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## **Toothache in the Literature: Dostoyevsky's 'Notes From Underground' and Hans Christian Anderson's 'Aunty Toothache' as Examples**



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**ABSTRACT:** Every form of art bears tracks from the artist's real or fictive experience. Physical pain as an important human experience have been discussed, described and painted in many literary works. In addition, there are enough proofs to believe that toothache – a unique representative of bodily pains- is an old friend of humanity. Hence, it is more than natural to see the reflections of this symptom in the written literature. In this essay we are going to focus on two particular literary works of different genres; a novella and a fairy tale: Dostoyevsky's 'Notes from Underground' and Hans Christian Anderson's 'Aunty Toothache'. These two authors and these two particular works have been studied in many different aspects. However, the place and importance of the concept of 'Toothache' was not investigated in previous analyses. Therefore, the subject of this paper is justified in one hand, original and unprecedented on the other hand. As it shall be seen, Dostoyevsky uses toothache as a tool to attack the basics of 'Rational Egoism' in 19<sup>th</sup> Russia and employs it to counter-argument against natural and historical determinism in favor of human's free will. In the case of Anderson, toothache is an allegory about friendship and art in which toothache accompanies, and is compared with the pain of striving to produce a piece of art.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Definitions of literature vary from a broad spectrum including all books and writings to a more restricted frame containing only "imaginative" works [1]. Every form of art bears tracks from the artist's real or fictive experience. Physical pain as an important human experience have been discussed, described and painted in many literary works. In addition, there are enough proofs to believe that toothache is an old friend of humanity [2]. Hence, it is more than normal to see the reflections of this symptom in the written literature. In this essay we are going to focus on two particular literary works of different genres; a novella and a fairy tale.

Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) is one of the most outstanding writers in the history of world literature. Most of Dostoyevsky's works explore human psychology in the unstable Russia's social, political and cultural atmosphere of the 19th century. Among his rich and diverse works, we want to discuss a particular one: "Notes from Underground".

The narrator of this story is an unnamed man of first person voice; generally called by the critics as the 'Underground Man'. The book is composed of two parts. Part I is a monologue in which the Underground Man exposes his ideas and arguments. In Part II, he is clarifying his concepts by giving examples from his own life. One of these interesting examples is the narrator's health problems including toothache. First, we are going to quote a long but worthy one –in relation to the theme of toothache- from the novella:

"Ha, ha, ha! You will be finding enjoyment in toothache next," you cry, with a laugh.

"Well, even in toothache there is enjoyment," I answer. I had toothache for a whole month and I know there is. In that case, of course, people are not spiteful in silence, but moan; but they are not candid moans, they are malignant moans, and the malignancy is the whole point. The enjoyment of the sufferer finds expression in those moans; if he did not feel enjoyment in them he would not moan. It is a good example, gentlemen, and I will develop it. Those moans express in the first place all the aimlessness of your pain, which is so humiliating to your consciousness; the whole legal system of nature on which you spit disdainfully, of course, but from which you suffer all the same while she does not. They express the consciousness that you have no enemy to punish, but that you have pain; the consciousness that in spite of all possible Vagenheims you are in complete slavery to your teeth; that if someone wishes it, your teeth will leave off aching, and if he does not, they will go on aching another three months; and that finally if you are still contumacious and still protest, all that is left you for your own gratification is to thrash yourself or beat your wall with your fist as hard as you can, and absolutely nothing more. Well, these mortal insults, these jeers on the part of someone unknown, end at last in an enjoyment which sometimes reaches the highest degree of voluptuousness. I ask you, gentlemen, listen sometimes to the moans of an educated man of the nineteenth century suffering from toothache, on the second or third day of the attack, when he is beginning to moan, not as he moaned on the first day, that is, not simply because he has toothache, not just as any coarse peasant,

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but as a man affected by progress and European civilization, a man who is "divorced from the soil and the national elements," as they express it now-a-days. His moans become nasty, disgustingly malignant, and go on for whole days and nights. And of course he knows himself that he is doing himself no sort of good with his moans; he knows better than anyone that he is only lacerating and harassing himself and others for nothing; he knows that even the audience before whom he is making his efforts, and his whole family, listen to him with loathing, do not put a ha'porth of faith in him, and inwardly understand that he might moan differently, more simply, without trills and flourishes, and that he is only amusing himself like that from ill-humor, from malignancy. Well, in all these recognitions and disgraces it is that there lies a voluptuous pleasure. As though he would say: "I am worrying you, I am lacerating your hearts, I am keeping everyone in the house awake. Well, stay awake then, you, too, feel every minute that I have toothache. I am not a hero to you now, as I tried to seem before, but simply a nasty person, an impostor. Well, so be it, then! I am very glad that you see through me. It is nasty for you to hear my despicable moans: well, let it be nasty; here I will let you have a nastier flourish in a minute . . . ." You do not understand even now, gentlemen? No, it seems our development and our consciousness must go further to understand all the intricacies of this pleasure. You laugh? Delighted." [3]

