



Demystifying Modern Heroism in *Notes from Underground*

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ABSTRACT

This research reads Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* through Roland Barthes' theory of myth to argue that the text can dismantle the anchor of modern heroic identity which is not merely a natural ethical ideal rather an ideological construction. Barthes defines myth as a second-order semiological system that transforms historically produced values into self-evident truths. Drawing on this framework, this paper identifies productivity, rationality, faith in progress and moral coherence as mythic signifiers of modern heroism widely circulating within nineteenth-century social premise. The Underground Man's hyper-conscious refusal to act, the rejection of rational self-interest, and the embrace of contradiction function as narrative strategies deny these heroic myths. Rather than proposing an alternative model of heroism, Dostoevsky reveals how heroic norms discipline subjectivity and marginalize deviation by foregrounding the violence inherent in mythic coherence itself. The text exposes heroism not as an ethical essence but as a socially enforced narrative that demands conformity to the expectation and suppresses interior complexity. By applying Barthes' concept of myth to a literary text, this study repositions *Notes from Underground* as a critique of ideological myth-making in modernity. This research paper argues that Dostoevsky portrays the modern heroism as a myth that conceals its own historical and cultural manufacture.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of the hero has always played an important role in literary and cultural narratives, often characterized by traits such as reason, moral certainty, agency and transcendence. Whereas classical heroic figures are generated out of epic tradition with divine sanction and communal values, modernity produces heroism as a secular concept based on productivity, self-control and progress, as historically produced traits that have come to be seen as natural and universal in modern society, seemingly established as a naturalized, unquestioned prototype of heroic identity. Such a perspective calls for more critical examination, when viewed through the lens of myth as ideology.

Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, presents myth as a second-order semiological system that presents historically produced meanings as self-evident and natural. “Myth, in this case, does not hide the truth; rather, it naturalizes the fabricated (Barthes 129)”. The modern hero, thus, becomes a mythical construction that prevails upon some subjective positions while others are marginalized, in the name of some ideal ethical human being. Reason, coherency and productivity are a signifier in this system and create some prescribed expectations from individual identity.

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* represents a drastic negation of this mythic model of heroism. The anonymous narrator (referred to as Underground Man) rejects these ideals of reason and self-interest which form a foundation of modern life in nineteenth-century. The hyper-consciousness, deliberate inertia and contradiction of the Underground Man challenge the coherency of heroic identity. The narrator can be perceived as being devoid of any heroic quality, instead highlighting the instability it is born from.

This paper argues that *Notes from Underground* denaturalizes the concept of modern heroism by challenging the idea that it is an ethical, not to mention universal or timeless, model, through its operation as myth (according to Roland Barthes' concept). This work asserts that Dostoevsky exposes the narrative of the modern hero as culturally constructed, imposed, and thereby exclusive and complexifying. The work ultimately contributes to the critique of meta-narratives.

Demystifying Modern Heroism in *Notes from Underground*

Roland Barthes' definition of myth as a process that "naturalizes" seemingly spontaneous and innate values, revealing instead a set of "historically variable contents that have been transformed into the image of nature," (Barthes 129) provides a critical means of understanding the formation of modern heroic identity. According to Barthes in *Mythologies*, "what the world supplies to myth is an historical reality; what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality" (Barthes 142). Through naturalization, concepts such as

reason, productivity, and coherence become understood as inherently natural, and therefore, beyond criticism. For the modern era in the nineteenth century, such traits serve as markers of the heroic ideal that will complement Enlightenment thinking that emphasized progress and reason. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* immediately undermines this construct with a narrator whose opening statement-"I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man"(Dostoevsky 3) completely denies the traditional heroic style that centers on strength, lucidity, and intent. Instead of the coherent subject, the narrator emphasizes fragmentation and contradictions, revealing the hero not as an ideal human condition but as a performance of that condition.

Denaturalizing Rationality and Agency

Central to the concept of the modern hero is the notion of rationality and purposeful action as inherent human virtues. These concepts are rooted in the Enlightenment, which presents the human subject as a logical, calculating subject, acting out of self-interest that will result in progress. "Myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (Barthes 110), emphasizing the artificially constructed, ideologically sustained nature of this ideology. The narrator of *Notes from Underground* fundamentally challenges this idea by constantly satirizing rational determinism. The Underground Man states, "too much consciousness is a disease" (Dostoevsky 18) the exact opposite of the Enlightenment glorification of reason. Instead of providing clarity and direction, consciousness seems to render him paralyzed, full of doubt, and self-sabotaging. His lack of action even when a course of action would appear to benefit him in conventional ways clearly demonstrates a denial of a causal progression that often underlies heroic narratives. Additionally, his insistent reliance on "independent desire, whatever that independence may cost" (Dostoevsky 29) defies any attempts to reduce the human actor to a purely rational subject, therefore highlighting the arbitrary constructedness of heroic agency.

Heroism as Normative Violence

In addition to naturalizing certain traits as inherent, "myth also works as a form of social control, creating a prescribed standard and marginalizing any behaviors that deviate from it" (Foucault 180). As mentioned, myth transforms history into nature through its processes, concealing and validating the ideological system from which these standards arise. The consistently alienated and inadequate feelings of the narrator of *Notes from Underground* point toward the violence of such prescribed roles. His inept social interaction, the perpetual stream of consciousness about his own self-awareness, and his failure to behave according to accepted masculine standards clearly illustrate how these roles are enforced. Dostoevsky's fiction does not offer a redemption from these prescribed notions, but rather shows the psychological violence required to achieve them. In this regard, *Notes from Underground* does not oppose heroism with a

set of alternatives; rather, it demystifies heroism as a coercive system through demonstrating the physical ramifications that occur when a human refuses to play by its rules. The Underground Man's contradictions may serve as a denial of his inherent weaknesses, but they are also a defiant assertion against the need for perfection.

