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A Mere Exposure: Life, Freedom, and Morality in Lev Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*

Nineteenth-century Russia was home to an important literary movement known as the “Golden Age of the Novel.” Two significant authors emerged during this time: Fyodor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy. Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and Lev Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* explore the lives of characters that go against societal norms. In *Notes from Underground*, the Underground Man forms a relationship with a prostitute, Liza, who alters his experience of life. Stemming from his conversations with her, the Underground Man begins to question morality in his search for a deeper meaning to life. In *The Cossacks*, a young Muscovite, Olenin, travels to the Caucasus where he meets an old Cossack, Uncle Yeroshka. Olenin is impacted by the freedom of the Cossack’s lifestyle and begins to consider it far superior to the life he knew in Moscow. Themes of freedom and morality are explored in *Notes from Underground* and *The Cossacks* through the relationships between the central characters.

In *Notes from Underground*, the concept of free will is addressed by the novella’s central character, the Underground Man, and his relationship with Liza. In the beginning of the story, the Underground Man works in the civil service and leads a menial lifestyle typical of his time. However, once he departs from society and inhabits a reclusive underground apartment, he begins to cultivate unconventional modes of thought. The main character’s decision to withdraw from society stems from his vision of himself as an independent, non-conforming person. “What man wants is simply independent choice whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead” (Dostoevsky 1994, 22). The Underground Man is on a quest for freedom, a value he
considers one of man’s innate desires. As the Underground Man recollects scenes from his previous life “above ground,” the reader discovers that his battle for freedom of will has always been a source of tension. This is evidenced by his attraction to Liza. The Underground Man perceived her as lacking personal freedom and attempted to exert control over her. He lectures her authoritatively — “Only think what you are giving up here? What is it you are making a slave of? It is your soul, together with your body; you are selling your soul which you have no right to dispose of!” (Dostoevsky 1994, 78). The Underground Man asserts that man’s inborn desire is for freedom but he is attracted to power because he lacks a full understanding of what freedom is. For instance, he is financially indebted to other men like Simonov, a former colleague. He wants to eradicate his debt, before the duel with Simonov, but in order to do so he must borrow money from someone else. “First of all I had at once to repay what I had borrowed the day before from Simonov. I resolved on a desperate measure: to borrow fifteen rubles straight off from Anton Antonovich” (Dostoevsky 1994, 84). Financial indebtedness is one factor limiting the Underground Man’s concept of freedom.

In *Notes From Underground*, the interactions between Liza and the Underground Man raise questions concerning morality and the meaning of life. During their first night together, their conversations cause the Underground Man to ponder life more deeply. He contemplates marriage, love, and even children for the first time. “‘People say it’s a trial to have children. Who says that? It is heavenly happiness! Are you fond of children Liza? I’m awfully fond of them’” (Dostoevsky 1994, 76). Statements like this show that the Underground Man feels vulnerable with Liza despite his authoritative façade. Being around her has stirred his conscience, and he begins to philosophize about life. Though initially he believed that he was in control of the relationship, as the story progresses the Underground Man discovers that Liza is the one with the
power. “The thought, too, came into my overwrought brain that our parts were completely changed, that she was now the heroine, while I was just a crushed and humiliated creature as she had been before me that night—four nights before” (Dostoevsky 1994, 97). The Underground Man comes to terms with his subordinate position as he is possessed by her. “If it would have not been for Liza, none of this would have happened” (Dostoevsky 1994, 91). The Underground Man allows Liza to become a significant voice in his life. Liza plays the role of a moral guide as she exposes his faults and compels him to examine his existence.

Similar to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy uses the relationship between Olenin and Yeroshka to address issues of morality and freedom. In The Cossacks “Olenin [i]s a young man who had never graduated, never served anywhere (apart from an obscure position in some office), squandered half his fortune, and reached the age of twenty-four without having chosen any career or ever having done anything much at all” (Tolstoy 2006, 8). Olenin led an unnatural life in Moscow without moral fulfillment or challenges. As a remedy, the young Muscovite chooses to reject his lifestyle and embarks on a journey to the Caucasus to seek a new philosophy of life. In “Gender, Genre, and the Discourse of Imperialism in Tolstoy’s The Cossacks,” Anthony Anemone states that “...when Tolstoy wants to show the negative effects of Olenin’s upbringing in Moscow society, the test clearly reveals that his problems result not from...the artificial and unnatural conventions of social behavior, but rather from the total absence of moral restrictions” (Anemone 1993, 58). During his journey, Olenin meets an old Cossack, Uncle Yeroshka, who embodies the sense of freedom Olenin seeks. Yeroshka is a hunter, warrior, and philosopher who has gained respect among his people. The emphasis on Yeroshka’s moral weight challenges Olenin’s lack of morality. The two men form an unlikely friendship and Uncle Yeroshka influences Olenin’s moral sensibilities. When Olenin is leaving the Caucasus he is “in agreement
[with Yeroshka] that everything in the world in which he had lived, and to which he was now returning, was fake” (Tolstoy 2006, 179). Yeroshka’s real, more “natural” lifestyle is valued above the one Olenin once led. Tolstoy stresses the lack of morality in Olenin’s life by giving Yeroshka the moral weight in the story.

Tolstoy stresses the value of life in The Cossacks in his depiction of the trials in Olenin and Yeroshka’s lives. When the young Cossack Lukashka kills a Chechen, Olenin asks Uncle Yeroshka whether he has ever killed a person. Yeroshka shouts, “Damn it!...What sort of question is that? Don’t talk about it. It’s a heavy thing to, oh, a heavy thing to destroy a human soul!” (Tolstoy, 71). Yeroshka values the preciousness of human life, and consequently does not view death as a trivial matter even though the dead Chechen was his enemy. Yeroshka speaks against violence and promotes the longevity of life. Olenin becomes deeply inspired by the old man’s strong resolve. “Like them, like Uncle Yeroshka, I shall live and die. And what he says is true…” (Tolstoy 2006, 93). Olenin discovers an alternative belief system through his contact with Yeroshka. Anemone argues on this point that “…almost all the critics agree…that simplicity, spontaneity, harmony, and the absence of self-consciousness and of social hierarchy constitute the essence of the Cossacks, and represent a way of life superior in most respects to that of the civilized, and therefore unnatural, Russians” (Anemone 1993, 50). Yeroshka’s life voices freedom in comparison to Olenin’s. The Cossack was once a fierce warrior, but in his old age embraces a sharper and more insightful sense of what it means to be alive. Before meeting the old man and drawing inspiration from his beliefs system, Olenin’s life was meaningless and unnatural. Tolstoy uses the relationship between Yeroshka and Olenin to highlight certain fundamental attributes of the human character.
In both *Notes from Underground* and *The Cossacks*, the issues of life, freedom and morality are examined through character relations. Character pairs exist in each novel – Liza and the Underground Man and Olenin and Yeroshka. These pairs exhibit differing relationships, although they explore a similar issue of the nature of morality and freedom. Liza and Yeroshka are socially inferior yet morally superior to their counterparts. Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy seem to create socially-inferior characters to act as moral compasses in their novels. Olenin and the Underground Man’s relationships suggest a fresh lifestyle for both of them. In both *Notes from Underground* and *The Cossacks*, the seemingly weaker characters possess a stronger moral sense and a greater degree of freedom.

**Works Cited**