The first thing noticed is the masochistic character of the underground man who claims that there is joy in toothache and he is indeed enjoying it. Also, he differentiates between the toothache moans of a normal peasant and an educated man influenced by the western civilization; describing the former to be normal and the latter to be nasty and malignant. However, to understand the nature of this bizarre perspective and the exact place of 'toothache' in the structure of this argument we should look closer at the character of the 'Underground Man' and the historical background of this Dostoyevsky's work.

Russia in 19<sup>th</sup> century was under the heavy influence of western European culture. In 1863, Chernyshevsky published a naïve, utopic and optimistic novel called 'What is to be Done?' In this work, Chernyshevsky advocates for a utopic world based on rationalism, socialism and scientific determinism, mostly known as Rational Egoism. According to him, men are rational and social beings; they surely know their best interests. If not, they could be educated to do so. Moreover, the final objective of man and his society is to avoid pain and gain maximum pleasure. Here comes the crucial role of scientific determinism which clarifies the whole dead and closed points of life. Hence, in the near future, the educated and socialistic 'New Men' will construct the utopic 'Crystal Palace' in which everything is ideal and they live happily forever. This new type of men is 'Men of Action', since everything in their life and their surrounding is clearly defined by the natural deterministic laws [4].

Dostoyevsky was so upset by the naïve approach of this book and its simple solutions to complicated human and social problems, that instead of writing a literary critique, he has written a satiric and ironic response [5].

Dostoyevsky's nameless Underground Man is a prototype totally against all of the attributes of Chernyshevsky's new men and every pre-assumption of his idealistic worldview. Dostoyevsky, behind the character of 'Underground Man', attacks every column of the Rational Egoism.

First, underground man is not social; rather he is a lonely and isolated guy who lives mostly in his underground. He is spiteful both to himself and the world. Secondly, he could be defined as one of the most illogical characters of the literature. For example, he has toothache and liver pain but rejects to go to a doctor. Also he knows that the filthy air of Petersburg is bad for his health but continues to stay. In his case, progressive science and education cannot help, since he is erudite and knows his interest, but refuses to act logically for reasons he believes.

Furthermore, and opposite to the men of action, the underground man is in the state of total inertia and inactivity. He shows his over and hyper consciousness as a reason for this motionlessness. In contrast, new men act and respond directly because life and its natural laws are simple and clear for them. Underground Man is reluctant and suspicious about this simplistic worldview. For this reason, he is always in the state of indecision.

Although the Underground Man admits a certain kind of determinism, but he declares that he is not obliged to like or accept the natural laws by saying: "Upon my word, they will shout at you, it is no use protesting: it is a case of twice two makes four! Nature does not ask your permission, she has nothing to do with your wishes, and whether you like her laws or dislike them, you are bound to accept her as she is, and consequently all her conclusions. A wall, you see, is a wall... Merciful Heavens! But what do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it." [3] Here, the Underground Man by simply not going to the dentist claims he is rejecting the 'Stone Wall'—a term used by Dostoyevsky himself for the deterministic natural laws. Of course the dental nerves continue to transmit the pain and make our hero suffer and moan bitterly. But the mere fact of this rejection is a proof of some sort of will, free choice and is one of the premises of Dostoyevsky's counter-arguments against determinism. According to the Underground Man, a person's fundamental urge is to use their free will, regardless of whether doing so is in their best interests. Man will engage in immoral and counterproductive behavior to refute the idea that his free will is predetermined and therefore entirely free. This may help to partially explain the Underground Man's contention that he enjoys his own toothaches because doing so demonstrates his capacity for free will and shows that he is not solely motivated by desire. [6].

The Underground Man disagrees with one of the main assumptions of Rational Egoism which is the naïve and optimistic claim that progressive science helps man to be good and act virtuously by identifying and clarifying his interests and getting rid of his nasty

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old habits. He argues that: "Oh, tell me, who was it first proclaimed, that man only does nasty things because he does not know his own interests; and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, man would at once cease to do nasty things, would at once become good and noble? ... Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure, innocent child! Why, in the first place, when in all these thousands of years has there been a time when man has acted only from his own interest? What is to be done with the millions of facts that bear witness that men, consciously, that is fully understanding their real interests, have left them in the background and have rushed headlong on another path?" [3] What can be a better example for the absurdity of human actions against his own interests than the Underground Man's toothache problem?

