not reduce his serious occupation with literature. Having rented an apartment in Petersburg, he lived rather carelessly. He frequently attended the theatre, concerts, and operas, inviting his fellow officers—he was a sublieutenant—over afterwards for cards and punch. For a time his younger brother Andrey lived with him, but later left because his older brother lost so much money that he was unable to enter Andrey in a boarding school. He would eat at a highly fashionable restaurant one day and be almost destitute for months. He gambled, became involved with vagrants, and, while later living with a Dr. Riesenkampf, gave no encouragement to the doctor's attempts to teach him household economy. In the words of Mochulsky:
Dostoevsky's personality is accurately summed up by Riesenkampf in his memoirs: 'good, generous, trusting, and completely unfit for life's realities—and this is how he will remain forever.'

Dostoevsky's first attempt as a writer occurred in the year 1844, when he published a translation of Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*. His enthusiasm for Balzac lasted all his life. However, the young Dostoevsky was a fusion of romantic and realist—this will be discussed later—and Balzac, was not the only writer he admired. In the words of Mochulsky:

The influence of Hoffman was no less profound. The fantastic world of the German romantic exercised a secret force to captivate the young man... But within this chaotic variation of impressions and enthusiasm, little by little a central theme was emerging, and his future vocation was being discerned. In all of German 'Naturphilosophic,' in Goethe's cosmic poetry, in Schiller's 'noble and beautiful,' and in the social novels of Balzac, Dostoevsky was searching for a single thing: man and his secret.

Other writers who impressed him were Gogol, George Sand, Eugene Sue, Victor Hugo, Byron, and Dickens. Among the writers who were more influential were: Balzac, who fostered his ability to produce maniacal characters; Gogol and Hoffman, whose works taught him to fuse fantasy and reality; and Goethe, whose *Wilhelm Meister* and other works consoled Dostoevsky after the death of his father, followed by the years of loneliness and apathy he experienced at the school of engineering. To these Janko Lavrin adds:

To these romantic and semi-romantic influences the


early examples of the Russian 'natural school' should be added. Its initiator was Gogol, but its chief advocate was the critic Belinsky, who demanded from literature truth to life and service to humanitarian ideals. A strong imprint upon Dostoevsky's literary work was, however, left by Petersburg itself. Behind the colossal, externally cold and prosaic metropolis of Russia he soon perceived a phantomlike city: the most 'abstract' city on earth.1

Balzac's Eugenie Grandet is concerned with a poor young girl, Eugenie, whose father provided only meager necessities for her and her mother, even though he was rich. So, ironically, she lived in poverty. The little money Eugenie did manage to save, she gave to an impoverished gentleman whose honor had been stained, to express her love for him. However, the gentleman deserted her for another woman. She married another man only for the man's sake, but he died early. The novel ends with Eugenie living the rest of her life in loneliness. After reading and translating the misfortunes of the young girl Eugenie, Dostoevsky had formulated the ideas for his initial novel, Poor Folk (1846).

In Poor Folk, Makar Devushkin was Dostoevsky's Eugenie Grandet. An impoverished government clerk, Devushkin worsened his condition to aid a woman, Barbara Dobroselova, who also lived in poverty. The novel strikes a unique parallel to Balzac's, as Barbara left Makar in extreme poverty to marry a rich man. Poor Folk was a great success, and in it we see not only the realism in Dostoevsky's writings but, more importantly, the influence of Gogol. Observe the meritorious words of D. S. Mirsky:

Like the other realists, he seeks, in Poor Folk, to

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transcend Gogol's purely satirical naturalism by infusing it with elements of sympathy and human emotion. But while the others sought to solve the problem by adopting a middle way between the extremes of the grotesque and of the sentimental, Dostoevsky in a much more truly Gogolian spirit, sought to combine extreme grotesque naturalism with intense sentiment; without losing their individuality in a golden mean, the two elements are fused together. But the message of Poor Folk is not Gogol's. It is not disgust at the vulgarity of life, but pity, intense sympathy for the downtrodden, half-dehumanized, ridiculous, and still noble human being.¹

The two novels published immediately after his initial success were The Double (1846) and "The Landlady" (1847); the former was deeply rooted in Gogol and the latter seemed a product of Gogolian, Hoffmannian, and Balzacian influences. These works did not get the recognition he anticipated, as Belinsky said of The Double: "It was fantastic and the fantastic can have its place only in lunatic asylums, not in literature."² However, the two works do prompt some intriguing observations here. First, The Double, like Poor Folk, employs a civil clerk as a protagonist. We will see later that this is a frequent occurrence in his novels. Second, "The Landlady" is a romantic work which brings to light the fact that, while he was evolving into a basic realist, the romantic did not fully leave him.

A few words about the label attached to Dostoevsky's art warrants attention here. Ever since he had been an adolescent, Dostoevsky had been seeking to find his true outlook. He was blind to reality, and this disturbed him; nonetheless, coming home one night and stopping to

¹ Mirsky, op. cit., p. 175.
² Wellek, op. cit., p. 1.
look down the Neva River in Petersburg, he had a vision which showed him that he was a mystic and did not even know it. Having lived with the romantic heroes in books all his young life, he had failed to see all of the people around him. Thus, he suddenly saw strange faces in the people around him as he took time to look at them. Yet, even the people he saw he thought only an illusion. Thus, it was at this time—somewhere between 1843 and 1845—that he came to the conclusion that even reality was unreal. The immediate spark for this conclusion was the way the vapors hung over Petersburg at night, as people seemed to fade in the vapors on Nevsky Prospect. He considered Gogol his godfather, since Gogol had written a work entitled *Nevsky Prospect*, wherein he describes the twilight appearance of this street overlooking the river where one could best see the juxtaposition of dream life and real life.

Giving vent to this view in his art stimulated Dostoevsky to portray the downtrodden. He felt that there were many people in the middle classes who could not see—just as he at one time could not see—the poor and lowly, because of their constant preoccupation with the higher orders of life. In this light, then, he is the realist. He is the romanticist in the sense that he renders situations in his novels that seem unbelievable—undeniably incredible. Dostoevsky calls his art fantastic reality when he learns that there is nothing more fantastic than reality; Donald Fanger, in his book of almost the same title, calls it romantic realism. Yet we get some meritorious words from Janko Lavrin, when he says:

*If a label were necessary at all, we could perhaps call his art visionary realism, as distinct from mere*
visual realism. Hence there is something paradoxical about Dostoevsky's exaggerated characters: they are most real when they seem least realistic from the standpoint of the mere visual realism.¹

Belinsky's poor reviews of the novels written just after Poor Folk, and Dostoevsky's personal search for a religious outlook, fostered his acquaintance with a radical circle headed by Mikhail V. Petrashevsky. However, it is necessary here to point out the fact that though he attended some of the Friday sessions of the circle—as did his brother Mikhail and many others who were merely curious—Dostoevsky never became a member. The members of the circle discussed reform in Russia, and used the French socialists as their guides. Dostoevsky's association with Petrashevsky began in 1847, and the disastrous fruits of this friendship revealed themselves in 1849.

The Christian socialists of the Petrashevsky circle expressed a profound love of God, which inculcated a concern for all people. The dictates of the circle are summed up in the words of the Petrashevist Akhsharumov when he said:

Here are to be found men with an ardent love for all people, for the whole of mankind, and likewise for God, who dedicated their entire lives in an attempt to discover an ordering of society wherein all would be rich, happy and content; where our very life, its very day, hour, and minutes, would be a thanksgiving hymn to the Creator; where there would be neither tears nor crimes; and at their head there stands the lofty genius Fourier.²

However, in mind-nineteenth century Russia the teachings of the

¹ Lavrin, op. cit., p. 33.
² Mochulsky, op. cit., p. 116.
Petrashevsky circle were considered radical. The influence of Vissarion Belinsky again enters the picture. Because of a profound love of mankind, he could not force himself to believe in the creator of an imperfect world, God. As Mochulsky so ardently expresses the views of Belinsky:

If to insure the happiness of the majority, one were forced to cut off a hundred thousand heads—he would cut them off. He himself related his blood-thirsty philanthropy to the tradition of Marat. Belinsky's influence was ultimately to determine the fate of Russian socialism: atheistic materialism succeeded in trampling down Christian utopianism; the way was being prepared for Marxist communism.¹

Dostoevsky did not fully renounce the teaching of the Petrashevists, since he could concur on the importance of love among men. Yet, he passionately accepted the atheistic teachings of Belinsky. It is necessary to mention here that at the end of his career, Dostoevsky confesses to being an agnostic, even in the face of his history of Russian Orthodox fanaticism and mysticism. This duality in his religious outlook, combined with his fusion of the romantic and the real, accounts for the paradoxical nature of his later novels. All his life he was trying to find—to no avail—a medium between Christianity and atheism. As Mochulsky puts it:

This man who was responsible for the most brilliant argumentation ever written in defense of atheism (Ivan Kaismazov), this man whom throughout his entire life God tormented, combined within his heart the most ardent faith with the greatest disbelief. All the religious

¹ Ibid., p. 118.
dialectic of his novels stems from this tragic duality.¹

Because of their activities, the whole Petrashevsky circle was arrested in 1849. Owing to a lack of evidence to prove Mikhail's participation, the authorities released him after two months confinement before the trial. Dostoevsky was not so lucky, because he had made some presentations at the gatherings—although they were always objective and no polemical—which made him seem an ardent member of the circle. The future literary giant would have been executed had not the Czar, after a mock execution, commuted their sentence—there were fifteen members of the circle arrested—to hard labor in Siberia. They were sent to the penal colony of Omsk.

The experience in prison was one that Dostoevsky never forgot. In the words of a scholarly anthology:

In prison, he reported he lived like a 'person buried underground.' He had not 'one single being within reach with whom I could exchange a cordial word. I endured cold, hunger, and sickness. I suffered from the hard labors and the hatred of my companions, who bore me a grudge for being a well-born person.' The ordeal aggravated Dostoevsky's epilepsy, but 'the escape into myself.... did bear its fruits.'²

One should not be surprised to find that one of Dostoevsky's novels, The House of the Dead (1862) reflects this prison experience. It is quite interesting to note that between 1850 and 1856, Dostoevsky published nothing. This period of relative inactivity prompted one writer to say:

¹ Ibid., p. 120.

For his own sake it is convenient to regard the young Dostoevsky as a different writer from the author of his late novels; a lesser writer, no doubt, but not a minor one; a writer with a marked originality and an important place among his contemporaries.¹

After five years in prison, Dostoevsky was allowed to spend the rest of his punishment as a common soldier. Given permission to resign from the army in 1859--his sentence was ended at this time--he returned to Petersburg. Starting with the year 1859, Dostoevsky went on to publish his best works, up to his death in 1881. These years saw the publication of some twelve novels and numerous short stories. Notable among them were: The Insulted and the Injured (1861), The House of the Dead (1862), "Notes From Underground" (1864), Crime and Punishment (1867), The Possessed (1873), The Idiot (1874), The Brothers Karamazov (1880), and The Diary of a Writer (1880).

D. S. Mirsky has conveniently divided the literary career of Dostoevsky into three distinct periods which are worthy of consideration. The early period he deems the years 1846-1856, since Dostoevsky's first novel was published in 1846, and up until 1857 he expressed a spiritual and stylistic affinity with Gogol. The middle period includes the years 1857 through 1863, as these years still show a measure of literary immaturity, but the works lack the immediate influence of Gogol. Finally, the mature period starts in 1864 and ends at Dostoevsky's death in 1881, because many scholars express the view that "Notes from Underground" is the first work that was uniquely Dostoevskyan in style and content.

Having sufficiently discussed much of the life of Dostoevsky, we

¹ Mirsky, op. cit., pp. 174-175.
can now reasonably examine his "Notes from Underground," which should give us a much clearer picture of the man and artist. In this work, his acute self-awareness is still present, his concern for the less fortunate continues; the work seems to convey an unswerving adherence to realism with only the slightest trace, if any, of romanticism. However, these facets of his style have been intensified; and moreover, he adds more. At this point in his literary career, his anger at the cruelty he suffered in life is being thoroughly expressed; he has become a psychological novelist, in that his works render a complete analysis of the individual personality; his realistic portrayals, though real, seem to be coming from a much higher level of consciousness; he is now a recognized symbolist; finally, his writings have gone to the point of seeming rather mystic, for he now seems more concerned with ideas and philosophy.

The importance of "Notes from Underground" is the fact that it introduces us to the mature Dostoevsky. In the words of D. S. Mirsky:

"Notes from Underground" cannot be regarded as imaginative literature, pure and simple. There is in it quite as much philosophy as literature..... Viewed as literature, it is also the most original of Dostoevsky's works, although the most unpleasant and cruel. It cannot be recommended to those who are not either sufficiently strong to overcome it or sufficiently innocent to remain unpoisoned. It is a strong poison, which is most safely left untouched.1

In 1857, while serving the balance of his sentence as a common soldier, Dostoevsky had married a widow, Marya Dmitrevna Isaeva. He dearly loved her, and though the marriage only lasted for seven years--the last two years of which they spent apart, while the writer was in

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1 Mirsky, op. cit., p. 273.
love with another woman—the split was fostered in great part by the obsessive mistrust Isaeva held of Dostoevsky. It is a fact that the relationship between Dostoevsky and Isaeva's son Pasha, her child by her first marriage, was quite stressful. It not only prompted problems during the marriage, but even after Isaeva's death, when Dostoevsky was entrusted with Pash's care, and the welfare of Mikhail's children. Evidence of Dostoevsky's love for Isaeva can be gathered from his constant conversations with his second wife, Anna Grigoryevna—his personal secretary whom he married in 1867—who once exclaimed: "Fyodor Mikhailovich deeply loved his first wife. In his life this was his first real sentiment."¹ We might add that it has been conjectured that Dostoevsky was more in love with his marital sufferings than he was with Isaeva.

The major catastrophe that fostered Dostoevsky's decision to write "Notes From Underground" was the death of his wife, only three months before that of his brother Mikhail, his journalistic partner. This occurrence brought on epilepsy, an anxiety over his gambling losses—his adulterous associations with another woman produced this habit—and subsequent poverty.

However, the immediate spark for the writing of the "Notes" was the ideas presented by Nikolai Cheryshevsky in the same year as Dostoevsky's "Notes." Although we will discuss Cheryshevsky's book later, an intriguing observation has to be made here. Both men were imprisoned for their apparently revolutionary activities, Dostoevsky for just over four years, but Chernyshevsky for almost twenty years. In addition, both men

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¹ Mochulsky, op. cit., p. 163.
were sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. So, because of the similarities in their experiences, it should be fascinating to observe the contrast in their responses. An analysis of "Notes From Underground" should render an understanding, not only of the mature Dostoevsky, but also of his underground man in society.

The first part of the "Notes" (often called "Letters from the Underworld") gives us the philosophical idiosyncracies of the protagonist (the narrator). The second part of the work lays bare the morbid illustration, from his everyday life, of his ideas in action. In the same vein, we might add that Part I lends itself more to the underground as a psychological realm, as opposed to Part II, which deals more with its physical aspects. This is not to say that either part offers an exclusive treatment; nevertheless, by analyzing the novella, as far as possible from this perspective, we should be able to better understand both the narrator's personal philosophies and his account of his life in society, as a manifestation of his temperament.

The novella is rendered through first person narration and, from the very first paragraph of the work, one gets the impression that the narrator, who we discover later is the protagonist, is a victim of psychosis. Observe his words:

I'm a sick man...a mean man. There's nothing attractive about me. I think there's something wrong with my liver. But, actually, I don't understand a damn thing about my sickness; I'm not even too sure what it is that's ailing me. I'm not under treatment and never have been, although I have great respect for medicine and doctors. Moreover, I'm morbidly superstitious--enough at least, to respect medicine. With my education I shouldn't be superstitious, but I am just the same. No, I'd say I refuse medical help simply out of contrariness. I don't expect
you to understand that, but it's so. Of course, I can't explain whom I'm trying to fool this way. I'm fully aware that I can't spite the doctors by refusing their help. I know very well that I'm harming myself and no one else. But still, it's out of spite that I refuse to ask for the doctors help. So my liver hurts? Good, let it hurt even more!¹

However, before the reader writes his protagonist off as a mental case and puts the book down, the author insists in a note on the same initial page that:

People like the author of these notes may, and indeed must, exist in our society, if we think of the circumstances under which that society has been formed.²

Thus, we find ourselves saying, "perhaps this man is fully aware of his condition, and there is some sense to it." Our task then is to discern what it is that makes him seem at this early point in the work not only acutely self-conscious, but also sensitive, introspective, and indecisive as well.

