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Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky · *1864* · *Constance Garnett*

A retired official speaks from a corner in Petersburg: he is sick, spiteful, and will not be made into a piano-key. Part I is a rant against the crystal arithmetic of the useful; Part II remembers a supper, a slight, and a girl named Liza. This is Constance Garnett's English.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If twice two makes four is a law, what is left of a soul that would rather be spiteful than useful—and can such a voice love anyone but itself?

"I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man."

Part I, the opening

The underground man will not be saved by comfort, statistics, or a palace of reason. He claims the right to desire what is not to his advantage, and then, in the memoir of the wet snow, he uses that freedom to insult friends and to wound Liza when she offers pity. Garnett's English keeps the spite close to the skin. The book is a confession that does not repent. It is the door into Dostoevsky's later novels, and it is already a warning: a freedom without love becomes another kind of prison.

KEY CHARACTERS

the underground man
The nameless narrator, a retired official whose confession is also an attack.

Liza
The young woman who offers him pity and is punished for it.

the companions of the supper
Former schoolfellows, the social world he hates and cannot do without.

A SPITEFUL MAN

> *"I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man."*
>
> Part I, opening

> *"it is a case of twice two makes four!"*
>
> Part I

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Sick Man

PART I, OPENING CHAPTERS

He introduces himself as sick, spiteful, unattractive, and unwilling to see a doctor. The voice is already a performance of isolation.

- The four-dot ellipsis after 'sick man' is Garnett's punctuation in this text: "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man."
- He boasts of being unattractive as if it were a choice.
- The 'underground' is a room and a habit of mind.

> *"I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man."*
>
> Part I, chapter I

02

Twice Two

PART I, THE ARGUMENT

He attacks the idea that reason and advantage will eventually satisfy man. Twice two makes four is a law; he wants the freedom to refuse it.

- 'Twice two makes four' is this text's wording of the mathematical slogan.
- The useful Crystal Palace (in other English versions) is here an argument about laws of nature more than a named building in every paragraph.
- The rant is funny and also a serious refusal of a reduced human being.

> *"it is a case of twice two makes four!"*
>
> Part I, the mathematics of advantage

03

The Wet Snow

PART II, THE MEMOIR BEGINS

Years earlier, a young man of the same spirit goes to a farewell supper, is slighted, and stays to take a kind of revenge.

- The officers and the restaurant are a social test he cannot pass or leave.
- His humiliation is self-chosen as well as inflicted.
- The memoir will not redeem the philosophy; it will show it at work.

04

Liza

PART II, MIDDLE

He follows the supper with a visit to a girl, Liza, and preaches to her about a different life. For a moment both of them almost believe him.

- The sermon is not simply a lie; it is a truth he cannot live.
- Liza's feeling is the first real pressure on his isolation.
- He is already preparing to punish her for having heard him.

05

A Wounded Pity

PART II, THE CLOSE

Liza comes to him in his room. He cannot bear to be pitied, rages, and drives her out. The notes break off still underground.

- The cruelty is the point, not an accident of plot.
- He knows what he has done and will not unsay it.
- The book leaves the reader with a voice, not a conversion.

Freedom and Spite | Reason's Limit | Isolation | Pity Refused | Confession without Repentance

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is Constance Garnett's English of Project Gutenberg #600, Notes from the Underground, in two parts: "Underground" and "À Propos of the Wet Snow." Quote Garnett, not a later English version.
2. The opening is exact, including the four dots: "I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." Also: "it is a case of twice two makes four!"
3. Do not quote from the Garnett volume White Nights and Other Stories (the site's white-nights file), which also contains this novella plus other tales. This map uses the standalone #600 text and the matching hosted EPUB.
4. The book includes a visit to a brothel and a cruel scene with Liza. It is for older students. Teach the moral wound, not the setting as color.

Quotations are verbatim from the Constance Garnett, Project Gutenberg #600, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/notes-from-underground/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.