Another point the Underground Man puts forward is related to human nature. Optimist rationalists like Chernyshevsky believed that human is a rational being; however Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, believed that man does not do evil because he is obliged, but simply to show that he can [5]. He believed that man is evil by nature, irrational and destructive; only religious faith, not reason, could aid him to govern the impulses of his animalistic nature [6]. For this reason, Underground Man opposes by saying: "Man is stupid, you know, phenomenally stupid; or rather he is not at all stupid, but he is so ungrateful that you could not find another like him in all creation." [3] Perhaps the peak of stupidity is moaning of a modern man in his underground habitat from a toothache which is curable.

Next comes the place of suffering in human life and history. Dostoyevsky uses dental pain of the character of the Underground Man and his resistance to pursue a cure, as a symbol against one of the mottos of deterministic rationalism, that escaping from pain is the ideal objective of man and societies. Underground Man thinks suffering is a principal element of human nature by elucidating: "But man is a frivolous and incongruous creature, and perhaps, like a chess player, loves the process of the game, not the end of it. ... Does not man, perhaps, love something besides well-being? Perhaps he is just as fond of suffering? Perhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to him as well-being? Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering. Why? Because suffering is the sole origin of consciousness." [3] According to Dostoyevsky, man needs to suffer and suffering is a natural part of life. Also, the irrational component of human history is, at least, as much as the rational component [7]. Opposite to the materialistic idea of Rational Egoism that suffering is undesirable and man's ultimate goal is to minimize it to the lowest point, the Underground Man believes that suffering is a natural and inseparable component of human life; any effort for its elimination brings more misfortune and dehumanizes man. Hence, it is more humane to moan out of dental pain than live a comfort life but lacking free will. At this point 'Notes From Underground' could be seen as an anti-utopian and anti-authoritarian work resembling George Orwell's '1984' [8].

Even if some day the utopia of the rationalists becomes true by establishing a Crystal Palace based on the modern scientific facts, there is no guarantee that it will survive a long duration. Because: "Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick. He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element." [3] For instance, a man emerges from underground and by experiencing joy in toothache and rejecting a dental treatment, would shake the mirror walls of the fragile Crystal Palace.

In conclusion, the Underground Man argues that suffering is enjoyable, particularly when you're conscious of it. Hence, if nothing could be done against the 'Stone Wall' of the natural laws, "it is better to do nothing! Better conscious inertia! And so hurrah for underground!" [3] At least the wall could be made porous by toothache moans, the final glimpses of human's free will against a deterministic nature.

### **Aunty Toothache**

Who says that 'Toothache', an urgent dentistry topic, cannot be the inspiration for a marvelous literature?

Humans are dreamers and story-tellers. Fairy tales are typically stories about the struggle between good and evil and fantastical forces. They create fantastical creatures like talking animals, dwarfs, and dragons. Although many fairy tales originate from folklore, mythology and legends, the majority of the fairy tales exists in published books today, come from the written literature instead of the oral traditions [9].

Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) is one of the most famous writers of the fairy tales such as The Ugly Duckling, Little Match Girl, The Tinder-Box, The Princess and the Pea, Thumbelina, The Little Mermaid, The Red Shoes, The Emperor's New Clothes, The Steadfast Tin Soldier, Willie Winkie, The Nightingale and The Snow Queen.

The author has a relatively short but interesting fairy-tale story: "Aunty Toothache". The narrator of the story is an orphan child who lives with his mother's aunt; Aunty. This fairy-tale has many things in relation with toothache.

First, the aunt is nicknamed by Rasmussen, a retired brewer and an old friend of hers as 'Aunty Toothache', because she used to have a great deal of dental problems and she was speaking about her toothache sufferings often. Besides, the narrator is already aware about the fact that eating too much sweet causes tooth decay by saying "Auntie gave me sweets when I was little. My teeth

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could stand it then; it didn't hurt them. Now I am older, am a student, and still she goes on spoiling me with sweets." [10] Meanwhile, we can conclude that auntie was edentulous and used dentures, as her old male friend mocks her by saying: "Aunty could surely never have eaten sugar in her childhood, for she had the most beautiful white teeth. She took great care of them, and she did not sleep with them at night!" [10] What makes an adult to give sweets to children, whom herself suffered from successive toothaches, dental extractions and ending up without teeth? Probably, this is the answer: "...but the dear children were her weakness, she said. It was cruel to deny them a few sweets, when they were so fond of them. And that's why we loved Aunty so much." [10] This could be Anderson's critic of his contemporary civilization and culture in which instant gratification is chosen over the beneficial but a little difficult actions, or he concludes that sometimes the harm and damage may come from the near ones in the name of love and care. Moreover, from the public health view, it shows auntie's lack of dental hygiene awareness.