The narrator goes on to tell more about himself. At present he is forty years old, and was once a minor official in the service of the government. We learn two things from the information given here. First, we get our first piece of "concrete evidence" regarding the autobiographical tone in the novel. The narrator is forty, and Dostoevsky was about the same age, forty-three, when he wrote the book in 1864. The emphasis on "concrete evidence" stems from the ambiguous reference made in the


²  Ibid., p. 90.
footnote on the first page of the book. Was he referring to himself as
the author of the notes, or was he pointing to the narrator? The second
technique we see is Dostoevsky's continuity in employing the civil
servant as his basic authorial mouthpiece. The narrator's former posi-
tion is likened to Devushkin's title of government clerk in Poor Folk
(1846) and to Mr. Golyadkin's title of titular counselor in a Petersburg
section of the civil service in "The Double" (1846). The reader may
also recall that Dostoevsky was also in the civil service for two years
after he left the school of engineering in Petersburg.

In reminiscing on his experience as a government official, the
narrator mentions that he used to be a nasty official. He felt good
when he made petitioners angry who came to him for information. However,
we get a paradox when he later says:

I was lying just now when I said I used to be a nasty
official. And I lied out of spite. I was having fun at
the expense of the petitioners.... but deep down, I could
never really be nasty. I was always aware of many ele-
ments in me that were just the opposite of wicked.\(^1\)

What is the meaning of this paradox? In fact, what reasoning can we
attach to all of the paradoxes we encounter in our study of the under-
ground man in his "Notes?" Richard Peace gives us the answer in his
words:

Paradox is the natural element of the underground man,
and what he seeks to stress is that for man's happiness
volitive urges are more important than rational motives.\(^2\)

\(^{1}\)Ibid., p. 91.

\(^{2}\)Richard Peace, Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels
The underground man's paradoxicality reminds us of Nikolay Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1867). We must realize that the underground man's constant self-contradiction is also an expression of his freedom to say or do what he desires. Stavrogin, at the age of twenty-five, comes back home and for several months observes all of the rules of social decorum in his hometown of Skvoreshniki. Then all of a sudden he commits some irrational acts. He bites the ear of the governor, pulls an old man by the nose, and kisses a woman in public. Edward Wasiolek explains and compares Stavrogin's acts in his words:

> The acts remind us of the spiteful and playful forays of the Underground Man, and they have a similar point. They are the testings of freedom; as the Underground Man has done, Stavrogin liberates himself from a fixed image of self by always doing the opposite. Contradiction and inconsequence become tools of revolt against one's nature, and consequently tools of one's freedom.¹

Also, we need to take note of the fact that the narrator, as he himself said, does have other emotions--he calls them elements. This further enhances Dostoevsky's contention that, though the narrator may seem strange to many in society, he is in some ways like all of us, and in many ways like some of us.

The narrator says that he could make himself nothing - neither a hero nor an insect. His excuse is that an intelligent man cannot, while the fool can. In talking about himself--he considers himself a member of the intelligentsia--he says:

> It's true that an intelligent man of the nineteenth century is bound to be a spiteless creature, while the

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¹Wasiolek, op. cit., pp. 124-125.
man of character, the man of action, is, in most cases, of limited intelligence.¹

This reminds us of Dostoevsky's experience on Nevsky Prospect, where he discovered that, coming from a middle-class environment, he had failed to see the reality of the entire world around him; he could not see those below his status. This is why not only was he lost during his experience with students in the school of engineering; he was also almost totally introspective in prison. We will readily see later that one of the basic characteristics of the underground man is his introspective personality.

We learn that the setting of the novel is Petersburg, Russia, and that the narrator lives on the outskirts of town in an unhealthy and filthy neighborhood. He had joined the service only to have something to eat, yet when a distant relative died and left him six thousand rubles, rather than move to a better environment, he stayed in the same place—he called it his little corner. He really did not have enough money comfortably to afford the high cost of living in Petersburg, and he knew it. Nevertheless, he was determined to stay there. It is here that we see how the title of Part I, "The Mousehole," is appropriate. The narrator's little corner just on the outskirts of Petersburg was his mousehole. We see the similarity when he says:

I reached a point where I felt a secret, unhealthy, base little pleasure in creeping back into my hole after some disgusting night in Petersburg and forcing myself to think that I had again done something filthy, that

¹ Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 92.
what was done couldn't be undone.\footnote{Ibid., p. 94.}

When we examine the vile thoughts of the underground man in his hole and his occasional vices in society, we are reminded of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov sat in his little room and contemplated the perfect crime. His thoughts resulted in the murder of the old pawnbroker and her stepsister, coupled with the theft of their jewels. Richard Peace give us some thoughts on this similarity in his words:

> In much the same way as the nameless hero of the *Notes* skulks in his 'underground' so too Raskolnikov locks himself up in his 'coffin' of a room, and in both cases hermetic surroundings appear to act as a retort for the distillation of unusual ideas.\footnote{Peace, *op. cit.*, p. 19.}

Before we become deeply immersed in the philosophical idio-syn
crasies of our narrator--surely Dostoevsky's raison d'etre--we need to say just a few words here about the underground, both as a physical realm and a psychological realm. When Dostoevsky entitled Part I "The Mousehole" he was referring, in a physical sense, to the narrator's little corner in the Petersburg suburbs. Just as a mousehole is underground, Dostoevsky is here considering the narrator's little corner in Petersburg his (the narrator's) underground. Also, just as the mouse makes his home in the slums, commits his acts of vice in the city, and returns to his hole to bask in the glory of his vice, we get the same pattern from the narrator.

The underground as a psychological realm was superficially discussed
when the author talked about the nineteenth-century intellectual as a spineless creature, but, a more revealing explanation is given when the narrator tries to explain why he could not even become an insect. Observe his words:

For everyday needs, the average person's awareness is more than sufficient, and it is about a half or a quarter of that of the unhappy nineteenth-century intellectual.... The extent of consciousness at the disposal of what may be termed the spontaneous people and the man of action is sufficient.¹

Dostoevsky is saying here that the psychological underground is the depth to which the overly self-conscious individual descends. When one becomes too self-conscious he loses touch with reality, a fate not shared by the direct men, the men of action. Thus, our narrator is an underground man because his intelligence has fostered his extreme self-consciousness, which resulted not only in his constant introspection, but also in many other personal characteristics that are distinct from those of the average man. These characteristics will be discussed as we continue to study the "underground man"—we can safely designate the narrator as such at this point.

It should be easy to understand now why the underground man would not change his place of inhabitation after receiving the money, and after learning that the climate was bad for his health. The underground is the only place where he can exist with personal satisfaction. To try to live elsewhere would only foster embarrassment and conflicts, as we will see in Part II.

¹ Ibid., p. 93.
The underground man himself mentions that he is sensitive; yet we get a paradox when he mentions that there have been times when he wanted his face slapped. Aside from his "natural element," paradox, and his confession of being sensitive, we learn something new about him here. He sometimes consciously prompts despair. In talking about revenge, even for someone's slapping him, he feels that the acutely self-conscious man cannot act. He would spend so much time examining the pros and cons of the occurrence that he would get lost and end up doing nothing. Here we get another of his characteristics, indecision. As a result of the normal man's ability to act in a positive manner, the narrator says that he envies the normal man--the normal man is really the man Dostoevsky calls the man of character, the direct man.

The underground man goes on to say a few words about a stone wall. "What stone wall? Why, the laws of nature, of course, the conclusions of the natural sciences, of mathematics."\(^1\) Again we see the difference between the intellectual and the man of action. The man of action would take revenge by hitting his head against a wall, but he would accept the wall. The intellectual would not accept the wall. In the words of Richard Peace:

In the concept of the 'wall' we have another important symbol for the underground man. It stands for the obstacles placed before man's will by the laws of the natural world. For the underground man, human desires reach out towards infinity; he refuses to allow them to be thwarted either by the dictates of reason or the laws of the natural world, in spite of the fact that both these forms of restraint appeal as intractable as

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 99.
mathematical formulae.¹

Here we get one of the underground man's major characteristics, his defiance of the laws of nature—more specifically, his defiance of the dictates of reason.

Continuing in his seemingly unorganized manner, the narrator talks about the pleasure he feels in a toothache. This is somewhat similar to what he had to say about his liver ailment in the beginning. One gets the impression that he finds pleasure in suffering when he says: "Once I suffered from a toothache for a whole month, and I can tell you there is pleasure in it."² He views the moans of the nineteenth-century intellectual—for the most part he is here referring to the undergrounder—as different from those of the peasant. In discussing the moans of the nineteenth-century intellectual, he says:

   His moaning is quite unlike the moaning of a peasant, for he has been affected by education and by European civilization. He moans like a man who, as they say nowadays, 'has been uprooted from the soil and lost contact with the people.'³

He is really exaggerating his moans to show everyone that he is suffering, but, unlike the peasant, he refuses to do anything to relieve the pain. Thus, it is evident here that one of the underground man's major characteristics is his desire wilfully to suffer. In the words of Robert Louis Jackson:

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² Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 99.

³ Ibid., p. 100.
The creator of the Underground Man, Dostoevsky re-affirms the absolute value and integrity of the single, separate individual; in the pathos of suffering, doubt, and despair, Dostoevsky finds the essence of man's identity.1

Dostoevsky next takes up the subject of the underground man's inability to define himself. We will see later that this characteristic for the most part, fosters his existentialist anti-heroic status at the end of his "Notes." The narrator provides several examples to bring this out. When he was beaten by his father he could not stand saying, "Sorry, papa, I'll never do it again."2 Ironically, he would even purposely get himself blamed for things just so he could say he would never do it again. However, every time he said he was sorry, he was lying. Two lines of analysis are required here, but they both lend themselves to Dostoevsky's contention that the underground man is in a constant state of inertia; he has not reached and cannot reach any final stage of creativity, though he is full of potential. Thus, the narrator hated saying he would never do it again, because although the narrator knew he was lying, it might give his father the satisfaction—even though it would be a false one—of saying "There is a man whom I know as one who will not do a certain thing again." On the other hand, the narrator enjoyed putting himself in a position of blame, because he would get a big laugh out of seeing people fall for his false definition of himself.

Another example the narrator gives is that of his attempts at


falling in love. He never fell in love, but got a big laugh out of people falling for his false expressions. He brings this out in his words:

Once, or rather twice, I tried to make myself fall in love. And, believe me, ladies and gentlemen, I certainly suffered! Deep down, of course, I couldn't quite believe in my suffering and felt like laughing. But it was suffering nevertheless—the real stuff, with jealousy, violence, and all the trimmings.¹

The underground man is really incapable of falling in love, as we will see in the Liza affair in Part II.

The final example the narrator gives in reference to his inability to define himself is that of his supposing himself a lazy man. He feels that if he had a choice he would choose to be a lazy man. In this way, at least people could say something positive about him. He even talks about a man who had found satisfaction in having defined himself. The narrator says:

I once knew a gentleman who all his life was proud of being a connoisseur of Chateau Lafitte. He considered it a great virtue and never had any misgivings about it. He died with a conscience that was not merely clear but jubilant.²

However, this man must have been a direct man, because, had he been an undergrounder, his constant state of inertia would not have allowed him the choice of becoming not only a connoisseur at Lafitte, but at becoming anything.

The remainder of Part I is mostly an attack on the utilitarian

¹ Ibid., p. 102.
² Ibid., p. 104.
philosophy of Jeremy Bentham, more specifically an answer to the tenets presented in Nikolai G. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done*. In his book, Chernyshevsky renders a picture of society in a utopian state, where perfect happiness is achieved by everyone pursuing their own personal but rational desires. He purports, as did Bentham, that man commits evil only because he does not understand the nature of his own interests. In his basic interpretation of Dostoevsky's "Notes," Edward Carr gives us some meritorious words:

"Notes from Underground" are an answer to the philosophy of Chernyshevsky. It had become by this time one of Dostoevsky's strongest convictions that human nature is not, as optimistic utilitarians of Chernyshevsky's kidney believed, fundamentally and essentially good; and that many, in virtue of one side of this nature, may desire and choose evil, knowing it to be evil.¹

Dostoevsky starts his onslaught by first defining utilitarianism as "the good and the beautiful." The narrator says that if he had a choice, not only would he choose to be a lazy man, "but one who would also have been at the same time, a supporter of 'the good and the beautiful.'"² Ultimately, however, he considers this supposition just a golden dream. He first talks about Bentham by posing the question:

Who was it that first said that man does nasty things only because he doesn't know where his real interests be, that if he were enlightened about his true interests, he would immediately stop acting like a pig and become kind and noble?³


²Dostoevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

He then talks about Chernyshevsky, who was not only a later proponent of Benthamite philosophy, but also a contemporary of Dostoevsky.

He was calling Chernyshevsky his friend when the narrator said:

"You see, ladies and gentlemen, I have a friend--of course, he's your friend, too, and, in fact, everyone's friend. When he's about to do something, this friend explains pompously and in detail how he must act in accordance with the precepts of justice and reason. Moreover, he becomes passionate as he expostulates upon human interests; heaps scorn on the shortsighted fools who don't know what virtue is or what's good for them."1

However, Dostoevsky expresses the fallacy he sees in utilitarianism, "the good and the beautiful," when the narrator says:

"Interest! What interest? Can you define exactly what is in the interest of a human being? And suppose the interest of a man is not only consistent with but even demands something harmful rather than advantageous? Of course, if such an instance is possible, then the whole rule is nothing but dust."2

Dostoevsky does feel that it is possible for one to demand something harmful. Thus, he is here refuting Chernyshevsky's contentions. Also, we have just discussed another of the underground man's characteristics: his practice of acting against his self-interest.

Dostoevsky extends his argument to the teachings of science. The utilitarians felt that science, if properly followed and advanced, could show man that he does not have a will; that man never had a will. According to the utilitarians:

1
Ibid., p. 106.

2
Ibid.
Science will teach man that he is something like a piano key or an organ stop; that... there are natural laws in the universe, and whatever happens to him happens outside his will, as it were, by itself, in accordance with the laws of nature. Therefore, all there is left to do is to discover these laws and man will no longer be responsible for his acts.¹

The narrator refutes this utilitarian view many times, and one of the better examples of his refutation follows:

It seems to me that the meaning of man's life consists in proving to himself every minute that he's a man and not a piano key. And man will keep proving it and paying for it with his own skin; he will turn into a troglodyte if need be. And, since this is so I cannot help rejoicing that things are still the way they are and that, for the time being, nobody knows worth a damn what determines our desires.²

This seems to have been at least one of the sparks for Robert Louis Jackson's statement:

If there is any work which leaves man boundless freedom of choice, and imposes a tremendous responsibility for that choice, it is "Notes from Underground."³

Another of the underground man's characteristics has been brought out here. He defies the dictates of reason and the laws of nature. An adherence to reason and the laws would not allow him complete freedom of wilful action.

What Dostoevsky says about the crystal palace is quite significant here. The crystal palace, when erected in 1850 to house the first great

¹ Ibid., pp. 108-109.
² Ibid., p. 115.
³ Jackson, op. cit., p. 15.
exposition of all nations, represented a triumph for man's scientific and architectural strivings. This beautiful cast iron and glass structure made the utilitarians proud. In the words of Richard Peace:

The crystal palace is a symbol for more than the perfect society, it stands too for the triumph of man's reason, for his ultimate ability to comprehend and to codify the whole of creation.¹

To the underground man, the crystal palace was just like the wall; and, contrary to those who could not stick their tongues out at it, deeming it unfair not to accept such a miraculous creation, the underground man could stick his tongue out at it, not accept it, and feel not the slightest remorse. He even goes to the point of saying that he would welcome having his tongue cut out, if someone could create something that would get a desired emotional response from him.

