Superiority Versus Equality In Notes From Underground

In Notes from Underground, the Underground Man argues that people like to be superior; There cannot be equality. I agree with the Underground man because humans want and believe they must be superior to prove a point. Notes from Underground is a psychological novel, told in a-chronological by the Underground Man. Fyodor Dostoevsky authored this complex novel about the mind. Dostoevsky condemns the mind over the heart through the Underground Man's tale. Dostoevsky had a somber life which translates to the aspects the novel and the Underground Man. It is speculated that Dostoevsky's father was murdered by his own serfs. Adding to Dostoevsky gloomy past he was part of a radical group that went against the Czar in Russia, the result of his rebellion gained him ten years exile in Siberia (Handler). Dostoevsky was also anti-enlightenment, twisting the ideas of Isaac Newton, John Locke, and Rousseau. These Enlightenment thinkers each believed in natural law and will of the people, while Dostoevsky believed somewhat in these ideals, he also incorporated his own moral beliefs that man should have free will and should not be fully controlled by reason (Dostoevsky VIII, XI).

People like to be superior, therefore there cannot be equality is an argument that the Underground Man makes. I believe the argument the Underground Man makes corresponds with three elements present within the novel. The first element in the novel asks if humanity is fundamentally good. Aspects of this theme deal with Nature vs Nurture or if people have selfish nature. I believe people have selfish natures because they learn as they grow/develop. A selfish nature leads to the feeling of superiority or using superiority upon others. It is either we take or be taken from, so sometimes we must be selfish to survive. This theme is hugely evident in William Golding's novel, Lord of the Flies. Lord of the Flies tells a story about schoolboys who crash-landed on a deserted island and now they must fend for themselves while trying to get off the island. The boys increasingly change throughout the book becoming more ravenous and animal like without guidance of an adult. Jack is one character in Lord of the Flies who becomes a selfish and barbaric only wanting to hunt and kill. Countless times within Lord of the Flies, Jack and his hunting crew shout a disturbing chant, '_Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!_' (Golding 117). All Jack wants to do is kill repeatedly showing how he is ready to take/kill without clear reasoning or wanting. Selfish nature leading to the feeling of superiority is observed directly with the conch. The conch is a symbol of power and voice. Whoever holds the conch has power over all the schoolboys, making the boys listen to orders. "He lifted the conch. 'Seems to me we ought to have a chief to decide things.'

'A chief! A chief!'

'I ought to be chief,' said Jack with simple arrogance, 'because I'm chapter chorister

and head boy. I can sing C sharp.' (Golding 16)

This quote conveys the thought of Jack's selfishness. Jack has the conch and declares his superiority by stating he is the chief. The actions of Jack express a superiority complex that takes control of the people for selfish reason. William Golding's Lord of the Flies demonstrates how selfishness is innate and humans are not fundamentally good, but through the appropriate nurturing, humanity can be fundamentally good.

The Underground Man is emotional, unkind, and childish, but can identify when the concept of superiority over equality is tested. One of the Underground Man's old classmate, Zverkov, is a prime example of the kind of man who is superior and hated in the Underground Man's eye. The Underground Man believes wealth, education and status prompt superior qualities. "In his last year at school he received in for an inheritance of two hundred souls, and since all of us were poor, he even began to swagger before us" (Dostoevsky 61). "I hated the things he used to say about his future successes with women (he hadn't ventured to start up with women, not having his officer's epaulettes yet, and was looking forward to them impatiently) and about how he'd be fighting duels all the time" (Dostoevsky 62). The Underground Man loathes Zverkov for his snobbery, wealth, good looks, and status. Interactions with the Underground man and Zverkov show how these two men are not equal. The Underground Man makes the superiority claim clear by stating, "Now he no longer greeted me in the street, and I suspected he was afraid of compromising himself by greeting a person as insignificant as I was" (Dostoevsky 62). The Underground also states, "They had constantly associated with him all those three years, though inwardly they did not consider themselves on an equal footing with him, I'm sure of that" (Dostoevsky 63). Both quotes establish the thought of Zverkov's superiority not only in the eyes of the Underground Man but Zverkov's friends too. Another example of Zverkov's superiority is his obnoxious tone.

Zverkov winced, but declined to notice.

"We-e-ell, and how's your keep?"

"What keep?"

"Your sssalary, that is."

"Quite the examiner, aren't you!" (Dostoevsky 74).

These lines are important because they display Zverkov talking slowly to the Underground Man. The Underground Man perceives Zverkov's tone to be his high class and superior. Zverkov's tone also illustrates how people of equal level must talk in the same manner as Zverkov. The character of Zverkov and his actions establish the point that people like to be superior, therefore there cannot be equality.

An additional theme present in the book questions if education improves us. A feature to consider about this theme is if common sense rules the day. In today's society, we are always being compared based on education and our ability to produce an educational based background rather than experience. An example of explaining if education improves us is looking at high school class ranks. Class rank is a way to see how your GPA matches up to your classmates who are in the same grade as you (Strauss). At my high school there was four quartiles of class rank. The "smartest" individuals would be place in the lowest quartile, meaning you are ranked top of your class. "Less intelligent" individuals would be placed in the highest quartile, meaning you are ranked bottom of your class. If you were "average" you would be placed either in the upper-middle or lower-middle quartile. "The most important reason that class rank is on the decline is because it really isn't a direct measure of student achievement" (Strauss). "Pitting students against one another for the status of having the best grades takes the strychnine of extrinsic motivation and adds to it the arsenic of competition" (Strauss). In the article "The case for abolishing class rank", Valerie Strauss argues how class rank demoralizes

and pits students against each other. Strauss believes there is no need because a regular student and a valedictorian have the same capacity to enter the same college and perform identically. Strauss' views align with the Underground Man and also mine about how people like to be superior, therefore there cannot be equality.