



Navigating the Abyss: Existential Psychotherapy and the Integration of Rage in Dostoevsky's Underground Man

Abbas Jaafar Mutar¹, Samer Ayad Ali Al-Fahham²

¹Asst. Lecturer, Department of English, Islamic University Najaf

²Asst. Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Languages, University of Kufa

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Abstract— This paper explores the relevance of existential psychotherapy in addressing the pervasive issue of modern rage, using Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* as a lens to examine the human condition. Drawing on existential and Jungian perspectives, it argues that rage, as a manifestation of the daimonic, is an intrinsic aspect of human existence that cannot be suppressed or medicalized without fragmenting the self. Through an analysis of the Underground Man's psychological turmoil, the paper proposes that existential psychotherapy offers a pathway to wholeness by encouraging individuals to confront and integrate their rage within the context of their lived experiences. By situating rage within historical and cultural frameworks, this approach avoids reductive biomedical interpretations and fosters a deeper understanding of human emotions. The paper concludes with reflections on the contemporary relevance of these insights in addressing societal violence and alienation.

Keywords— Existential Psychotherapy, Dostoevsky, Underground Man, Rage, Daimonic, Jungian Psychology, Alienation, Modern Rage



INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by escalating interpersonal violence, societal polarization, and emotional disconnection, the phenomenon of rage has emerged as a defining feature of modern life.

From impulsive outbursts in public spaces to the calculated aggression of political rhetoric, rage permeates contemporary existence, reflecting deeper existential tensions. This paper proposes that Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) provides a profound literary exploration of rage as an existential given, embodied in the character of the Underground Man.

By analyzing this character through the lens of existential psychotherapy, we can better understand rage not as a pathological disorder but as a fundamental aspect of human experience that demands acknowledgment and integration.

Drawing on existential and Jungian frameworks, particularly the concept of the daimonic as articulated by

Stephen Diamond (1996), this paper argues that suppressing rage leads to psychic fragmentation and alienation, while embracing it as part of the human condition fosters wholeness and emotional connectivity.

The paper begins by contextualizing modern rage within historical and cultural shifts, critiques the limitations of neurophysiological models, and explores how existential psychotherapy can offer a more holistic approach to addressing rage.

Through a close reading of the Underground Man's struggles, we highlight the therapeutic potential of confronting the daimonic to achieve integration and transcendence.

The Cultural Context of Modern Rage

The 21st century has witnessed a surge in what might be termed an "Age of Rage," characterized by spontaneous acts of violence—such as road rage or public altercations—and systemic expressions of anger in

political and cultural spheres.

These phenomena, often sensationalized in media, reflect broader societal frustrations stemming from rapid technological change, economic inequality, and social fragmentation. Drawing on W.H. Auden's (1947) "Age of Anxiety" and Woodburn Heron's (1957) "Age of Depression," this paper posits that the current era is defined by an emotional volatility that transcends individual pathology and points to a collective existential crisis.

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* offers a prescient critique of the rationalist ideologies that underpin modern alienation.

Written in response to the utilitarian optimism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's vision of a "Crystal Palace"—a utopian society governed by reason and scientific progress—the novel exposes the limitations of rationality in addressing the irrational, sensual, and destructive aspects of human nature.

The Underground Man, consumed by rage and self-loathing, embodies the consequences of suppressing these primal drives in favor of a mechanized, conformist existence. His story serves as a cautionary tale for contemporary society, where the denial of emotional complexity fuels destructive behaviors.

The Daimonic: A Jungian and Existential Perspective

Central to this analysis is the concept of the daimonic, a term rooted in Jungian psychology and existential thought.

As Stephen Diamond (1996) explains, the daimonic represents a natural force within the human psyche that encompasses both creative and destructive impulses. Unlike the demonic, which is associated with malevolent behavior, the daimonic is an archetypal function that integrates both light and shadow, good and evil.

In pre-Christian traditions, deities like Shiva or Abraxas embodied this duality, reflecting the complexity of human emotions.

In *Notes from the Underground*, the Underground Man's rage is a manifestation of the daimonic, a force that drives his self-destructive tendencies but also holds the potential for redemption and connection. His inability to integrate this force results in a fractured self, marked by isolation and an incapacity for love.

As Dostoevsky illustrates, the Underground Man's attempts to suppress his irrational drives—through rational control or moral superiority—only deepen his alienation, leading to outbursts of cruelty and self-sabotage.

Existential psychotherapy, informed by thinkers like

Martin Heidegger and Rollo May, offers a framework for understanding the daimonic as an existential given. Rather than pathologizing rage, this approach recognizes it as an intrinsic part of being human, shaped by one's historical and cultural context.

By embracing the daimonic, individuals can move toward wholeness, accessing the creative potential of their emotions while mitigating their destructive power.

Critiquing the Medicalization of Rage

Mainstream psychological approaches often frame rage as a neurophysiological disorder, such as intermittent explosive disorder, attributing it to imbalances in neurotransmitters or brain lesions.

While these models provide valuable insights, they risk reducing rage to a biological malfunction, ignoring the social, historical, and existential factors that shape emotional experience.

As Diamond (1996) argues, medicalizing rage overlooks its role as a response to cultural alienation and existential disconnection.