Nearing the end of his philosophical discourse, the narrator reaffirms his contention that conscious inertia is the best. He also employs his natural element again when he says:

And, though I said that I was green with envy of the normal man, I still wouldn't take his place under present circumstances—although I'll go on envying him.²

Are you surprised that the narrator says in the end of Part I that he cannot believe a word of what he has said? He does, but only to express his concurrence with Heinrich Heine that one cannot write a true autobiography—Heine felt that Rousseau's Confessions was permeated with his lies, because man is bound to lie about himself. However, the

¹ Peace, op. cit., p. 9.

² Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 120.
narrator was trying to do a better job because, unlike Rousseau, he was writing for himself and not for the public. Why could he not keep the information in his head? Maybe he was a coward. Perhaps by imagining an audience his words might be rendered more convincing. The idea that the narrator is trying to stress here is that he defies the laws of nature to the extent that he tries his utmost to show the world that he has the freedom of will to make even the nature of his actions whatever he wants it to be.

When we reflect on Part I of Dostoevsky's "Notes" and review the philosophical idiosyncracies of a unique individual, we wonder if the underground man knew his condition well enough to narrate it. One would think so when he considers the fact that the narrator's creator--after having started on the road to a literary career that had already seen some fruits, only to be abruptly shut off from the literary capital for a decade--had a terribly real and soul-searching experience in prison. Here was a man whose status of nobleman was taken from him at the age of twenty-eight and not given back for eight years. This is why Dostoevsky felt that he was a member of the uprooted intelligentsia. Here was a man whose wife and brother died over a three-months span. Yes, his narrator could narrate it; Dostoevsky was sick from anxiety over things real. As Stephen Zweig puts it:

"It was this malady which enabled Dostoeffsky to soar upward into a sphere at such concentrated feelings as is rarely experienced by normal men; it permitted him to penetrate into the underworld of the emotions, into the submerged regions of the psyche."

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Part II of "Notes from Underground," entitled "Apropos of the Wet Snow," is entitled such simply because snow was falling when the underground man wrote it. Since this portion of the novella gives us a picture of the underground man’s daily life, we should be able to get a clearer picture of his personality. Then, by comparing the underground man’s real-life actions to those of other Dostoevskyan characters, we will be able to discern underground characteristics in other Dostoevskyan characters, especially those of his mature period.

In Part I of "Notes from Underground" we were introduced to the narrator at the age of forty; after he had lived the life of an underground man for some twenty years. Part II gives a picture of his actions and/or experiences during those twenty years. A question that might be in your mind now is why he requires a Part II when he has virtually presented a philosophical account of his personality in Part I. The answer is simple. Because he agrees with Heine that a true autobiography cannot be written, he thought it necessary to give you a picture of his life, so that you could be the judge of his personality, according to your own will.

Just as we learned much about the underground man’s characteristics on the very first page of Part I, the same pattern follows in Part II. What are some of the things we learn? We gather that he was twenty-four years old when he had amassed all of the requirements for the status of underground man. We learn that he lived in his hold then, too. We detect his acute self-consciousness, as he shunned the gaze of others and thought himself a disgusting personality. In talking about the other clerks in the office, he said that one smelled and that another wore
dirty clothes. Yet these men did not seem worried about such habits in the least. Here he was again discussing the contrast between the nineteenth-century intellectual and the direct man, the other clerks being common-place and forthright. He hated his own face, which does not seem too utilitarian. Not surprisingly, all of these traits are rendered not only on the very first page, but also in the very first paragraph.

Among the clerks in the office, the narrator considered himself the coward. Here again he is bringing out the fact that the underground man, because of his acute self-analysis, finds it difficult to act. He refers to himself as the self-respecting man, which means that the non-self respecting men are those who respect nature instead.

Once the underground man saw someone thrown out of a window of a billiard room. He went into the tavern to provoke the same fate, only because he wanted to be insulted, because he desired personal humiliation. Yet, with all his efforts at provocation, the Lieutenant who threw the other person out would not do the same to him. Seemingly the Lieutenant did not even notice him. Thus, "The Underground man had sought to be insulted by being thrown out the window; he is also insulted when he is not thrown out of the window."¹

Two insults were levied in this situation. The first was that he desired suffering and was not given it, even though he sought to provoke it. The second was that he was not even recognized by the officer. It was for the latter insult that the underground man sought revenge. He

ran a thorough investigation on the officer; wrote a slanderous satire on the officer's villainy that was rejected by the National Journal only because exposes were not in vogue; and even wrote a letter imploring the officer to apologize, but did not send it. These acts he did self-torturingly, over a two-year period.

Finally, he decided to refuse to step aside when he confronted the officer on Nevsky Prospect. His revenge would be for the officer to step aside when they walked toward one another. In this way, the underground man's anti-bourgeois and anti-establishment sentiments could be appeased. A word about Nevsky Prospect should be enlightening here. This was a street in Petersburg where the cream of society would gather to regale themselves in their financial and societal superiority—the place was the Fifth Avenue of Petersburg. The underground man would often go there to be humiliated. There, he would see the less fortunate insulted and stepped on by their superiors, only to exert his higher status over those below him.

The underground man employed his tactic several times, only to lose his nerve at the last minute and step aside for the officer. The bumping scenes with the officer are quite hilarious, but the full force of the humor is reduced by the boisterous nature of the comic scenes. Once, the underground man was six inches away from the officer and in fear fell down at the officer's feet. The officer stepped over him, which made the underground man even more vindictive. He does achieve success, though, when on one occasion he closes his eyes and runs into the officer. Although the underground man suffered the most physically from the
contact—the officer still seemed not to notice him—he felt that he had gotten his revenge.

The narrator confesses that he often gave himself over to dreaming. He says:

It is noteworthy that I usually thought of "the sublime and the beautiful" during my dissipation, often just when I hit rock-bottom of abjection.1

But then he later says: "But you're right, after all—there's plenty of baseness and bad taste in it all."2 Dostoevsky is here referring to his former admiration for the famous romantic Johann Schiller. In his youth he loved Schiller so much that he saw his plays more than once, especially "The Robbers." However, after the prison experience his attitude towards the romantic changed completely. As Mochulsky so tersely puts it:

Ordynov in the tale "The Landlady" heads the line of Dostoevsky's romantic heroes; Dmitry Karamazov, declaiming Schiller, closes it.3

We also get some meritorious words from Robert Louis Jackson:

The period embraced by the Underground Man's "Notes" (the 1840's) is a most dramatic one for Dostoevsky. It is the period in which he himself moves from the position of a "dreamer" to a critical attitude towards that same effusive idealism and sentimentalism he had embraced as a youth.4

The next experience the underground man narrates is that with his

1 Dostoevsky, op. cit., p. 136.
2 Ibid., p. 138.
4 Jackson, op. cit., p. 21.
former schoolmate Zverkov. He paid a visit to Simonov, a former schoolmate. Their relationship had severed years ago, but the underground man always sought hurt and humiliation. The minute he hit Simonov's door he could see the coldness and anguish in Simonov's face. Simonov was entertaining two other schoolmates of the underground man who expressed only regrets at his entrance. Yet, the underground man desired to be with them. This particular situation seems quite autobiographical, since the young Fyodor and his brother Mikhail attended the Moscow boarding school of Leonty Chermak, where they had very few friends, if any. The interesting point here is that Dostoevsky used to find escape from the other students by immersing himself in romantic literature. However, now that he has virtually rejected romanticism, neither he nor his narrator can find sufficient escape in a romantic piece of literature, or in any form of daydreaming.

Simonov and his friends were planning a party for another former schoolmate, Zverkov. All of these young men, Zverkov having accomplished the most, had realized some measure of success. Thus, they could easily look down on the meager circumstances of the underground man; yet in the face of all this adversity he wanted to be a part of the group, and even went to the point of contributing part of his servant's wages just to be at the gathering. They quite reluctantly accepted the underground man's company at the party held at the hotel, although they feared he would embarrass them.

The underground man thought for an instant that he would not go, but he knew that he was only dreaming and that his fantasies would not do him any good. Observe the words of the narrator:
A farewell party indeed! And for a nasty pig like Zverkov, too! Of course, I won't go; I have no obligations toward them. I don't give a damn anyhow! I'll send Simonov a note tomorrow to say I'm not coming. But what actually made me so furious was that I knew very well that I'd go—I'd go just to spite them, and the more wrong, the more tactless it was for me to go, the more certainly I'd do so.\(^1\)

Of course the underground man did go to the party; he did suffer from the obvious ostracism levied on him; and he did embarrass everyone with his obnoxious conversation. The underground man's humiliation was extended when, after attempting to apologize to Zverkov, he was told that the likes of him could not insult Zverkov.

When we reflect on the Zverkov experience, three other literary characters come to mind. The first is Lev Myskin, from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868). In this work, Mme. Epanchin reluctantly gave her consent to the betrothal of her daughter Aglaya to Myshkin, who was considered an idiot by almost everyone because of his lack of sophistication, his naiveness, and his frankness. To celebrate the occasion she gave a dinner party. However, worried that Myshkin might commit a blunder, they advised him to sit quietly and say nothing. Having a change of heart, Mme. Epanchin allowed him to exert himself just a little. This resulted in a wild conversation, an epileptic seizure, and Myshkin's act of knocking over an expensive vase, only to look at the remains idiotically. Dostoevsky's intention in the cases of both the underground man and Myskin seems to have been to explain that, though there are some people whose actions seem contrary to the dictates of reason, these people are

\(^1\) Dostoevsky, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
often quite aware of and desire their actions. It is necessary to pursue this matter just a little further.

Dostoevsky portrays Myskin as the saint who is afflicted with epileptic suffering as a necessary characteristic of his sainthood. We find Myskin's counterpart in Mohammed, Saint Paul, and Julius Caesar. The underground man was no saint, as he could control his neurotic condition if he desired; Myskin was helpless—in essence he was a slave to his epilepsy. However, the underground man's condition was more pathetic, since his neurotic affliction was more self-destructive than turned outward.

The other characters reflected in the Zverkov experience are Mr. Merdle and Miss Wade, from Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. Dostoevsky, a contemporary of England's greatest novelist, admired Dickens for several reasons, among them Dickens' portrayal of the grotesque and his depiction of the self-tormentor. Dostoevsky probably got his best picture of the Dickenian grotesque from *Oliver Twist* (1838); the self-tormentor from *Little Dorrit* (1857). In the latter work Mr. Merdle reminds us of the underground man because he puts himself in a position to be tormented. Although he was very rich, Mr. Merdle married above himself. While he had the money, he did not have the manners; therefore he felt out of place at Mrs. Merdle's social gatherings and at some of the affairs they attended. If a gathering were held at his house he could be found against the wall or behind a door; if in attendance at an affair elsewhere, he would always complain of fatigue and a desire for home and bed. Yet he spent great sums of money to satisfy society, such massive amounts that he was unable to deter his bankruptcy and subsequent suicide.
The other self-tormentor in *Little Dorrit* was Miss Wade. She was a woman with a seemingly ungovernable temper, a self-tormentor who imagined that everyone was treating her badly. She even influenced Miss Meagle's maid, Tattycoram, to believe malicious things about her benevolent benefactors. After running away with Miss Wade and living with her, Tattycoram discovered that Miss Wade was a self-tormentor and had no proof of her statements about the Meagles, nor about any of the other people she claimed were enemies.

The idea of the self-tormentor can be extended to *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this work, Dostoevsky reveals the torment through which Dmitri and Ivan take themselves in order to get some kind of foothold on life. Both brothers nurtured hate for their father almost all their lives. Dmitri increased his torment by wasting three thousand rubles of his fiance's money on a prostitute, hoping to get it back through a legacy from his mother's estate; he never gets the money, but seriously wounds one of his father's servants in his attempt to kill his father for the money. In the end he is falsely convicted of the murder and imprisoned in Siberia. Ivan's self-torment is intensified by his inability to comprehend the dual nature of man. In the end he is tormented by a guilt complex for the rest of his life for not only fostering the death of his father through murderous impressions given to the servant Smerdyakov; he also left himself responsible for Smerdyakov's self-hanging. However, the youngest son, Alyosha, who devoted his life to the good father Zossima, accepted the war between worldliness and spirituality, and took an unselfish, concerned attitude towards his father, experienced no such self-torment.
A moment's reflection on *Crime and Punishment* reveals a similarity between Ivan and the underground man. Of the three brothers, Ivan seemed to come off with the most tragic results of the self-torments experienced by the brothers. Why did Dostoevsky portray Ivan as the greatest sufferer? The answer is that Ivan was portrayed as a nineteenth-century intellectual, just as the underground man was presented. The author was showing how acute self-consciousness fosters penetrating suffering.

The final experience in Part II is that involving Liza. After the schoolmates left the hotel, they went to a brothel, and the underground man followed later, hoping to find Zverkov so that he could slap Zverkov and his companion, Olympia. He wants to get back at Zverkov to the extent that he conceives a plan of revenge, only to discard it when he discovers that his plan has come from Pushkin's "Silvio" and Lermontov's "Masquerade." The plan was only a dream.

The underground man fails to find the schoolmates at the brothel, and consoles himself with one of the prostitutes there. When he awakes in the morning he delivers a long lecture to Liza, explaining the hazards of her profession. Liza is driven to tears, and for a moment even the underground man seems convinced of the apparent sincerity of his attempt to reform the young lady. In a fit of elation over his success, he invites Liza to his house. For days afterwards he basks in the glory of his success and even contemplates marrying the young lady. Then fear comes into his heart, for what will he do if the young lady does come and saw his shabby quarters?

The underground man could not afford to love or marry Liza, because
it would make him a slave not only to passion, but also to the dictates
of a wife. His life-philosophy would not allow his will to be thwarted
in this way. Moreover, if we analyze his response to Liza in light of
his indifference to being defined, we again see why he was forced to re-
ject her. Had he accepted her, then one could easily define him as a
man who was a slave to his passions.

Liza does come, and soon observes him in a degrading scene with his
servant. He tells her that his eloquence was false. The underground
man knew all along that he was incapable of love. Liza, feeling sorry
for his condition, even then expressed her love for him. Seeing that
his back was almost against the wall, he offers her money to give her
the impression that he conceives of her affection—the affection was
genuine and the underground man knew it—as that of a prostitute. View-
ing him as a baseless individual, incapable of help, Liza vehemently re-
jects the money and leaves.

We are reminded of two other Dostoevskyan characters when we closely
scrutinize the Liza affair. The first character is Raskolnikov, in Dos-
toevsky's Crime and Punishment, who had a similar experience. Observe
the words of Richard Peace:

Both men were offered salvation and regeneration as
human beings through a relationship with a prostitute.
Once again Raskolnikov takes a positive step where the
underground man fails to act: he offers Sonya his love
and receives hers in return. Yet it is not merely that
Raskolnikov is, above all else, a man whose actions are
based on cool and calculated reason—he is a member of
that same younger generation against whom the under-
ground man is taking up arms.1

1 Peace, op. cit., p. 19.
The other character is Versilov in Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent* (1875). Versilov's actions toward his son on one occasion are the same as those of the underground man towards Liza. Arkady was searching for faith in his father, just as Liza was searching for some kind of belief in the actions of the underground man. In both cases the seekers were deceived by the momentarily hidden motives of the people in whom they sought salvation. We see the similarity between the two situations when we examine Edward Wasiolek's explanation of the scene in *The Adolescent*:

Versilov's "good" deeds are always corrupted by his character. He marries the idiot girl that Prince Sergey has seduced and he nobly takes over the care of the child, but he does so to spite Katerina Nikolievna, who had rejected him. This contradiction between Versilov the man and his high-minded ideas is brought out most clearly for us and for Arkady in his motives toward Katerina, especially in the final scenes. There we find a petty, jealous, spiteful Versilov. Despite his "golden visions," his superior culture, and his belief in the essential nobility of man, he is moved by base motives.¹

It is interesting and necessary to end our examination of the underground man by comparing his anti-heroic status at the end of his "Notes" to the somewhat heroic status of Versilov at the conclusion of *The Adolescent*. In the latter work, Arkady is the illegitimate son of an aristocrat, Versilov, and a poor woman, Sofia. The relationship between Versilov and Arkady is hampered by the father's unwillingness to accept his son. Versilov's refined intellectuality fostered his neglect of his son. However, Versilov has a change of heart in the end, and not only accepts his son, but also marries Sofia. Symbolically, the noble and peasant strains—in more relevant terms the intellectual man and the

¹ Wasiolek, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
direct man—were reconciled. Thus, Versilov mends his ways and achieves heroic status.

