The Themes Of Free Will Vs. Determinism In Dostoevsky’s Notes From The Underground And Chernyshevsky's What Is To Be Done?

Nikolai Chernyshevky’s “What Is To Be Done?” and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s “Notes From the Underground” are works published in 1860`s Tsarist Russia that debate the dominant Russian philosophies of the time; the emerging Western rational egoism of asserted by Chernyshevsky versus the existential, anti-determinist teachings within Dostoyevsky`s novella. Both pieces were published a little more than a year apart, by authors who were members of contemporary literary circles, whose interest in the banned books of Tsarist Russia and the discussion of revolutionary ideals led both men to years of incarceration in Siberia. While imprisoned, Dostoyevsky and Chernyshevsky conceived and produced some of their most influential and impactful work. Both texts expose the same themes of Utopianism, Rationalism and Determinism but the reader is presented with two antithetical philosophies. Either as an individual whose actions are entirely their own and cannot be attributed to any system or authority as argued by Dostoyevsky or that one`s free will is an illusion in so much that every action one takes can be logically predetermined as disputed by Chernyshevsky. These beliefs on the state of reality are borne of not unidentical life experience and socio-economic climate, both author`s reflections being contrasting observations on the same image. Man`s true nature and the implication it has for society as a whole is heavily debated in these texts also; Chernyshevsky constructs symbols and citizens of Utopian society in his novel, believing Man, if presented the chance, would strive for this betterment while Dostoyevsky creates a world and a narrator that is critical of this, presuming that Man defies rationalisation and would rebel against Utopia in favour of disorder and chaos simply to validate their individual free will. Through these texts and the themes explored, readers can better understand the conflicting philosophies, their legitimacy in relation to Man`s Nature and the literary techniques employed in “What is to be Done?” and “Notes from the Underground”.

Chernyshevsky’s novel, “What is to be Done?” is a popular illustration of the idea that maintains that a man primarily loves himself. In that sense, for Chernyshevsky, everyone is a rational egoist and there is no other law affecting human ambition. Every mans real desire is to work towards a destination that means every possible need and want is catered to and there never needs to exist a conflict of interest between any persons – as mans nature is beyond his own control. This novel aims to demonstrate the practical conclusions of Chernyshevsky’s utilitarian and positivistic line of thought in daily social relations. One of the aims of Chernyshevsky is to lay a philosophical foundation for a healthy relationship between Russian Intelligentsia and ordinary people. The intellectual has to understand the actions of the people he gets into contact, instead of judging them. The second aim of Chernyshevsky and his work is to empower individuality. Rational egoism, according to Chernyshevsky, is the subtext for every action so to feel for deceived or disappointed by someone for acting only in their own self-interest is deluded. Hence, there cannot be any delusion. If one organizes their relationships with others on the same basis, then consequently there cannot be any disappointment. The marriage of Pavlovna with Lopoukhoff is based on this principle. Pavlovna does not choose money, which she would get from the rich rival suitor. She prefers to enjoy the freedom and intellectual life, her highest passion, which is given to her by a life with Lopoukhoff. From

Lopoukhoff angle, their marriage is explained through both his love for Pavlovna and the pleasure he gets by helping her break the chains with her parents. The assumption that all people are rationalist egoists also removes any emotion that might weaken a person's force of will, such as guilt or obligation. In the relationship between Pavlona and Kirsanoff Chernyshevsky attempts to propose that since everyone does everything for their own interest and since no one does something good for someone else, there is no guilt or shame in being self-interested. No one can be blamed for their action, either. For instance, it is totally rational for Pavlovna to leave Lopoukhoff and marry Kirsanoff, because she loves Kirsanoff and it is for her interest. And in the context of "What is to Done?" Lopoukhoff has no basis to feel angry or aggrieved towards either party, as they had no real control over their actions.