Myth as Narrative Coherence vs Fragmented Subjectivity.

Heroic myth depends on narrative coherence presents the assumption that a life can be formed into a single, unified narrative arc. As Barthes noted, "myth itself operates to translate history into a continuous, 'natural' narrative; if myth presents coherence, this cohesion itself becomes a tool of ideology rather than a feature inherent to its subject matter" (Barthes 134) and *Notes from Underground* fundamentally calls this assumption into question. Here, "fragmented and contradictory narration presents a destabilised heroic subject" (Bakhtin 263). The Underground Man's tone shifts, he corrects himself, he makes irrelevant digressions: none of the markers of a traditional narrative arc seem possible here. Yet, while his subjectivity is incoherent, his narrative refuses linear development and solid form; at one point he declares ownership over his story and at another it all collapses. This is precisely the myth of heroic identity he resists the narrative of the integrated hero who possesses purpose, unified under a coherent structure of experience. Instead, Dostoevsky proposes a subjectivity of fractures and paradoxes. Coherence is a construct imposed upon the narrative rather than a feature that emerges naturally from it. Narrative incoherence becomes a formal mechanism for demythologizing coherence in heroic identity.

Anti-Teleology and the Collapse of Progress.

A key feature of modern heroic myth involves teleology; action is always toward improvement, toward a conclusion or an eventual revelation. This expectation of teleological development is itself a construction, or "a myth, which naturalizes the idea of progress in history" (Barthes 143). But, the Underground Man's narrative actively works to undermine such an assumption. Every eventuality leads not to development, but to an experience of embarrassment, failure, and stagnant self-reflection. Every relationship, particularly with Liza, leads to a growing understanding not of humanity, but of his own alienation from it. By eliminating narrative teleology, Dostoevsky dispels the myth that "human lives are designed toward improvement and ultimate resolution" (Lyotard 23). The absence of movement from one narrative climax to another demonstrates that progress is not an inherent feature of being human, but a mythic expectation to which human narratives ought to conform. The modern heroic narrative thus shows itself to be inherently unsustainable.

The Failure of Recognition and the Myth of Social Validation.

Heroic myth depends on recognition; public approval is essential to the reaffirmation of the hero's greatness and to his acceptance that an obedient trajectory will lead to reward and validation. As in the case of coherence, recognition is an ideological construct that helps disguise the arbitrary nature of social approval. The Underground Man receives humiliation when he seeks recognition, not the reward that heroic myth promises to those who adhere to normative ideals. His attempt to claim dignity among his old acquaintances backfires, leaving him exposed as ridiculous and vulnerable-social validation does not confirm his heroism, it demolishes it. His experience of recognition is a negation of what heroic myth anticipates.

Desire Against Rational Myth.

A further feature of modern heroic myth concerns the assumption that human desire operates in accordance with rationally calculated self-interest. Barthes' argument that myth naturalizes existing understandings of reality extends to this belief, which simplifies human behaviour into predictable actions and motivations. This assumption is directly challenged by the Underground Man, who celebrates irrationality in desire itself. 'I will insist on having it' (Dostoevsky 24), he declared when challenged that his own behaviour went against his desires and that he may not actually want the outcome; I will not want it for the very sake of being able to write to you that 'I wanted it.' He will choose what is destructive precisely because he is free to: Man is, and I am, the hero of this particular scenario of my will and it can do absolutely anything I command of it" (Dostoevsky 118). This is to reject any simple connection between desire and its object, the logic of human will and human action, as inherently heroic. Human reason and heroism are separated when human desire asserts itself as an independent, anti-teleological force that stands in opposition to the coherent structure of rational heroic myth.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to demonstrate that *Notes from Underground* deconstructs the idea of the modern heroic self by deconstructing it as Barthesian myth: a historically constructed system of signification that naturalizes particular historical values. Examining heroism through the theoretical lenses of Barthes, it is clear that it is neither an universal ethical goal nor a natural property, but "a system of signification that valorizes reason, production, stability and progress while suppressing their historical contingency"(Foucault 115). The Underground Man's hyper-awareness, performative inaction, fragmentation and willingness to contradict the logic of his narrative are all techniques that undermine the

ideological force of hero-ism, deconstructing it not as an alternative model of the heroic self but as the violence that is produced by an imposed need for wholeness and normative subjectivity.

Through the denial of his own rational subjectivity, the refusal to endorse teleological linearity, and the questioning of the validity of social acknowledgment, Dostoevsky's character refuses "to be interpellated by modernity into a narrative of the heroic self"(Althusser 178) . This refusal to identify with the heroic narrative and his insistent questioning of his own subjectivity places *Notes from Underground* well in advance of many subsequent theoretical interrogations of master narratives and the assumption of human subjectivities stabilized by mythic coherence. Indeed, this article argue that hero-ism, in this text, is not an intrinsic property of the self, but rather a prescribed cultural fantasy used to enforce an appropriate heroic identity, and to contain, reject and simplify the otherwise unwieldy complexity of the human.

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