With no attempts at fastidiousness, an interesting biographical resemblance can be deciphered from Versilov's actions. Dostoevsky himself had conflicts with a problematic stepson, Pasha, before and after the death of Isaeva; she was the first wife of Dostoevsky, and the mother of Pasha. Unlike Versilov, Dostoevsky did not experience any final reconciliation with Pasha, and never went back to his wife, from whom he was separated.

The underground man had the same opportunity to achieve heroic status through Liza as Versilov did through Arkady. However, he refused to mend his ways, and ended as the anti-hero. Thus, both Versilov and the narrator were intellectuals with the potential for the affixation of the label "underground man," but Versilov escaped by not allowing his intellectuality completely to control his consciousness. The underground man was not so lucky.
CHAPTER III

RICHARD WRIGHT'S TREATMENT OF THE
UNDERGROUND THEME

One has to be careful in examining a work by Richard Wright, since his works, on the one hand, have been given extremely high praise by some, while, on the other they have come under seemingly unending attack from hostile critics. This has been a pattern in Wright's criticism ever since the author's second major success, the novel Native Son (1940). This is not to say that other writers have not shared the same experience. Research of a wide variety, though, has somehow fostered this unique impression of Wright criticism. However, our aim in this examination of Wright--more specifically in our consideration of his "The Man Who Lived Underground"--is not to get caught in the argument over his ability to assess his level of achievement, especially as it relates to Ralph Ellison's treatment of the underground theme, in copying from the pioneer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Our purpose is solely to discern the extent to which he employed the underground characteristics defined by the Russian giant, Dostoevsky.

If my advice were solicited as to the best source of information on Richard Nathaniel Wright the man, my ready response would be to commence one's probe by reading his autobiographical novel, Black Boy (1945). This tear-jerking but thorough account of his life up to the age of nineteen tells of his pilgrimage from Mississippi to Memphis, to Arkansas, to Mississippi and home to Memphis again, and ends in Wright's narration
of his train trip to Chicago in 1927, during the course of which he reminisces on his years in the South and looks forward to a better life in the North.

My ready response aside, a terse glance at the life and works of Richard Wright here should be both sufficient for our purposes and enlightening. He was born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908 and died in Paris, France in 1960. Wright visited France in 1946 and then returned there the next year to make France his home—he spent the rest of his life there as an expatriate. While in France he became friends with Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. It is evident that the existentialist influence of these writers was the creative force behind Wright's *The Outsider* (1953)—indeed this novel is considered by many as the first American existential novel.

The themes and attitudes that permeate Wright's fiction resulted from the oppression he experienced in the South. He could never accept being inferior to whites, but saw the necessity of putting on the act of submission. Wright's father, Nathaniel, deserted the family—Wright, his brother Alan, and his mother Ella—when Richard was a youngster. His mother became partially paralyzed, and the financial status of the family worsened. For a while he lived in an orphanage, but he was soon withdrawn because of his impatience and restlessness.

After leaving the orphanage, Richard lived with various relatives. Ultimately, his childhood and teens were spent with his grandmother and aunt in Memphis and Arkansas. Both of these ladies were Seventh-Day Adventists, and attempted to impose their religious feelings on Richard.
He rebelled, and renounced formal religion for the rest of his life.

Aside from the inherent protest nature of Wright's work, another characteristic of his style is violence. Ella Wright recalls that even as a child Richard seemed quite violent. The conditions in the South probably prompted this feeling, as the youngster's uncle was killed for having a lucrative business and Richard and the family had to flee to avoid the same end. This is just one example of his experiences.

The first author he discovered was H. L. Mencken, who was followed by Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and other social novelists. Having come to the conclusion that he could fight his battle with words, he went to Chicago in the hope of making a living by his pen one day. At this time in 1927 he was nineteen years old and was equipped with only a ninth-grade education.

While in Chicago he became a member of a Communist organization, the John Reed Club. When the club insisted that he abandon his writing for more political activities, he quit. After ten years in Chicago Wright moved to New York, and this was where his successful writing career began. Although he had already published poems and essays in radical journals, his first major success was *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). In this collection of short stories he narrated the frustrations and alienation of Black sharecroppers in the South.

*Uncle Tom's Children* was followed by *Native Son*, which was not only the first major novel by a black American but also the work that established his reputation. Other works by Wright after his initial success were: *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941); *Black Boy* (1945); "The God
That Failed" (1950); The Outsider (1953); Black Power (1954); The Color Curtain (1956); Pagan Spain (1957); White Man Listen! (1957); The Long Dream (1958); and two works published posthumously, Eight Men (1961) and Lawd Today (1963).

The work on which we will focus our attention is "The Man Who Lived Underground." This short story is taken from the collection of short stories entitled Eight Men. While the influence of Dostoevsky is quite evident, Wright's aim in his rendition of the underground theme seems an attempt to show the extremely tragic nature of the black man's underground status in society. While the protagonists of Dostoevsky and Wright inhabit a physical underground, their existentialist outlooks are different. Unlike Dostoevsky's man, Wright's protagonist sought identification with society, but was driven away; Dostoevsky's narrator desired no such societal stamp of approval.

Before we begin our acute analysis of "The Man Who Lived Underground," a discussion of its publication, its position among Wright's works, and the criticism levied on it is both necessary and illuminating. Although "The Man Who Lived Underground" is one of the stories in the 1961 Posthumous publication Eight Men, the short story was first published in Accent magazine in 1942. Also, a revised and enlarged version—the one that we are using—was published in 1944. This latter version is the one included in Eight Men.

The Wright productions on which we will mostly rely to reinforce and enhance our interpretation of the focal work are Native Son (1940) and The Outsider (1953). These two works are specially considered because,
unique among Wright's works, they are both broad in dimension and lend themselves well to a comprehensive study of Wright's varied accounts of the existentialist and underground motif. We see the closest existentialist affinity, among the three works, between the two earlier works, since *The Outsider* is an exclusive product of French existentialist influence. The eleven-year gap between the earlier works and *The Outsider* fostered the use of a broader scope on the author's part. Observe the relevant and meritorious words of the editors of *Dark Symphony*:

> *The Outsider* expressed Wright's criticism of Western society, and though the protagonist is Negro, his hostility is significantly different from that of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Whereas Bigger resents his exclusion from the middle-class of the white man, Cross Damon—the central figure of *The Outsider*—rejects completely all middle-class values in America.1

Finally, we regret that not much has been written on "The Man Who Lived Underground." Much of what we decipher will be impressions gathered from comparisons with other works by Wright. This is not to say that no critical information was found. Our sincerity is enhanced by the words of Ronald Ridenour, who did a critique of the work:

> James Baldwin, in "Alas, Poor Richard, Eight Men," from *Nobody Knows My Name*, is one of the few critics, who even comments on this collection of short stories wherein "The Man Who Lived Underground" is found. And even he does so in an astonishingly cursory and unrevealing manner. That so little has been written about *Eight Men*....is an unjustifiable neglect.2

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Quite briefly, "The Man Who Lived Underground" is a story about a black man, who was wrongly accused of killing a white woman by the name of Mrs. Peabody; in fact, the police had even forced him to sign a false confession. However, in the course of the interrogation the police left the room when the man said that he was sick. At this time the falsely accused man escaped and, upon seeing an open manhole in the streets, went underground. Having hidden underground for some time—Wright is never exact about time in the story—he surfaces, and attempts not only to clear himself of a crime he has not committed and to confess to crimes he has committed underground, but also to show the police (the world) how well he has fashioned a life for himself underground.

The police had already found the real murderer—he was an "Eyetalian." The cops burned the false confession in the black man's face, admonishing him to go free and forget the whole matter. Not satisfied with mere freedom, but also anxious to show off his ingenuity, the man took the cops to the entrance of his underground home and was there fatally shot—in essence, buried also—and forgotten by the policemen.

When we ponder the implications behind Wright's story line we learn much—some things that are quite obvious, and many things that are unique indictments against American society. Foremost on the list is Wright's obvious message that, among all the oppressed peoples in America, the chances of improvement for blacks are incomparably most hopeless and problematic. An examination of the significant features of the short story should be revealing of Wright's account of the underground theme.

After reading the entire story, one finds that no setting is given.
True, it seems an average-to-large-size city in America, but no specific name is given. Wright's message here seems to be that there is no place at least no rewarding place—for the black man in American society. Thus, Wright's protagonist goes underground to find peace and environmental affinity. In his underground cave (the sewer) he welters in the mud of sewerage, which is symbolic of the slum dwellings inhabited by many blacks in America. While Wright avoids the employment of exact time in the story for his own special purposes, we can reasonably presume that he is referring to American society at least around 1942, the year in which the story was first published. This was surely a time when many blacks were living in slums.

Two points concerning the affinity of Wright's work to Dostoevsky's can be made here. The first is that there is a sharp contrast between the underground descent of Wright's protagonist and Dostoevsky's. While Dostoevsky's man wills to go underground, Wright's protagonist is forced underground by the pressures of white society. The other point is that both men are portrayed as the small man in society. Dostoevsky's man was a minor civil clerk and Wright's man—we learn near the end—was a domestic. However, another interesting point, concerning a change in the author's focus, can be considered here. While both the protagonist in "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Cross Damon in The Outsider are existentialist men, the latter, unlike the former, was a middle-class employee. As a matter of fact, besides being a postal clerk, Cross Damon was an ex-philosophy student and had a middle-class wife.

Now that the man has descended underground, we can safely call him
the underground man. Two of his first underground impressions are those of a rat and a dead baby, both of which are symbols worthy of consideration. The rat is a symbol for the kind of existence led by many blacks in America. The underground man's attempt to kill the rat is symbolic of his attempt to rid himself of his present form of existence. Bigger Thomas, in Native Son, had the same desire when he killed the rat in his family's one-room apartment in the ghettos of Chicago. Wright points out the fact that the rat seemed to be moving aimlessly, which symbolizes the attitudes of many blacks who had experienced constant setbacks.

The dead baby floating in the sewers is a symbol of the despair prevalent in the black community. Evidently the mother thought it best to kill the child rather than to allow him to make a futile attempt at life in America. The core of Wright's message is brought out here, since the worst crime a mother can commit is to kill her own child. The fists of the child are closed tightly, and his mouth is open. This symbolizes the innocent protest of the child against a world that refuses to hear him.

The innocent protest of the baby is the same as the cry of innocence expressed by the falsely accused guard. Although the underground man had opened the safe and taken much of its contents, the guard was accused. Getting no favorable results from his confession of innocence—the same cops who had beaten the underground man were beating him—the guard committed suicide rather than prolong his agony.

Quite obviously, the sight of the baby fostered deep feelings of condemnation and hopelessness in the underground man, so much so that he
momentarily thought of leaving the underground. In his words: "He had to leave this foul place, but leaving meant facing those policemen who had wrongly accused him." This feeling of indecisiveness reminds us of the similar feelings of Dostoevsky's underground man; yet, while both men are ostracized in the world above, Dostoevsky's man admires his underground abode, while Wright's protagonist abhors his. Thus, the black underground man suffers in both places--above ground and underground. Wright is once more saying that there is no rewarding place of inhabitation for the black man in America.

Moving through the underground, the underground man passes under a black church and peers in, through a crevice, to see the service. As Wright narrates the experience:

After a long time he grew numb and dropped to the dirt.
Pain throbbed in his legs and deeper pain, induced by the sight of those black people groveling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him. This reminds us of the author's own feelings as a child when he was faced with the religious taunts of his grandmother and aunt. Wright uses this scene to express his negative feelings regarding formal religion. He gives vent to his feelings later in the story when his protagonist is thrown out of the church for his mere appalling appearance even as the choir sings a song asking God to fill them with love. They surely did not show any love for the underground man.

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2 Ibid., p. 118.
The underground man passes under an undertaker's establishment and gets a glimpse of a dead man on a table being embalmed. Though he heard sounds from the undertaker, he cannot see the undertaker. Chills run through his body; and he hears a low chuckle in the undertaker's parlor. Wright's message in this portrayal seems to be that, while no one can laugh too loudly at death, since we all come to the same end, the undertaker--probably white--could at least offer a low chuckle for not having the fear of a premature, violent, tragic end. The underground man is terrified, since he feels no such confidence or assurance.

Next the underground man stumbles into the basement of the undertaker's parlor and finds a tool box which he takes. The interesting thing about this experience is the fact that when he discovered the light switch and turned on the lights he felt sightless and defenseless. The rat felt the same way when the underground man had lit the match. This is symbolic of Wright's apparent contention that the black man, like the rat, is helpless in the light of the world above.

The underground man stumbled upon a movie theater and was amazed to see the viewers laughing at the "animated shadows of themselves." The idea the author is expressing here is that the underground man--the black man--had experienced little, if anything, in life that was meaningfully humorous. We are reminded of Jack and Bigger in Native Son, when they attended the movies. They enjoyed and admired the initial feature, "The Gay Woman," which depicted whites in financial and social splendor. However, the second movie, "Trader Horn," which portrayed nude black men and women engaged in wild african dances, was paid little attention.

After leaving the movie theater, the underground man heard footsteps,
which forced him to hide in the coal bin. The old white man employed there tended the furnace, shoveled coals from the bin and carried out the whole operation of his job without turning the light on and without showing any outward signs of detecting the presence of the protagonist. The underground man wonders why the old white man did not turn the light on. He then comes to the hasty conclusion that the man had probably worked at his job for so long that he could perform it in the dark. While this may be true, a deeper implication is detected. This scene can be symbolic of Wright's seeming contention that whites consider blacks as nothing. In this light, then, perhaps the old white man did see the black man, but did not turn on the light because he thought him nothing. After all, why turn on the light to rave over nothing. If we compare this scene to a similar one in *Native Son*, our assertion can be deemed reasonable, if not accurate.

When Britten, Mr. Dalton's own private detective, and his men were in the basement of the Dalton home trying to find the whereabouts of Mary Dalton, not only did he and his men use lighted flashlights in their search, the newspaper men also employed light for their cameras. Immediately the white girl was detected among the dead coals, and she was considered somebody. The underground man was not given this consideration.

As the underground man became more aware of his environment, he started making his underground world more convenient. Having selected a dry spot for himself, he went about the business of breaking and entering from underground to get things for his habitat. He used the tools he had found in the chest to pry doors open and to drill through walls. This in itself is symbolic, as the author's message seems to be that if
given the proper tools and allowed to function without interference, as the underground man was doing in his submerged environment, the black man could make life better for himself.

Constantly using his tools, the underground man breaks into Peer's Manufacturing Jewelers and steals a radio, a gun, watches, diamonds, and money. While in the jewelry store he pecks his name out on a typewriter before he puts the typewriter in his sack. We learn that his name is "freddaniels," as he pecks it out to be. However, the name has little significance, since he never uses it. Wright's obvious intention in not having the man use his name is to show that there are many "freddaniels" in society. Dostoevsky meant somewhat the same thing when he said:

People like the author of these notes may, and indeed must, exist in our society, if we think of the circumstances under which that society has been formed.¹

He burglarizes a grocery store, Nick's Fruits and Meats, and steals not only food, but a cleaver as well. Having amassed all these things, he decorated his abode. Using the glue he found in the tool box, he pasted the money on the walls; with the aid of the cleaver and some nails, he fashioned hooks on the wall, from which he hung the watches and rings; he had even connected his wires to some wires in the church to provide light and music for himself; as a final endeavor in his fit of happiness, he fired the stolen gun to see if he could obtain the same sensation as the men in the movies seemingly obtained. The stealing episodes are very humorous, but the serious nature of the endeavors reduces the impact

of the humor.