The Underground Man's rage, for instance, cannot be fully understood through a biomedical lens. His anger is not merely a symptom of a disordered brain but a reaction to the dehumanizing effects of a rationalist, mechanized society.

Dostoevsky critiques the Enlightenment ideal of rational self-interest, as championed by Chernyshevsky, which assumes humans act solely to maximize their own benefit. The Underground Man's irrational behaviors—such as his refusal to conform to societal norms or his delight in self-destruction—challenge this assumption, highlighting the complexity of human motivation.

Existential psychotherapy counters the biomedical model by situating rage within the individual's lived world. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of *Befindlichkeit* (situatedness), this approach views emotions as emerging from one's immersion in a shared cultural and historical context.

For the Underground Man, rage is not an isolated symptom but a response to the "toxic atmosphere" of 19th-century Russia, marked by rapid modernization and the erosion of spiritual community.

By acknowledging this context, existential therapy offers a pathway to understanding and integrating rage, rather than suppressing it.

The Underground Man's Existential Crisis

Dostoevsky's Underground Man is a quintessential

antihero, trapped in a cycle of rage, self-loathing, and alienation. His internal conflict stems from his rejection of the rationalist ideals of his time, which he perceives as stifling the irrational, sensual aspects of human existence. In *Notes from the Underground*, he describes his inability to love as a form of “laceration,” a term Dostoevsky uses to denote the psychic splitting caused by denying one’s daimonic drives.

This suppression leaves the Underground Man disconnected from “real life,” unable to form meaningful relationships or find purpose.

A pivotal moment in the text occurs in the Underground Man’s encounter with Liza, a prostitute to whom he briefly opens up about his childhood trauma. Raised as an orphan, he laments the absence of familial love, which he believes has rendered him “unfeeling.” However, the vulnerability of this confession triggers overwhelming shame, prompting him to lash out in rage and humiliation.

This episode illustrates the destructive consequences of suppressing the daimonic, as the Underground Man’s attempt to control his emotions only intensifies his isolation.

From an existential perspective, the Underground Man’s rage is a response in his existential situation—his “thrownness” into a world that devalues emotional authenticity.

Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit* underscores that moods like rage are not internal states but ways of being-in-the-world, shaped by cultural and personal contexts. The Underground Man’s anger is thus a reflection of his struggle to find meaning in a society that prioritizes rationality over emotional depth.

Existential Psychotherapy: A Path to Integration

Existential psychotherapy offers a promising approach to addressing the Underground Man’s rage by encouraging him to confront and integrate his daimonic impulses.

Unlike traditional interventions that seek to suppress or manage emotions, this approach emphasizes the importance of dwelling with one’s feelings, allowing them to emerge without judgment. As David Loy (1996) suggests, the path to integration involves enduring unsettling emotions, such as rage, until they lose their destructive power and reveal their transformative potential.

In a therapeutic setting, an existential therapist would begin by listening to the Underground Man’s experiences without preconceived notions of pathology. By situating his rage within the context of his personal history—such as his orphanhood—and the broader cultural shifts of 19th-

century Russia, the therapist would help him understand why certain things matter to him and why he responds with anger.

This phenomenological approach, rooted in Heidegger’s philosophy, recognizes that emotions are always embedded in a shared world of meaning.

For the Underground Man, therapy would involve exploring the sources of his rage, such as his feelings of impotence and alienation, and learning to tolerate these emotions rather than acting them out destructively.

By accepting rage as an existential given, he could begin to access its creative potential, fostering emotional connectivity and a sense of wholeness. This process would not preclude the use of traditional interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or medication, if needed to ensure safety, but the primary goal would be to integrate the daimonic rather than eradicate it.

Contemporary Relevance: Rage in the Modern World

Dostoevsky’s insights remain strikingly relevant in the contemporary context, where rage manifests in both individual and collective forms.

The rise of mass shootings, political polarization, and xenophobic rhetoric reflects a broader societal failure to acknowledge and integrate the daimonic.

As in the Underground Man’s case, projecting rage onto external “others” serves as a mechanism of denial, masking feelings of helplessness and despair.

Humanistic and existential psychotherapy offer a counterpoint to this trend by emphasizing the importance of accepting rage as part of the human condition. By fostering self-understanding and emotional integration, these approaches can help individuals and societies move toward greater cohesion and empathy.

In a world increasingly fragmented by technology and individualism, Dostoevsky’s call to embrace the irrational and sensual aspects of existence serves as a powerful reminder of the need for wholeness.

CONCLUSION

Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* provides a timeless exploration of rage as an existential phenomenon, embodied in the tragic figure of the Underground Man.

By analyzing this character through the lens of existential psychotherapy, we see that rage is not a disorder to be cured but a fundamental aspect of human existence that demands recognition and integration.

The concept of the daimonic, with its dual capacity for

destruction and creativity, offers a framework for understanding rage as a pathway to wholeness.

By situating emotions within their historical and cultural contexts, existential therapy provides a holistic alternative to reductive biomedical models, fostering emotional authenticity and connectivity.

In an age marked by increasing violence and alienation, these insights offer a hopeful path toward healing and integration.

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