Chernyshevsky's third aim seems to be to redefine human relations and make the Russian intellectuals immune against the toxic values of the old society. The new men of Chernyshevsky shall not judge or act according to the moral code of the existing society. On the contrary, they will establish their own moral code, which will conform to the principle of utility. With respect to the novel, this means that it is morally right to arrange every aspect of life in accordance to mans own benefit. For instance, to make fictitious marriages is morally correct on the basis of the mutual utility to the partners. And it is morally right to lie to your friends, as illustrated in Lopoukhoff's fake suicide, if it is the best option for all involved. Chernyshevsky also tries to come to the conclusion that an individual shouldn`t hesitate to take responsibility to change a situation that makes them unhappy - i.e. Lopoukhoff's marrying with Pavlovna or Kirsanoff's "liberating" of Nastennka – as that would impede on their own pursuit of pleasure which, as Chernyshevsky posits, is mans highest tier desire.

Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground" is a sarcastic literal response to Chernyshevsky's "What is to be Done?". The understanding of man as a self-interested pleasure-seeker and promotion of principle of utility as a solution to the existential problems are mocked and derided by the realist novelist. Through this work of existentialist writing, he attempts to counter the utopian theories of his time. Dostoyevsky demands to know how good and bad actions can be distinguished if the only motivation for the egoist man is his own happiness. In this work and later works like "Crime and Punishment", killing someone and helping someone are both seen as morally right in the egoist sense and are not judged by "outdated" measures such as good or bad. The reader is first introduced to the reader as a knot of contradictions. His confessions open the doors of his own chaotic soul. So the individual is not observed from outside as it is done by the utilitarian dynamics. It is approached from inside through introspection. There, we find the psychological dimension of the individual that cannot be simply explained by pleasure and pain. The inner complexity of our hero, who is a character created by Dostoyevsky to represent the real and actual qualities of man in the 19th century, is too beyond the principles of utility and "acting in your own interest" to be consoled by them. Dostoyevsky, through the horrid Underground man, asks the Utopian universe of "What is to Done? - how can a man justify his own existence if any real and definitive choice can to be attributed to egoism? How can the characters of Chernyshevsky`s novel always be expected to "do the right thing" if at any moment , like the Underground man, decide to leave a liver pain alone to get worse or live in a city that is too expensive for a man of his small means. Dostoyevsky posits that this is the true nature of man, not that we would attribute every action to our own self-improvement but, instead, act in a way that defies rationalisation or determination – because that is our nature.

"Notes from Underground" is a first-person monologue of an isolated man trying to answer the question - who am I? The narrator describes his traits, makes judgments and then negates

them, makes other judgments and tells anecdotes that detail his own spite, in order to sketch a picture of himself. This revealing of the subject by the subject is in a sharp contrast with Chernyshevsky's novel, which is narrated from an omniscient position, which sees all characters from above. Chernyshevsky`s narrative voice differs from Dostoyevsky`s – one observes civilization as whole made up of its cooperative parts betterment and the other scrutinises only the individual as his or her own whole and not part of larger community.

The underground man introduces himself with the words "I am a sick man … I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man". He believes that he has a liver disease but he refuses to consult a doctor. While Chernyshevsky praises science as the key towards a harmonious society (Lopoukhoff and Kirsanoff, characters presented to the reader as morally right, are medical students) the underground man sneers at any supposedly egoist action – the Underground man is exercising his own free will and rebelling against the idea that a man must do what the determinists and utopists want. Dostoyevsky tells the reader that as long as man does not act for himself, their paradise will never be realised. To act out of spite is the Underground man`s way and is the motive behind his own gleeful self-destruction. This unexplainable behaviour hinders him from performing the rational behaviour that produces utility. It is a sentiment not covered by utilitarianism but that cannot be ignored.

The underground man`s tragic nature becomes especially evident in his relationship with Liza, an obvious parallel to the prostitute Nastennka in "What is to be Done?". Dostoyevsky uses Liza as a contrary figure to show what would happen to a prostitute in his "Underground World" when compared to the events of Chernyshevsky`s egoist text. Kirsanoff does not take the advantage of Nastennka and refuses her offer, only accepting her into his home as a means of following the Hippocratic Oath, fearing for her health. After diagnosing her with consumption, he pleads Nastennka to leave her life of prostitution before it kills her. After curing her, he begins to love her, without judging her past. Kirsanoff follows the utilitarian principles set out by Chernyshevsky – refusing to resent her for her actions and attempting to save her. To the reader of "Notes from the Underground", it may seem like Liza is promised the same life as Nastennka– one free of judgement or shame. But the underground man is not the same character as Kirsanoff. The underground man does not refuse any offer, sleeps with Liza and only after that does he reveal the reality of her life – eventually her only commodity will disappear. Unlike Kirsanoff, his only motivation for her salvation is to establish the existential difference between himself and his hated schoolfellows - he needs to feel himself as a liberator, as someone morally superior to everyone else.