The intensity of the underground man's feelings subsided. He then kicked a pile of diamonds all over the ground of his cave and, in mock regret for the damage he had done, mumbled words of remorse. However, he later consoled himself with the idea:

Maybe anything's right, he mumbled. Yes, if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture.¹

This seems to be the same feeling Cross Damon had in Wright's *The Outsider*. He too took on a form of underground existence when, after being thought dead in a train accident, he fashioned a new identity. This similarity of feeling can be derived from the words of Kingsley Widmer:

Having taken on a counterfeit identity (draft card and all), he can act with moral indifference and impartially murder Herndon, Gil, and Hilton to protect his freedom.²

It seems that the underground man is at least momentarily happy with the things he has stolen, i.e., with the life he has fashioned for himself underground. However, this happiness is short-lived, since near the end of Wright's story the underground man submits to an irresistible desire to go above ground. When we consider the fact that he could get things underground that he could not get above, we somehow frown upon his later desire to emerge. If he could only be satisfied with his

¹ Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

environment, he could survive, as Dostoevsky's man did. Kingsley Widmer not only provides a reasonable, sound conjecture, for the underground man's seemingly ironic desire to emerge, he also reiterates Wright's view of the tragic nature of the black undergrounder; in his words:

Living for days in a cave, off the city sewers, the outcast collects and plays with the "serious toys" of the underground world--money, jewels, machines, clocks, a meat cleaver. But, in his dreadful freedom and anxious isolation, those things can have no meaning. Nor can the lives of that other world.¹

Having examined the underground as a physical realm, we might take a look at Wright's depiction of the psychological underground, since it shows marked resemblances to Dostoevsky's treatment. One major characteristic of the underground man is his constant dreaming. While underground he had four dreams, but each time he awoke to reality he saw the same terror and saw the same environment. His dreams, like those of Dostoevsky's man, were of "good and beautiful" things, but observe his waking response on one occasion:

He awakened with a start, leaped to his feet, and stood in the center of the black cave. It was a full minute before he moved again. He hovered between sleeping and waking, unprotected; a prey of wild fears.²

The dreams of both underground men serve them to no good purpose when the men are faced with reality.

The author makes mention of the uncertainty of time throughout the


² Wright, op. cit., p. 142.
story. As examples, observe the two following references to time:

From one box he lifted up a fistful of ticking gold watches and dangled them by their gleaming chains. He started with an idle smile, then began to wind them up; he did not attempt to set them at any given hour, for there was no time for him now.¹

and

His mind flew back over the blur of time lived in the underground blackness. He had no idea of how much time had elapsed, but the intensity of what had happened to him told him that it could not have transpired in a short space of time, yet his mind told him that time must have been brief.²

What is the meaning of this ambiguous emphasis on time? The author calls time at one point "the king of consciousness, defining the limits of living."³ When we consider Wright's definition of time here, coupled with the underground man's obvious feeling that time is running out on him, we detect that the protagonist is overly conscious of his life. Ronald Ridenour expresses somewhat the same view in his critique of the work:

Man is so finite, so bound by time, he appears as nothing. This awareness /consciousness/ of hopelessness—captivated the protagonist.⁴

This acute self-consciousness is the same feeling that Dostoevsky's

¹ Ibid., p. 139.
² Ibid., p. 150.
³ Ibid., p. 141.
⁴ Ridenour, op. cit., p. 57.
underground man nurtured. Because Wright's underground man is acutely aware of his existence, he suffers just as Dostoevsky's man suffers. Nevertheless, a line of demarcation must again be drawn. While the suffering on the one hand is wilful, it is forced on the other.

The underground man's keen self-consciousness is also the force behind his intense sensitivity. Observe Wright's description of the underground man's reaction to the black church service he saw through an underground crevice:

His first impulse was to laugh, but he checked himself. What was he doing? He was crushed with a sense of guilt. Would God strike him dead for that? They oughtn't to do that, he thought. But he could think of no reason why they should not do it. A vague conviction made him feel that those people should stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying, yet he had run away from the police, had pledged with them to believe in his innocence. He shook his head, bewildered.1

Thus, intense sensitivity is another characteristic that Wright's figure shares with Dostoevsky's underground man. Ronald Ridenour also detected the sensitivity in the personality of Wright's protagonist, and he expresses it in his words:

Wright's protagonist possesses a morbid sensibility. He is not to be seen as typical but as an extreme product of the collective, social, neurosis.2

Wright enhances his portrayal of the underground man as constantly sensitive by making him a heavy smoker. Because the underground man's sensitivity keeps his nerves on edge, he has to smoke to calm his nerves.

1 Wright, op. cit., p. 118.

2 Ridenour, op. cit., p. 56.
Throughout the story we find him smoking, and on one occasion Wright actually narrates the soothing effect of a cigarette on the underground man's nerves:

He rolled it and wet it, with spittle, then inserted one end into his mouth and lit it: he sucked smoke that bit his lungs. The nicotine reached his brain, went out along is arms to his finger tips, down his stomach, and over all the tired nerves of his body.¹

On one occasion the underground man's feeling of being trapped exactly resembles the state of inertia in which Dostoevsky's protagonist considered himself. Observe Wright's narration:

He shut off the radio, fighting an irrational compulsion to act. He walked aimlessly about the cave, touching the walls with his fingertips. Suddenly he stood still. What was the matter with him? Yes, he knew.... It was these walls; these crazy walls were filling him with a wild urge to climb out into the dark sunshine aboveground. Quickly he doused the light to banish the shouting walls, then sat again upon the tool chest. Yes, he was trapped. His muscles were flexed taut and sweat ran down his face. He knew now that he could not stay here and he could not go out.²

The mere fact that the protagonist was killed in the end--thus having his attempts to become somebody thwarted--lends credence to our assertion that Wright's underground man; the black man in America, is in a state of inertial frustration.

Having given some consideration to the underground man's physical and psychological existence underground, a discussion of his emergence should reinforce some of the points already made. First of all, the

¹ Wright, op. cit., p. 124.
² Ibid., p. 141.
underground man was warned several times not to emerge. One warning
during his emergence was his near escape from being sucked in by the
current of the sewer waters. Another is explained by the author, in his
words:

A heavy car rumbled past overhead, jarring the pave-
ment, warning him to stay in his world of dark light,
knocking the cover back into place with an imperious
clang.\(^1\)

The most interesting warning was deciphered from the words: "His
mind said no; his body said yes; and his mind could not understand his
feelings."\(^2\) In this passage we clearly see that Wright's protagonist,
unlike Dostoevsky's, succumbs to the laws of nature. Dostoevsky's man
would have followed his mind, rather than his body.

When the underground man finally emerged he was given warnings to
go back. One pedestrian told him to "go home and sleep your drunk off!"\(^3\)
Another warning after his emergence was the mere fact that he did not
know where he was going. Observe Wright's narration:

He ambled on down the sidewalk, not having the merest
notion of where he was going. Yet, sleeping within him,
was the drive to go somewhere and say something to some-
body.\(^4\)

Incidentally, we also learn that the underground man is black, as one of

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 147.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 148.
the pedestrians referred to him as "nigger."

The final warning given to the narrator was the policemen's--Lawson, Murphy, and Johnson--admonition to him to forget the whole thing and go home, but in spite of all these warnings the underground man felt the necessity of having someone recognize him for who he was. He is the existential man in search of the meaning of his existence. In Wright's words: "He had to force the reality of himself upon them /the policemen, the world/." Thus, the underground man emerges to declare his guilt. In a philosophical sense, Wright seems to be saying that the black man in America is guilty for merely being black. We again can turn to Kingsley Widner to reinforce our assertion, as he says:

From the pathetically fumbling murders and self-hatred of Bigger Thomas in Chicago in Wright's first, quasi-Marxian determinist novel, Native Son (1940) through the slyer crimes and self-disgusted flight imposed by the white South of black Fishbelly in his last work of rhetorical naturalism, The Long Dream (1958), Wright mostly played variations on the black outsider as guilty underground victim.1

Wright himself explains his message when he discussed the literal guilt of the underground man. The underground man actually watched the guard commit suicide owing to a crime which he (the underground man) committed. Why did he not confess at that moment to prevent the guard's suicide? Did he not feel any remorse for his act? The answer is that the underground man considered himself in the same position as the mother of the dead, nude baby. We gathered this from Wright's narration of the

1 Ibid., p. 153.
momentary scene:

The watchman was guilty; although he was not guilty of the crime of which he had been accused, he was guilty, had always been guilty. The only thing that worried him was that the man who had been really stealing was not being accused. But he consoled himself: they'll catch him sometime during his life.1

Aside from what Wright tells us of the protagonist's feelings in the face of the guard's ensuing suicide, a deeper implication can reasonably be deciphered. Perhaps the underground man was momentarily protecting his freedom. In this case, the protagonist's actions would be similar to those of Cross Damon in The Outsider. When faced with his friend Joe in the Chicago brothel, Cross knew he had to kill him to protect his own freedom. Joe had been a good friend to Cross for six years, and was one of the pallbearers at Cross's mock funeral, but his discovery later, upon seeing Cross, that Cross was not one of the casualties of the train wreck, rendering him a threat to Cross's future ideas of freedom, made him Cross's regretted victim. Cross killed him and threw his corpse out the window.

We cannot drop the subject of guilt here because a confusing irony in the underground man's actions warrants necessary attention. The underground man saw the futility in the efforts of the guard. Moreover, he had already been given the same message through the dead, nude baby. Furthermore, Wright narrates the underground man's feelings during his observance of the beating of the guard:

Perhaps the beating would bring to the boy's attention, for the first time in his life, the secret of his

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1 Wright, op. cit., p. 145.
existence, the guilt he could never get rid of. ¹

When we combine the protagonist's knowledge with all of the other warnings he has been given, we would think he would be the last to emerge. Yet he emerges and, not surprisingly, experiences a fate no different from that of the baby or the guard. An explanation of this irony should be interesting.

It seems that it is difficult to understand the full-dimension of Wright's undergrounder without a knowledge of Dostoevsky's portrayal. Just as Dostoevsky's protagonist worked against his own self-interest, Wright's protagonist, because of the same characteristic, emerges. The underground man takes the policemen to the entrance of his abode, only to be fatally shot by Lawson, who said: "You've got to shoot this kind. They'd wreck things."² Wright's superficial message seems to be that a black man trying to improve himself in America—a black man who does not know his place—is dangerous not only to himself, but to white society also.

When we reflect on the ending of Wright's short story, we come back to our original thesis that Wright uses Dostoevsky's rendition to point out the tragic nature of the black man in America. Like Dostoevsky's protagonist, Wright's man also comes off as anti-heroic. However, Dostoevsky's man had the chance to become a hero—through Liza—but did not want heroic status. Wright's man, by contrast, wanted to be a hero, but

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¹ Ibid., p. 144.
² Ibid., p. 160.
was not given the chance, since Lawson did not want to see the underground abode.

Wright's basic thesis is given additional enhancement if we compare it to the conclusion of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. While both Wright's protagonist and Raskolnikov go to the police to declare their guilt, Raskolnikov is given a relatively brief sentence which enables him to embark later upon a regenerative process with society's help; Wright's protagonist is given no such chance.

Before we consider another work to clarify Wright's thesis, an interesting observation about *The Outsider* can be made here. Cross Damon, after the train wreck, had the same chance at regeneration as Raskolnikov had after his sentence. Damon had completely rid himself of a staunchly religious mother, a wife from whom he was separated, and a young girl who was carrying his child. Yet, with his new freedom, he became involved in new conflicts and quandaries that burdened him more than he had been before. He discovered later that his real fight was against the world, a fight he was destined to lose.

Further comprehension of the thesis is provided by a comparison of the underground man and Bigger Thomas. The protagonist in Wright's *Native Son* was at least "survivingly" safe in his one-room apartment in the ghettos of the South Side of Chicago, which can reasonably be considered his underground. However, when he leaves and attempts to survive satisfactorily in the other world, through his association with the communist Jan Erlone and the Dalton family, he experienced a tragic end. We are not surprised, then, that Bigger was captured on the water-tower.
This structure was high above ground, a place where he was obviously not safe. Similarly, Wright's underground man came too high above ground to survive.
CHAPTER IV

RALPH ELLISON'S TREATMENT OF THE UNDERGROUND THEME

Winning the National Book Award in 1953 for his novel Invisible Man was a cherished honor for Ralph Ellison. However, that award is overshadowed by the fact that in 1965 the book was acclaimed by a Book Week poll of some 200 authors, critics, and editors as "the most distinguished single work published in the last twenty years." This should reveal that we are dealing with a book of immense proportions in attempting meaningfully to examine its contents. Nevertheless, the task has to be undertaken, because, despite its complex architectonics, Invisible Man shows a marked resemblance to Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground." In fact, Ellison himself admitted that Fyodor Dostoevsky, along with others, was an ancestor. A brief consideration of his life, and an in-depth examination of his major novel, should illuminate the extent of Ellison's ancestry.

Oklahoma had been a state for only seven years when Ellison was born in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914. Thus, it had no tradition of slavery, and although the schools were segregated, race relations were much better than they were in the Southern and Eastern slave states. Ellison's father, Lewis Alfred Ellison, was a tradesman and construction worker. However, prior to taking on these occupations the senior Ellison had spent time in China during the Spanish-American War. Though he died when young Ralph was only three years old, he was an avid reader who not only exposed his son to books, but also named him Ralph Waldo
Ellison. We might mention that this early loss of his father probably had much to do with Ellison's individuality as a man and artist. Hence, we can reasonably assert that Ellison's interest in books was at least partially influenced by his father's literary concerns.

We cannot overlook Ellison's mother, who was a somewhat militant black woman who supported the Socialist Party and outwardly defied current segregationist policies in Oklahoma. When we consider the early death of Ellison's father and the temperament of his mother, we can understand in part why Ellison is a writer of strong moral courage and conviction. It is interesting to note here that Ellison's parents were able to provide him with a relatively secure and comfortable childhood, far distant from the poverty Richard Wright experienced. A further contrast to the life of Wright can be gotten from Ellison's discussion of his childhood in *Shadow and Act* (1964):

I recognized limitations, yes; but I thought these limitations were unjust and I felt no innate sense of inferiority which would keep me from getting those things I desired out of life.... by early adolescence the idea of Renaissance man had drifted down to about six of us /students/, and we discussed mastering ourselves and everything in sight as though no such thing as racial discrimination existed.¹

A moment's reflection on Ellison's childhood and early adolescence prompts some interesting points. Although his family lived in a mostly black and segregated area, the community was not a poverty-stricken one. When we couple young Ralph's immediate community with his family's economic status, we can see how Ellison could at least avoid whites if he

desired. Thus, it was not until later in life that he saw the hardships of blacks through his observation of black life in other sections of the country. Even then, he himself was mostly the observer and not the worst victim of white oppression. We should not be surprised that in his works he never portrayed a character in worse economic shape than his childhood afforded him. Another point of interest is Ellison's satiric touch—exemplified by the Sybil scene in *Invisible Man*—in writing. Richard Wright, whose childhood was rough, was a more defiant and didactic writer who never fully developed—or at least never mastered—an effective ability to employ satire.

As a result of the excellent music program at his high school, young Ralph developed an interest in jazz and classical music. With the aim of becoming a composer of symphonic music, Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute from 1933 to 1936. In his junior year he went to New York to study sculpture. However, he lost interest in sculpture and resumed his study of music in New York. Ellison never finished his studies at Tuskegee, but received a Doctor of Philosophy in Humane Letters from the school in 1963.

While in New York he met Richard Wright, who played a part in the genesis of his literary career. Although he wrote small reviews in many of the radical magazines of the early forties, he never joined the Communist Party. This strong sense of individuality became a major characteristic of his work. His first attempt at writing was a review of Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* published in *New Challenge*, which was a magazine edited by Wright.

Shunning the label "Negro writer," Ellison has always considered
himself an artist, and, after dropping his concern for political activities in 1943, he concentrated on his writing. The idea that permeates Ellison's fiction has seemingly always been the need for white America to recognize the identity of blacks. Ellison's works up to this date include numerous short stories: "Mister Tonssan" (1941), "That I had Wings" (1939), "Slick Gonna Learn" (1939), "Afternoon" (1940), "In a Strange Country" (1944), "Flying Home" (1944), "King of the Bingo Game" (1944), "Did You Ever Dream Lucky?" (1954), "A Coupla Scalped Indians" (1956), and "An Hickman Arrives" (1956); one full-length novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), and a book of essays entitled *Shadow and Act* (1964), wherein, for the most part, he defends his art.

Ellison's masterful employment of complex structure—most thoroughly seen in *Invisible Man*, and seemingly most influenced by James Joyce—results from his literary background. Besides possessing a keen insight into his own life and culture, he has ardently studied Faulkner, Joyce, Emerson, Melville, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Twain, T. S. Eliot, and Henry James. As an example of Ellison's knowledge of two of these writers, observe his words concerning Wright's *Black Boy*:

In its use of fictional techniques, its concern with criminality (sin) and artistic sensibility, and in its author's judgement and rejection of the narrow world of his origin, it recalls Joyce's rejection of Dublin in *A Portrait of the Artist*. And as a psychological document of life under oppressive conditions, it recalls *The House of the Dead*. Dostoevsky's profound study of the humanity of Russian Criminals.¹

When we consider the obvious similarities between the renditions

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of the underground theme by our three writers, we can understand why
many critics question Ellison's contention that "he evolved his hiber-
nation symbol not from Wright, but from a study he made of the Lafargue
Psychiatric Clinic for Magazine of the Year, 1948."\(^1\) In this study
Ellison views Harlem as a "nowhere" place and explains how the clinic
made Harlem a "somewhere" place. Thus, he admired the clinic for making
invisible people into visible people. Placing Ellison's contention
aside for a moment, we might look at William Goede's narration of some
opinions regarding the novel in his words:

Wright's novella is widely proposed as a parallel to,
and a source of, Invisible Man. It is a 'more direct
source' for the novel, states Ellin Horowitz, than is Dos-
toevsky or Kafka or Negro legend; Marcus Klein adds that
it is just 'as important a source' for Invisible Man as is
"Notes From Underground," and Earl Rovit endorses Wright
as the logical source for the dominating metaphor.\(^2\)

It has to be made clear that we are not denying Ellison's conten-
tion, for when we consider the author's ever-present struggle to be
recognized as the unique individual, and the artist, we are forced to
lend some credence to his version of the evolution of his literary mas-
terpiece. One thing that cannot be disputed, though, is the autobiog-
graphical overtones in Invisible Man. Both Ellison and his narrator left
a black Southern college--probably Tuskegee Institute--in their junior
year and went to New York, only to embark upon several experiences
before they realized an appropriate life-vocation--a fitting identity.

\(^1\) William Goede, "On Lower Frequencies: The Buried Men in Wright

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 488.
Ellison himself was a writer, a jazz musician, and a photographer before he finally decided on writing as a career.

Because *Invisible Man* is such a complex novel, and because it has lent itself to so many levels and varieties of interpretation, our aim is to limit our interpretation, as much as possible, to its kinship to the underground theme. This is not to say that we will completely overlook all of the other thematic features. In fact, it will be revealed that most of the dominant features are closely related to the underground theme. Our biggest problem will be the many symbols in the novel, but our attempt, again, will be to employ only the relevant ones.

Ellison's novel is basically divided into two parts, precisely as is Dostoevsky's rendition. While there is a prologue, an epilogue, and a novel proper to make up *Invisible Man*, the Prologue and the Epilogue are one and the same, since they both describe the narrator's present condition. In fact, the narrator (the invisible man) says himself in the Prologue that "the end is in the beginning."¹ Ultimately, at the conclusion of the novel proper, he states: "The end was in the beginning."² Thus, Ellison's Prologue and Epilogue are analogous to Dostoevsky's Part I in *Notes From Underground*.

While Ellison's novel proper can be juxtaposed to Dostoevsky's Part II, in that they both narrate past experiences that show a profound relationship to the respective present conditions of their protagonists,


² Ibid., p. 494.
an important distinction has to be made. The past experiences of Ellison's protagonist were the stepping-stones to his decision to nurture his present identity. The former adventures of Dostoevsky's man are no more than an illustration of his actions as a result of his conscious exertion of his possession of the full dimension of underground characteristics. The difference here stems from the fact that both Ellison's and Wright's protagonists—as will be revealed later—were forced underground, as opposed to Dostoevsky's protagonist, who wilfully went underground. An examination of the Prologue and Epilogue—the present condition of Ellison's protagonist—should clarify some questions in our minds that will foster a more thorough comprehension of the novel proper.

We learn from the opening words of the Prologue that the narrator considers himself an invisible man. However, before we discuss his invisibility we might point out the fact that both Ellison and Dostoevsky use first-person narration; Wright employs third-person narration. When we consider the fact that autobiographical overtones are more prevalent in the works of the other two writers than in those of Wright, we might assert that this probably accounts for the greater philosophical and aesthetic complexity in the respective works of Ellison and Dostoevsky, since they should be able to analyze more effectively the intricate thought-processes and experiences of their protagonists.

The narrator's invisibility requires an explanation, since he is not invisible in the general concept. He is invisible in the sense that many people tend not to recognize him as an individual, perhaps as a stereotype, but not as a unique and significant being. As Ellison points
out in an interview with Rochelle Girson:

'By "invisible" I don't, of course, mean me. I mean the book's hero .... Invisibility has to do with the failure of most of us to regard the individual we contact as a human being.'

Examining Ellison's statement concerning invisibility, it is easy to understand why he does not perceive of himself as invisible. Because he is an accomplished writer it is hard for most people to overlook him. However, the narrator in his novel did not carry any such distinction.

In contrast to what the casual reader might think, the narrator indicates, "Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis." We might take note of the narrator's employment of the word "exactly" here. While anyone could be invisible--regardless of race, color, or creed--if he falls under the narrator's conception of invisibility, Ellison seems to be using the word "exactly" to point out the fact that in some cases--as in the case of many blacks in America--skin color can be an indicator of probable invisibility.

Jonathan Baumbach lends support to our assertion in his words:

The Negro's life in our white land and time is, as Ellison knows it, a relentless unreality, unreal in that the Negro as a group is loved, hated, persecuted, feared, and envied, while as an individual he is felt, unheard, unseen--to all intents and purposes invisible.

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2 Ellison, Invisible Man, op. cit., p. 7.

An important point concerning the narrator's invisibility is the fact that he was invisible for a long time but refused to accept it. Thus, we are introduced to him at the point in his life when he has accepted his invisibility. This conscious toleration of his invisibility did not come easily, as it cost him many taxing and heartbreaking experiences before his resignation to an invisible identity was evoked—our later discussion of the novel proper will narrate these experiences.

We learn that the narrator is now living in New York. He does not live in any of the conventional apartment buildings or plush homes. He lives underground—we will learn later that it is an abandoned coal cellar. As the narrator states it:

Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century. ¹

After telling us where he lives, the narrator immediately makes certain distinctions about his habitat and his inhabitation. Contrary to what we may think, he points out that his "hole in the ground" is a warm one. He then says:

It is incorrect to assume that because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation. ²

With some wires and sockets he has obtained from a junk man, he has placed 1,369 lights in his abode—this evidently accounts for the warmth--

¹ Ellison, Invisible Man, op. cit., p. 9.

² Ibid.
and also has one radio-phonograph, with plans of getting more. The narrator has tapped a power line leading into the building, running the wires into his underground abode. Thus, Monopolated Light and Power is giving the narrator free current, since it does not know that he has tapped the line. However, with all these conveniences, the narrator mentions that he will one day emerge, because he feels that even the invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.

What the narrator has told us about his habitat and inhabitation prompts many intriguing comparisons and assertions. The most obvious is that he inhabits an underground environment, just as the protagonists of Wright and Dostoevsky. However, the underground men of Wright and Ellison live "rent-free," as opposed to Dostoevsky's figure, who is actually paying more rent than he can afford. Nevertheless, the difference here stems from the fact that in addition to having more money, Dostoevsky's underground man was wilfully and consciously making a stronger case against utilitarianism.

The fact that the narrator has made his hole a warm one, and has provided himself with light and music, indicates that he—at least momentarily—likes his abode. In this momentary light, then, we can see a similarity among our three underground men. However, Dostoevsky's underground man continues to love his abode. Wright's submerged figure, after becoming sick of the four walls in his cave, began disliking his abode and emerged, only to meet death. Ellison's man, while never saying that he dislikes his underground, feels that he must emerge one day to live above, because—as he points out in the Epilogue—"even hibernations
When we reflect on the attitude of Ellison's narrator towards his underground, we feel the same as we did towards Wright's protagonist. With all that his underground affords him, Ellison's underground man could live happily if he stays. However, if he emerges, we envision the same end for him as Wright's underground man experienced. Marcus Klein lends some very fitting comments to our discussion here:

His /Ellison's/ narrator's coal cellar, Ellison has himself pointed out, is not a sewer, but a source of heat and light and power. The hero converts all his losses to assertion. In fact he has found his politics and his person, and he has made sense out of his history, and so in his fall there is finally an ascension—which Ellison ultimately blurs by his promise that the hero will someday rise to do good among men.2

The narrator's decision to emerge prompts the question of why he considers his abode a place of hibernation rather than a permanent residence. Part of the answer is that Ellison's undergrounder, like Wright's, possesses an unconscious inclination to work against his own self-interest. The other portion of the answer seems to be Ellison's desire to portray a character--more specifically a black protagonist--who is not doomed merely by just being born in America. Wright's portrayal was just the opposite. While we do not know what the invisible man's fate will be when he does surface, we can reasonably assert that because he thoroughly realizes and accepts his invisibility--Wright's protagonist

1  Ibid., p. 503.

realized but refused to accept his—his end might be different from that
of Wright's protagonist. Support for our assertion lies in the mere
fact that at the end of the invisible man's story he is still alive.
The difference in the two endings seems a result of the contrast between
the childhoods of the two authors. Thus, Ellison seems to be using his
book as a weapon against society, with a protagonist who is determined
not to be doomed.

Another point of interest is the various names that we can attach
to Ellison's raison d'être. He is the narrator because he is telling
the story. He is the protagonist because the story is about him and he
best exemplifies the author's views. He is the invisible man because
many people refuse to recognize him. He is the underground man because
he lives underground. Moreover, he asks to be called Jack-the-Bear be-
cause he is in a state of hibernation, and responds to the name "thinker-
tinker" because of his ingenuity with electrical equipment—Ellison him-
self was an audio-electronics hobbyist. What is Ellison's purpose in
all these labels? The answer is that the author is purposely enhancing
a later contention by his protagonist that there are infinite possibilities in life. This matter will be further considered when we discuss
Rinehart, a man for whom the invisible man is mistaken in the novel
proper.

The narrator further explains his concept of invisibility by refer-
ring to the junk man who gave him the wires as a man of vision. He does
not give a reason for the man's visibility, but it could be that the man
is white. Support for our conjecture comes from his subsequent referral
to Louis Armstrong as invisible. In the narrator's words:
I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"--all at the same time. I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible.¹

A fight between a yokel and a prizefighter is narrated. While we would think that the "swift and amazingly scientific" prizefighter would win the fight, the opposite occurs. This is just a foreshadowing of the narrator's experiences in the novel proper. He, too, will be constantly shocked by the element of surprise.

After smoking a reefer, the narrator has a dream. While part of his dream is beautiful, he becomes afraid when he snaps out of it. This reminds us of the underground men of Dostoevsky and Wright, whose dreams did them no good when they were faced with reality. We also detect another similarity among the three writers when we observe the indecisiveness of the narrator when he comes back to reality. Observe his response after the dream:

Then somehow I came out of it, ascending, ascending hastily from this underworld of sound to hear Louis Armstrong innocently asking,

What did I do
To be so black
And blue?

At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act.²

The significant features of the remainder of the Prologue and Epilogue are allusions to occurrences in the novel proper. A discussion of

¹ Ellison, Invisible Man, op. cit., p. 11.
² Ibid., p. 15.
the novel proper, with a later conclusive glance at the Prologue and Epilogue, should clarify these other features.

The novel proper not only narrates those experiences which fostered the invisible man's mature personality; it also gives us a keener insight into the narrator's psychological underground—remember, he possessed the central characteristics of Dostoevsky's conception of the underground man even before he accepted them. Also, the narrator will be called the "invisible" man, rather than the "underground" man in the ensuing examination, since it was only at the end of the novel that he literally descended underground.

When the narrator says that his story goes back about twenty years, we are reminded of Dostoevsky's underground man, who also mentioned that he had been living as an undergrounder for twenty years. He then mentions that his grandfather was the cause of his problems. Both of his grandparents were slaves, but the grandfather never accepted his inferiority—his invisibility. The others accepted their invisibility and stayed in their places. Observe the invisible man's narration:

About eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social, separate, like the fingers of the hand. And they believed it. They exulted in it. They stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up my father to do the same. But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him.1

The advice offered by the grandfather will surely be revealed as the cause of the invisible man's problems. Part of the grandfather's

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1 Ibid., p. 19.
advice ran:

I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.

In other words, the grandfather was trying to tell the invisible man—he must be black, since his grandparents were slaves—to act externally as whites expected him, but covertly to nurture a drive to be just as good as they, until he reached his desired goal. Put another way, the grandfather was admonishing his grandson not to accept invisibility.

It seems that the naive narrator did not understand the grandfather's advice; yet we will find that he was unconsciously trying to live out his grandfather's life-philosophy. Evidence of this assertion is the narrator's own statement, "I am told I take after him." Others saw that he was like his grandfather, but he did not realize it. Thus, because the grandfather's advice and the pre-underground life-philosophy of the narrator were similar, we can reasonably say that the grandfather was the cause of his troubles—his many humiliations and embarrassments.

The invisible man embarks upon several endeavors before he is finally clubbed into the cellar. The first is the battle royal. Having given a graduation speech on humility, the naive invisible man is praised by everyone and is invited to give the speech again, at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. We learn that it is a Southern town through his reference in his speech to the philosophy of Booker T.

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1 Ibid., p. 20.

2 Ibid., p. 19.
Washington concerning the Southern white man.

With high hopes of being treated with great respect, the narrator is humiliated instead. The first thing he discovers is that his speech is only a part of a big smoker. All of the men are drunk and disorderly, and before he gives the speech he is compelled to participate in a battle royal with other black boys wherein they are all blindfolded and forced to fight one another. After the battle they were tricked into scrambling for gold coins on an electrified rug. Also, they were coerced into observing the dance of a naked blonde at the smoker.

When the invisible man finally makes his speech—his mouth is bleeding simultaneously—the men pay little attention to him until he makes the mistake of using the phrase "social equality." Observe the dialogue:

"You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake? "Oh, yes, sir." I was swallowing blood. "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech."¹

A reflection on the battle royal scene reveals that it is an example of the thwarting of invisible man's expectation of recognition. We can view his mistake as an attempt to say what he desires—an attempt to be visible. Nonetheless, the attempt fails because the white men tell him that it would be best for him to know and accept his place—"invisibility." The use of the phrase was only a momentary triumph, one that was quickly obliterated. Marcus Klein offers some fitting words on our discussion here:

In this moment of his triumph, he is crowded suddenly

¹Ibid., p. 33.
back into the dark, the dark from which, by his academic prowess and his show of humility, he has thought to escape.¹

The efforts of the invisible man soon bore some fruits, as he was awarded a scholarship to the state college for Negroes which he found in the briefcase he was given. However, an important point here is that he was given this scholarship for accepting, in the eyes of the white men, his invisibility.