After Liza comes to his home he observes himself from an outsider's perspective, realising the gap between what he pretends he is and what he actually is. In this context, he is not a saviour but someone imitating one. Liza`s statement, "Some families are glad to sell their daughters, rather than marrying them honourably", can be said to be linked to Vera Pavlovna, who is forced to marry a man she does not love. The story is used by Chernyshevsky to explore to what extent marriage is different from prostitution, if a woman cannot freely choose her husband and is only arranged through financial gain, not love. Dostoevsky seems to use Liza as an example of families worse than Pavlovna`s.

Dostoyevsky also parodies other scenes in Chernyshevsky's "What is to be Done?"such as when the petty justice the underground man seeks on an officer who "made him" step aside in the street. This is a caricature of a scene in "What is to be Done?" in which the strong willed Lopoukhoff does not move aside, as a matter of principle, when he encounters a man on the

street. In that sense he acts as a consistent egoist, following his principles without taking anyone else into consideration, as if he is the only person in the world. In “Notes from the Underground”, our protagonist hates himself for his hypocritical attempts at being a Lopoukhoff-type figure, as he sees egoism as beneath him. The reader sees how the pseudo-revenge on the officer revives his dull life. The underground man proved himself by being acknowledged by a “man of action and truth”. The underground man is an exaggerated version of Lopoukhoff, without having any principles at all. He is in need of an external source, to feel his existence. In that sense there is not even a moment, where he is not dependent to the action of other subjects.

There is extensive use of symbolism in “Notes from the Underground” and “What is to be Done?” through which the authors establish concepts relating to their respective philosophies. The symbols that feature the most are the “Crystal Palace” and the “Stone Wall”. In the context of the time of writing, the Crystal Palace was built to house the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The structure was a monument of the Industrial Revolution and a sacred shrine to the belief in scientific progress. The underground man uses this as a symbol to criticize the ideal of modern society, constituted of enlightened individuals and functioning according to the laws of reason. He tries to show that a rational society would be nothing but a dystopia and asks the readers to consider the concept of free will in a world where every action a man takes can be tracked according to sheets of sums and figures. The individual would not be happy in this case since he would not live how he wishes. Here, the underground man criticises the idea of progress as well. According to him, man will try to ruin the rational stability that is represented in the Crystal Palace just to act in such a way that could not be predicted. The crux of Chernyshevsky`s argument and his praise of the Crystal Palace in “What is to be Done” is that the systems of a egoist society rely on everyone wanting and working towards the same thing. Dostoyevsky challenges this, debating that there are those, like the Underground Man, who would act against the creation of a Crystal Palace. So even though, everyday, developments are made to progress to a rational society, the possibility of losing all progress cannot be eliminated.

The other symbol, the Stone Wall, is described by the underground man as “the laws of nature, the deductions of natural science” and is the basis in which “What is to Done?” inspires conscious inertia. This concept is explained as the incapability of being something other than a hyper-consciousness individual. For the underground man, it would be enough, for to have the consciousness of men of action like the officer earlier in the book or characters like Lopoukhoff. The stone wall is an absolute truth to men of action and truth and does not hinder their actions; there is no analysing, the stone wall simply is. For hyper-conscious individuals, it is the symbol of the futile nature of their own free will, one that reminds them that “two plus two” will never equal five. Though he is conscious of what the Stone Wall is and knows that it is an implacable metaphysical concept, the underground man still attempts his small victories against it but ultimately concedes that to do nothing, to be inert, is better than to obey the rules of the stone wall. This is Dostoyevsky answering the questioned posed by Chernyshevsky`s novel, “What is to be Done?”. The answer is nothing, nothing is to be done.