An examination of the invisible man's college experience is also quite revealing. From his description of the college and the varied allusions to the founder, it seems evident that the school is Tuskegee Institute, founded by Booker T. Washington. The invisible man's school career went along well until his junior year. We might say that his abstinence from doing anything that would indicate a feeling of disdain for his place, his invisibility, fostered these two years of success. Proof of his success over the two-year period is his position of chauffeur in his junior year. However, this same third year was a catastrophic one for him.

The task of showing Mr. Norton, a white trustee of the school, the countryside was given to the narrator. During the trip, Mr. Norton made several comments to the narrator, but it can be seen behind everything that Mr. Norton says that he does not recognize the narrator. In essence, the narrator is invisible in Mr. Norton's eyes. The trustee quotes Emerson in relation to the invisible man--the black man. Yet, he is really contradicting Emerson's theory of self-reliance by helping the

black school. The mere fact that the Northern trustee is smoking a cigar enhances our assertion that he does not respect the invisible man as a person--the cigar reminds us of the white men at the smoker.

The chauffeur and the trustee stumble upon the house of Jim Trueblood, who, as a result of poverty, has impregnated both his wife and daughter. The narrator did not want to stop, but Mr. Norton insisted. An important observation here is the fact that the narrator did not want to be associated with a black man like Trueblood, since Trueblood was a man resigned to invisibility. It will be detected, as we continue through all of his endeavors, that for a long time he shunned many black values and identities because of their invisible nature.

A closer view of the Trueblood incident reveals that Ellison is pointing out the bad effects of poverty on the black man. Because Mr. Norton was overly fond of his own daughter, he might have done the same thing under similar circumstances. Evidence of this is the mere fact that he gives Trueblood some money. However, Mr. Norton does not and cannot stand alone in reacting as he does to the situation, which has never been paid any particular attention until the scandal becomes common knowledge—a direct outgrowth of the misery of the Trueblood home. The irony inherent here is the fact that before his catastrophe, Trueblood received little aid of any kind from the white community; but now that he has embarrassed both his home and the community, whites in the community commence showering him with gifts of clothes, domestic supplies, and money. Trueblood himself describes the irony in his words:

"But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things
After the Trueblood experience, Mr. Norton wants a drink. The narrator hopes to get a bottle from the Golden Day before the shellshocked veterans arrive. However, Mr. Norton has a slight heart attack, and the narrator has to summon help from the establishment. While the trustee is finally revived, the scene is a bizarre one for both Mr. Norton and the narrator. Because the insane vets are having a day of leisure at the establishment, they perform acts that are appalling to Mr. Norton.

The highlight of the chaos is the confrontation among three types: Mr. Norton, the white man; the narrator, the "Uncle Tom;" and the Vet—a former physician—who represents the black man seeking change. The Vet brings out some important points. One is that he and his colleagues are really not free, because Supercargo is always watching them. This is symbolic of Ellison's apparent contention that blacks are not free to do as they desire because whites are always in control of their actions. Another point is the fact that the black Vet had also made an attempt to be successful in a profession, only to end up in an insane asylum. This should have been an indication to the narrator that his attempt would fail also, but the narrator, inevitably, does not want to accept this.

When the narrator and Mr. Norton finally return to the campus, the Uncle Tom President, Dr. Bledsoe, is angry at the narrator for taking Mr. Norton through those experiences. He is angry because what has happened could jeopardize his position as president. He expels the

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narrator to protect his position. Observe Bledsoe's words:

I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around ... Yes, I had to act the nigger! I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I am here and I mean to stay--after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it, protect it; there is nothing else to do.¹

The narrator made his biggest mistake in telling about Trueblood. His purpose in revealing Trueblood's incestuous crime was, seemingly, an attempt to strengthen his visible conception of himself. He could have easily lied to Mr. Norton, but lying would have been the act of an invisible man. Thus, his attempt to be visible was again thwarted. Mr. Bledsoe himself lends credence to our assertion when he says:

Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness--smallpox--or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God boy! You're black and living in the South--did you forget how to lie?²

Dr. Bledsoe evidently detected the narrator's attempt to be visible, for he later told the narrator in quite simple terms: "You're nobody, son. You don't exist--can't you see that?"³

Now that the narrator has been expelled, he is on his way to New York, in hopes of working to gather funds to return to Tuskegee in the fall. However, before we discuss his departure, we might take note of an observation made by William Goede which reinforces our assertion that

¹ Ellison, Invisible Man, op. cit., p. 128.
² Ibid., p. 124.
³ Ibid., p. 128.
the narrator wants to return. In Goede's words:

Tuskegee is the Invisible Man's only identity and only hope. 'Here within this quiet greeness' he says, 'I possessed the only identity I had ever known.' But, it quickly becomes a 'flower-studded wasteland.' a gift from one of the multimillionaires. Attempting to support, he destroys his "identity" by showing Mr. Norton Jim Trueblood and the Golden Day, which represent the chaos of Negro life as it is.1

The invisible man is on his way North with letters provided him by Dr. Bledsoe to help him get a job. The young narrator's naivete is brought out here, as he honestly feels that these letters will help him. On the bus trip he encounters the Vet, who was being transferred to Washington, D. C. The Vet's transfer was probably requested by Dr. Bledsoe. At the Golden Day, the Vet had masterfully exposed the true nature of Mr. Norton. We are not surprised that Dr. Bledsoe is further protecting his position. An interesting occurrence on the bus is the fact that the narrator did not want to sit in the back with the Vet. However, he could not sit up front, because the front was reserved for whites. In the end he is forced to the back, because those are the only seats available to him. This is symbolic of the fact that he will be forced underground, just as Wright's protagonist.

Another relevant symbol is the migration of the invisible man from the South to the North. Since the South is more thickly populated with blacks than whites, we can reasonably deem it the underground; the North, on the other hand, is the surface—aboveground. Thus, it is inevitable—given the major dictates of the underground theme—that the narrator

will not succeed in the North. Marcus Klein expresses somewhat the same
view, in his words:

The Great Migration—a migration from the South to
the North—is to be another promise of progress in free-
dom which is not redeemed. Its end, too, is chaos bared,
because it is just the same promise as that which was im-
plicit in the liberalism of the golden day. Now that
liberalism is even more distant from its source, and it
has been progressively emasculated.\(^1\)

After the Vet and his guard change buses, the narrator is able to
daydream without interference. Observe part of his thoughts:

I would work hard and serve my employer so well that
he would shower Dr. Bledsoe with favorable reports. And
I would save my money and return in the fall full of New
York culture. I'd be indisputably the leading campus
figure. When I met the big men to whom my letters were
addressed I would put on my best manner ... my nails
would be clean and my armpits well deoderized— you had to
watch the last item. You couldn't allow them to think
all of us smelled bad.\(^2\)

All this daydreaming on the part of the narrator will not become a re-
ality, because the letters he has are not favorable at all. He will not
experience these things of which he is dreaming. This reminds us of the
similar dreams of the underground men of Dostoevsky and Wright. Their
dreams, too, did them no good in the face of reality.

The reality of it all started when he received no response from the
first six letters he had delivered. However, before he delivered the
last letter to a Mr. Emerson, he wrote a letter saying that he had a
message from Dr. Bledsoe. As a result he received a response. Before

\(^1\) Klein, in *Five Black Writers*, op. cit., p. 96.

we discuss his interview, we might observe two occurrences on his way to Mr. Emerson's office. He saw a man throwing away a stack of blueprints, which is symbolic of the fact that one has to be able to change tactfully his plans in order to succeed. At this point the narrator does not understand this. Also, when he is offered the special menu of pork chops and grits at the drugstore counter, he feels insulted and refuses. This would have identified him with blacks--this would have been an acceptance of invisibility.

When the narrator does arrive at Mr. Emerson's office, he finds, instead, Mr. Emerson's son. The son reveals to the narrator that the letters render negative comments. When the narrator is allowed to read the letter he finds that Dr. Bledsoe has no intention of readmitting him and is asking these influential men to render the situation worse for him. When we consider the fact that the narrator had hopes of becoming Dr. Bledsoe's assistant one day, we can imagine how he felt. However, this is just another denial of his request to be visible--more specifically, a member in good standing among the members of the white world.

After the shock of Dr. Bledsoe's letter, the narrator is now forced to be self-reliant. He must now embark upon a true search for a personal identity. His dilemma is that his attempts to be visible have failed and he refuses to accept his invisibility. William Goede expresses the same view; in his words, "This old identity he shakes and yet has not assumed a new one."1

Mr. Emerson was compassionate enough to get the narrator a job at

the Liberty Paint Factory. The electric sign for the company read: 
KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS. Since the factory prided itself 
on making the best white paint in the world, such a slogan is symbolic 
of the fact that whites control and nurture their control of America. 
The narrator was accused of sabotage when he used the wrong black dope 
to make the optic white paint. This is analogous to his being the wrong 
black chauffeur for Mr. Norton.

After being fired from his initial job in the factory for his mis-
take, he is transferred to the basement to work with Lucius Brockway. 
This basement is three levels underground and houses the controls for 
the factory. Brockway, an old black man, rules the basement with an 
iron hand. He was the one who gave the company its slogan: "If it's 
Optic White, It's the Right White." Also, he refuses to be a member of 
the union, as he is very selfish and cares little for the welfare of 
others. This reminds us of Bledsoe, who is only concerned about his own 
welfare. Just as Lucius Brockway controls his basement underground, 
Bledsoe controls his Southern underground at Tuskegee.

Going over to get his lunch at another building, the invisible man 
is pulled into a union meeting. He returns to the basement a little 
late, and Brockway wishes to know why. When he tells Brockway of the 
union meeting, Brockway becomes furious. Brockway's words, "Git out of 
my basement,"\(^1\) remind us of Bledsoe's decision to get the narrator out 
of his /Bledsoe's/ school. Both men saw the narrator as a threat to 
their positions. The two men fight, and the subsequent explosion places

\(^1\) Ellison, *Invisible Man*, op. cit., p. 196.
the narrator in the hospital. Sensing an ensuing explosion, Brockway had run for cover, but sent the narrator to the valve where the explosion occurred—symbolically expelling the narrator from the factory.

If the narrator had not stayed in the union meeting so long, he could have avoided his tragedy. Why did the narrator stay in the meeting so long, after Brockway had already expressed negative feelings concerning the union? The answer is that the narrator was a victim of a few of his underground characteristics. The most evident—as will be seen throughout our discussion of the novel proper—is his unconscious inclination to work against his own self-interest. The two other characteristics Ellison displays here are the narrator's indecisiveness and his sensitivity. Evidence for our assertion can be derived from the narrator's own words:

I couldn't move; too much was happening to me. It was as though by entering the room I had automatically applied for membership—even though I had no idea that a union existed, and had come up simply to get a cold pork chop sandwich. I stood trembling, afraid that they would ask me to join but angry that so many rejected me on sight. And worst of all, I knew they were forcing me to accept things on their own terms, and I was unable to leave.1

While in the factory hospital, the narrator was used for an experiment, which is symbolic of the fact that he was invisible—not an individual or a unique human being. At least, the hospital officials did not respect him as such.

When the narrator leaves the hospital, he is on his way to Men's House, but faints during the interval. He is helped and taken in by a

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1 Ibid., p. 194.
black woman, Mary Rambo. Mary is surely the classic mother figure, and nurses the narrator back to health.

After regaining his strength the narrator goes back to Men's House, but when he enters the lobby he sees a man who looks like Bledsoe. Before he caught his mistake, he had struck a black preacher on the head with a spittoon. While the narrator did make a mistake, this is symbolic of the fact that he has turned against his former way of life. Fleeing from the scene, the narrator later comes back and persuades the porter to get his things for him. He then goes back to Mary Rambo.

The narrator stays with Mary Rambo until the winter, and on an occasion takes a walk. Encountering a man selling some yams, he buys some and eats them with no reservations. This is quite a contrast to his reluctance to eat the pork chops earlier. This is surely an indication that the narrator is coming closer to accepting his invisibility. Observe his words:

This is all very wild and childish, I thought, but to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am! I wolfed down the yam and ran back to the old man and handed him twenty cents, 'Give me two more,' I said.\(^1\)

A few points regarding the narrator's change in attitude are necessary here. While he has now accepted his blackness, he considers himself a visible black man. What he fails to realize is that his hopes of achieving at least something close to visibility were better when he was an Uncle Tom than they are now. Thus, since he was not able to achieve visibility by denying his blackness, he now plans to make an attempt

\(^{1}\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 231.}\)
through embracing his blackness.

The narrator's next experience is the Brotherhood. After making a moving speech over the eviction of an old black couple, he is approached by Brother Jack, the white man in charge of the communist organization. The narrator, having matured as a result of his taxing experiences, refuses to join at first. The soundness of his refusal is enhanced by Brother Jack's explanation that the Brotherhood places no stress on individuality—which is the same as personal visibility. An examination of the narrator's later decision to join is illuminating.

Feeling guilt over the money he owes Mary Rambo, and not having much money of his own, he changes his mind and joins the Brotherhood. Even though he held reservations about the philosophy of the Brotherhood, he was guided by the force of necessity. We are here reminded of Dostoevsky's underground man, who joined the civil service mainly to have something to eat. Also, Theodore Driesser's *Sister Carrie* lengthily discusses the same force, as his female protagonist was, by the same pressure, coerced into becoming a mistress. Here we might observe the cogent observation of Marcus Klein:

> There is seeming opportunity in the Brotherhood, of course, because it seems brotherly, because it is active, because it seems to make the Negroes' cause its own. Beyond that, it imposes on the hero a version of his racial history that unites him with the majority, thereby eliminating the war that he has borne in his secret consciousness. ¹

Before we discuss the narrator's final major experience prior to

¹ Klein, in *Five Black Writers*, op. cit., p. 97.
his descent, an observation regarding the briefcase he received as a graduation gift is necessary here. All through his endeavors the invisible man has clutched his briefcase, symbolic of the fact that for him it represented visibility—in other words, it made him feel that he was somebody. He will use the same briefcase in his new job with the Brotherhood. However, he will discover in the end that this briefcase is a false symbol for him. Rather than bring him success, it will bring deception. We have seen one example of this already, as the letters he carried in the briefcase deceived him.

When the narrator joined the Brotherhood, he was immediately given three hundred dollars, a new apartment, and a new name. Thus, upon leaving Mary Rambo he gives her one hundred dollars as a gift for her kindness. When he arrives at his new apartment, he sets his briefcase on the table, feeling now more than ever that he is somebody, even after accepting his blackness.

The night after he arrived at his new apartment, the narrator made his first speech to the Harlem audience. However, Brother Jack and the other members of the Brotherhood objected to the speech because the narrator catered to his emotions and was not sufficiently rational and scientific. Since the Brotherhood is an organization which claims to be interested in the welfare of the masses rather than the individual, the invisible man was sent to Brother Hambro, the organization's theoretician, for training. The training lasted for four months, during which the narrator was taught the ideology and discipline of the organization.

When the four months ended, the invisible man was put in charge of the Harlem District and was given an office. He worked hard at his job,
and was influential in organizing the people for action. The narrator thinks that he has freedom of action under the discipline of the organization, but he is mistaken. When we reflect on what the Vet said about the veterans not being free because of the presence of Supercargo, this should have been an indication that he was not free.

The success and respect that the narrator was getting drew reactions from many. Tod Clifton, a young black member of the Brotherhood, found no fault in the narrator and was a close friend and dedicated worker. Brother Tarp, the old black janitor, had great respect for the narrator and gave him a chain link that he had filed to escape from jail. Brother Wrestrum, another black member of the Brotherhood, envied the narrator because he thought him too individualistic. Ras the Exhorter, a militant black in Harlem, disliked the narrator because he blamed the narrator for being used by the organization. The most alarming reaction came in the form of an anonymous letter the narrator found on his desk. Part of the letter ran:

You are from the South and you know that this is a white man's world. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. Be smart ...

Accusing the narrator of being individualistic, Brother Wrestrum was influential in having the narrator transferred to another section of New York to work on the woman's problem. However, the narrator was later abruptly sent back to Harlem because Tod Clifton had disappeared and Ras the Exhorter was becoming powerful in Harlem; indeed, the committee

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claimed that Ras the Exhorter was causing the Brotherhood to lose members.

When the narrator got back to Harlem, he discovered that the actual reason for the loss in membership was a shift in the emphasis of the organization. Observe his words:

As for the loss of membership and influence, it was a result of a new program which had called for the shelving of our old techniques of agitation. There had been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt that for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance.

In addition to this shock, the narrator was not called to the meeting that day. He went to headquarters anyway, and discovered that the meeting was already in session and was not to be disrupted. He was angry when he left, feeling that they should not have transferred him in the first place. Thus, it is evident that he feels important, visible, because they had to call upon him to recapture the former status of the Brotherhood in Harlem. However, we will see later that this is a false notion.

In going downtown to shop for a pair of shoes, the narrator encounters Tod Clifton selling paper Sambo dolls. The narrator does not know what to make of the situation. Why Tod left the Brotherhood and why he was selling the dolls were a mystery to him. However, the police came, and in Tod's struggle with the cops he was fatally shot. After the death of Clifton, the narrator begins to realize that in his attempts to be visible, he was being ill-used. Observe the narrator's words:

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1 Ibid., p. 371.
And although I knew no one man could do much about it, I felt responsible. All our work had been very little, no great change had been made. And it was all my fault. I'd been so fascinated by the motion that I'd forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth. I'd been asleep, dreaming.\(^1\)

Failing in his attempts to contact anybody from headquarters, the narrator took it upon himself to arrange and carry out a moving and touching funeral for Tod. In his eulogy, he praises Tod as an individual. After the funeral, the narrator was verbally chastised by Brother Jack for carrying out the funeral on his personal responsibility—in essence, on his unfounded status of invisibility. The narrator becomes confused and falls into a state of indecisiveness. He wants to leave the Brotherhood because he cannot cope with its discipline; yet if he leaves the Brotherhood his life, to him, will be meaningless.

The narrator was told to see Brother Hambro, and on his way he stumbles into a gathering headed by Ras the Exhorter. Ras was rallying the people to take action on Tod Clifton's death. The narrator is called upon to defend the Brotherhood's inactivity. His words tend not to have their former effect, and while he is leaving he is almost attacked by some of Ras' men. An important observation here is Ras' exclamation, "It is time Ras the Exhorter become Ras the Destroyer."\(^2\) Ras had become quite disenchanted with the Brotherhood and wanted to run its members out of Harlem. This is really a foreshadowing of the ensuing riot.

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 384.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 419.
During his futile attempt to call down a cab, the invisible man saw some men wearing some dark glasses. Fascinated by the sight, he bought a pair, and was mistaken for a man named Rinehart. Discovering through the mistake that Rinehart also wore a hat, he bought a hat, too. Through his disguise as Rinehart, not only did he go undetected, he also discovered the many roles that the man played. Rinehart was a lover, a pimp, a numbers man, and a preacher. Through his disguise the narrator could see the many possibilities in life. Also, he could see the little that the Brotherhood had done for Harlem.

When the narrator finally gets to Brother Hambro’s place, he is told that the Harlem District has to be sacrificed for the higher aims of the party. Ras and his followers were preparing to fight against the members of the Harlem District, and to riot in protest over Tod’s death. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood had decided not to aid the Harlem District. The narrator cannot believe what he has heard, and truly sees now that he has been used.

Realizing now that the real objectives of the party have never been given to him—because he has been invisible to the Brotherhood—he is anxious to discover the real aims. He wonders how Rinehart would handle a situation of this nature, and finally decides to use a woman in the Brotherhood to get information. At a party held for Brother Jack, the narrator is able to talk to Sybil, the wife of one of the higher officials in the Brotherhood. The narrator takes her home and arranges a meeting at his apartment the next evening.

Sybil does come to his apartment, but his attempt to use her fails.
In the course of the evening they spend together, Sybil is constantly associated with red, the symbol of passion. In the bedroom there is a vase of American beauty roses; Sybil's cheeks and bosom are "bright red," Sybil refers to a girlfriend as having a strawberry complexion; Sybil has red, oily nails; and her dress is flamelike in appearance. She is a woman of such intense passion that she makes the narrator "feel a tender, protective passion." Because of her condition, we can understand not only why she lacks interest in the party's ideology; we can reasonably presume, at the very least, that the party has not exposed her to its more confidential ideas and schemes. Thus, even though he tries, the narrator learns nothing about the party from her.

The Sybil scene is a very important one for our interpretation, and further scrutiny of it is forced upon us. Because Sybil views the narrator solely as the black man of sexual prowess and not as an individual, he is to her invisible. The narrator realizes this, and it hurts him deeply for two reasons. The first is that this is the first time that a woman--at least a white woman, and one who, he had always thought, could never pose a threat to his attempts at visibility--has exposed the futility of his attempts at visibility. The second is that, having achieved a higher level of maturity through his experiences, he thought it easy to wreak revenge on the Brotherhood by using Sybil; instead, his invisibility is only being further exploited--he is being used by her. Thus, we are not surprised that it is at this point in his life that he finally, since Sybil was the last straw of hope, accepts his invisibility. Observe his acceptant words:

I looked at her out of a deep emptiness and refilled
her glass and mine. What had I done to her, allowed her to do? Had all of it filtered down to me? My action... my--the painful word formed as disconnectedly as her wobbly smile--my responsibility? All of it? I'm invisible.1

The kinship of Sybil's actions to those of the Sybil of the classics enhances our discussion here. The ancient Sybil led Aeneas to and through the underworld. Ellison's Sybil is with the invisible man just before he goes underground. Why does she not go underground with him? The answer is, in Ellison's rendering, that because Sybil is visible, she could not survive in the underground, the land of the invisible.

A likeness to the Liza scene—at the underground man's home—in Dostoevsky's "Notes From Underground" is detected in the Sybil encounter. Both Liza and Sybil sought intimate and lengthy companionship with an underground man, and in both cases the request was refused. However, the difference is that, while Dostoevsky's undergrounder refused because he did not want to be defined as visible, or, in essence, as anything, Ellison's protagonist refused because he momentarily shunned being defined as invisible.

Examining the complex situation in which he finds himself, the narrator wonders what Rinehart would do. Being a man of many faces, Rinehart would surely have acted in some concrete manner to avenge the hurt levied on him. The invisible man does nothing, since rather than resort to violence or engage intimately with her he simply sends her home. The invisible man's actions only bring out his introspective nature, a basic characteristic of the underground man. He weighs the pros and cons of

1Ibid., pp.454-455.
the situation so carefully, just as Dostoevsky's narrator would do, that he gets lost in the mental debate and winds up doing nothing. Observe the mental debate:

There was a pristine incorruptibility about her face now that upset me all the more, for she was neither kidding nor trying to insult me; and I could not tell if it were horror speaking to me out of innocence, or innocence emerging unscathed from the obscene scheme of the evening. I only knew that the whole affair was a mistake. She had no information and I decided to get her out of the apartment before I had to deal definitely with either the horror or the innocence, while I could still deal with it as a joke. What would Rinehart do about this. I thought, and knowing, determined not to let her provoke me to violence.  

Ellison's portrayal here is reinforced by the fact that in both attempts at revenge the invisible man makes a mistake. Not only did the narrator choose the wrong man in seeking revenge on Bledsoe; he chooses the wrong woman in seeking revenge on the Brotherhood. Thus, he was humiliated in mistaking the man for Bledsoe; humiliated in trying to use Sybil; and agonizedly humiliated in the battle royal. This reminds us of the same humiliation Dostoevsky's protagonist experienced with Zverkov and his friends. However, the humiliation was less painful for Dostoevsky's protagonist, because his was preconceived; Ellison's narrator suffers because he has not seen the humiliating blows coming.

A word concerning Ellison's artistry is most intriguing at this point. While the Trueblood scene, the Golden Day scene, and the Sybil scene all spell doom for the narrator and are tragic, Ellison uses different literary techniques to portray them. The Trueblood scene comes

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1 Ibid., p. 448.
off as appallingly pathetic; the Golden Day portrayal is phantasmagorical; and the Sybil encounter is quite comic. However, the beautiful irony is that the most comic is the most tragic for the narrator.

The narrator sends Sybil home in a taxi, and is later ordered to go uptown to see what he can do about the riot. The scene is utter chaos, as stores are being looted and the police and the people are firing weapons at one another. This confusion here is similar to that of the battle royal, wherein blacks were fighting among themselves to the satisfaction of whites. The narrator, because of his blind attempt at visibility, was manipulated by Brother Jack and the Brotherhood, so that after the confusion the organization would have new food for propaganda. Ras, who now calls himself "Ras the Destroyer," is acting just as the Brotherhood has manipulated him to act. He is fighting against his own race. On horseback and dressed in tigerskin, Ras thinks himself the picture of African regality, while unaware that he is doing his people a great disservice.

Clutching his briefcase tightly, the narrator is in the midst of the chaos. He realizes without a doubt now that he has been used, as he vainly looks around for Brother Jack or another high official of the Brotherhood and finds none of them. His inquiry reveals that the people are upset over Tod's death and the negative response given by the Brotherhood. The invisible man realizes now that he has betrayed his own people and that Ras' men are justifiably out to get him. The invisible man narrates this last deception--the most crucial consequence of his attempts at visibility--in his words:
I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death.1

Confronted by Ras and his men, the invisible man grabs the spear that Ras had ineffectually thrown at him. Holding the men off with the spear, he confesses his guilt and tries to dissuade the people from continuing the riot with his exhortation:

It's simple, you've known it a long time. It goes 'Use a nigger to catch a nigger.' Well, they used me to catch you and now they are using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. Don't you see it? Isn't it clear ...?2

The confession of guilt of Ellison's underground figure is the same as that of Wright's undergrounder, but in both cases the confession of guilt only serves to drive them back underground. The confession only further shows them that an attempt to live above ground is futile. The only difference here is that while Ellison's undergrounder was allowed several attempts and was lucky enough to live as a result of them, Wright's underground man was given only one attempt, and that attempt proved fatal.

Getting no results from his confession, the invisible man throws the spear, and it goes through Ras' cheeks. The men chase him—he still

1 Ibid., p. 479.
2 Ibid., p. 483.
has his briefcase—but he gets away. While running he thinks of Mary Rambo, who is the only true and genuine person he can remember. Later, he encounters two white men who are anxious to know the contents of his briefcase. Feeling ashamed of the contents, which represent his humiliation by whites, he refuses and flees. In his escape attempt he falls in an open manhole, the same channel to the underground that Wright's undergronder employed.

Evidence of the fact that the men were white is the narrator's response of "You, All of you," when the men shout down the hole to learn what is in the briefcase. The two white men then place the lid over the manhole, just as Lawson, Murphy, and Johnson cover the manhole after forcing Wright's protagonist underground.

Needing light to see, the narrator burns the contents of the briefcase, symbolic of his burning his past, his life above ground. In the course of his burning, he discovered that Brother Jack had written the anonymous letter to him. Discarding the idea of going back to Mary or to any part of his former life, he decides to take up residence underground, where he will be safe. Hence, at the end of his story we find him just where we met him in the Prologue—Underground.

The invisible man never came to a complete understanding of his grandfather's advice, though our analysis of his life reveals that, for the most part, he followed it. His big mistake, though, was agreeing rather than pretending to agree. Can we call him the hero of his story? When we consider the people he victimized through his mistakes, we are forced to levy anti-heroic status on him. In fact, he is the

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1Ibid., p. 489.
existentialist anti-hero—another basic characteristic of our three writers' conception of the underground man—like the protagonists of Dostoevsky and Wright. While it can really go without saying that Ellison's invisible man suffers and represents "little man" status in society, we make the point to be accurate in ending our analysis of the novel proper.

A final glance at the Prologue and Epilogue will end our discussion of Ellison's rendition. Ellison's underground man stumbles into Mr. Norton one day in the subway. However, we are not surprised that Mr. Norton does not recognize him. Now consciously living underground both physically and psychologically, the invisible man is not surprised, either. This is an indication that Ellison's underground man will probably not emerge, as he fully understands the futility of life above for him. While he tries to give the impression that he will emerge someday, at the end of the novel he is still underground. He says in the Epilogue: "My world has become one of infinite possibilities."¹ This suggests to me that he is now in a state of inertia—Dostoeysky's man felt the same way—and cannot become anything other than what he is, an invisible man (an undergrounder). He also states:

There is still a conflict within me: With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, 'Open the window and let the foul air out,' While the other says, 'It was green corn before the harvest.'²

This conflict, indecisiveness, is the extra lock on the manhole lid.

¹ Ibid., p. 498.

² Ibid., p. 502.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A unique ability effectively to manipulate words is very important in one's attempt to express his feelings. We say "unique ability" because experience has revealed that the method used by one writer does not always serve the purpose of another writer, even if the basic theme is the same. Our conjecture was prompted by the fact that our three writers discussed the same theme but employed different literary genres. Dostoevsky resorted to the novella, Wright utilized the short story, and Ellison employed novel form.

Now that we have thoroughly discussed the respective renditions on the underground theme, we might entertain our first conclusive question. Does the underground man in Russian society face the same problems as the underground man in American society? The basic problem of both the Russian undergrounder and his American archetype is the same, in that both figures are ostracized in their attempt to exert their individuality. However, their other problems are different, even though the two figures share many personal characteristics. This difference stems from the contrast in their existentialist outlook. While Dostoevsky's protagonist is pushed aside for not desiring to follow the whims and ways of society, the American undergrounder is alienated for attempting to embrace the dictates of the ruling society. Thus, while both figures suffer from society's ostracism, the suffering is a problem for the American undergrounder, because he does not want to suffer; on the other hand, it
is a pleasure—not a problem—for the Russian undergrounder, because he consciously wills and enjoys it.

Our next terminating question is no less intriguing. Are the underground men in the works of Wright and Ellison given the same psychological dimensions as those Dostoevsky achieves for his underground figure? The answer is "No," because the latter two writers borrowed only those characteristics from the pioneer that would serve their purposes. Thus, while Dostoevsky's undergrounder makes a strong case against the dictates of reason and the laws of nature, the underground men of Wright and Ellison welcome both in their attempt to find meaning in their existence.

The final question in obligation to our conclusion should give us ample food for thought. Are there any differences between the problems faced by the underground man of the nineteenth century and the problems confronted by the underground man of the twentieth century? Since the twentieth century has been the recipient of an apparently exhaustive amount of advances in science and technology, it appears difficult to stunt the individuality of present-day man with unfounded arguments. While the arguments are not nearly as unfounded as they once were, sufficient methods are still being used to deny the individuality of many. There are many people in exile today because of their political and social views—actually, because their individuality was not accepted by society. If man were still not suffering, ostracized, and in many instances denied existence, then Wright and Ellison—twentieth-century writers—would not have employed Dostoevsky's basis for their respective renditions of the underground theme.
An interesting point concerning Ellison's underground figure can be made here. On the very first page of the initial chapter, the narrator states:

And yet I am no freak of nature, nor of history. I was in the cards, other things having been equal (or unequal) eighty-five years ago.

Ellison seems to be saying here that his underground man is not atypical because the problems faced by the black man in the Twentieth century are the same as those of the black man eighty-five years ago—allowing for the actual genesis of his novel in 1948. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was distorted and the only difference between the black man's problems of the nineteenth century and those of the twentieth century is the disguise of present-day white oppression. Evidence of this is the narrator's own societal position.

Our analysis of the underground theme, as portrayed by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, has been an honest one. It is our enthusiastic hope that greater clarity has been provided for a theme that has not been widely discussed.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


**Articles**