On the other hand, the story contains a series of symbols. For example, tooth is the sign for friendship, losing a tooth is the predictor and foreteller of the death of a beloved one. This belief is still present among some of the east and west societies of the globe [11]. One morning Aunty tells that she has seen loss one of her teeth in her last night dream. She says: "That means I shall lose a true friend!" Shortly afterwards, Rasmussen dies.

The narrator boy has a powerful imagination. This is seen in two instances: First, when he examines a lime leaf carried by the breeze through the window to his room. There is an insect crawling on the leaf as if it were scrupulously studying the leaf. Then he compares this to man's wisdom by elucidating: "we also crawl about on a leaf; our knowledge is limited to that only, and yet we unhesitatingly deliver a lecture on the whole big tree - the root, the trunk, and the crown - the great tree comprised of God, the world, and immortality - and of all this we know only a little leaf!" [10] In the middle of this thought, his aunt gives him a visit in his room and he shares his thoughts with her. Second, when our hero is a student and stays in a flat away from her aunt, he deliberately describes his habitation in a letter to her. In both cases, the reaction of her aunt is positive and encouraging: "You are a poet! Perhaps the greatest we have. If I should live to see this, I would go to my grave gladly. You have amazed me with your powerful imagination.", "Just write down all you have said, and you will be as good as Dickens! Indeed, to me, you are much more interesting. You paint when you speak. You describe your house so that one can see it. It makes one shudder. Go on with your poetry. Put some living beings into it - people, charming people, especially unhappy ones." [10]

However, the narrator is not very sure about this and he is suspicious regarding his writing talents: "I have something of the poet in me, but not enough." And he adds: "The night after she said this, I lay awake, full of longings and anguish, with anxiety and fond hopes to become the great poet that Aunty saw and perceived in me; I went through all the pains of a poet! But there is an even greater pain - toothache - and it was grinding and crushing me." As it is clearly seen, toothache accompanies, and is compared with the pain of striving to produce a piece of art.

Later on, our hero is a student staying in flat away from her aunt. One snowy night, the student accompanies his aunt to her home after the theater show ends. They are obliged to walk since all the carriages were taken. However, the snow is bad and exhausting. The boy convinces her aunt to stay with him for the night since his flat was closer. They get home and light the fire in the stove; soon the room gets warm and cozy. A conversation starts between them and Aunty begins to recall old memories, mostly associated with teeth and toothache, not surprisingly; such as the emergence of the first milk tooth of the boy and the joy it brought to the family. Here is another artistic description of our to-be-poet about tooth loss: "They disappear, too, sometimes every one of them; they disappear before their time of service is up, and when the very last one goes, that is far from a happy day; it is a day for mourning. And so then one considers himself old, even if he feels young." [10] Nevertheless, the student doesn't feel good about the conversation and finds it unpleasant.

Aunty falls asleep despite all the noise inside and outside the house. The wind is howling terribly. An awful toothache attack keeps the narrator away from sleeping. Suddenly, a ghost appears and presents herself as "Madam Toothache"! She commences to torture his teeth and says she continue to punish him until he admits that she is "mightier than poetry, philosophy, mathematics, and all the music" The student readily makes an agreement with the ghost and promises not to write anything else for the sake of being relieved from toothache. Before disappearing, she says: "See me you shall, but in a more substantial shape, in a shape more dear to you than I am now. You shall see me as Aunty, and I shall say, 'Write poetry, my sweet boy! You are a great poet, perhaps the greatest we have!' But if you believe me, and begin to write poetry, then I will set music to your verses, and play them on your mouth harp. You sweet child! Remember me when you see Aunty!" [10]

Then he falls into a peaceful sleep. This quote is part of the story-teller's poetic illustration on the relaxation after a toothache attack: "At our parting I received a thrust through my jawbone like that of a red-hot awl; but it soon subsided, and then I felt as if I were gliding along the smooth water; I saw the white water lilies, with their large green leaves, bending and sinking down under me; they withered and dissolved, and I sank, too, and dissolved into peace and rest." [10]

There are two possible scenarios for this hallucination. Either, the narrator is having a mere dream with a reflection of his constant toothache problems and the unpleasant topics discussed right before the sleep. Or, due to a walk in a cold and snowy night, he is sick and feverish. Furthermore, he is having a terrible toothache. Therefore, he is in a state of delirium and illusion. Let's recall that in his letter to Aunty, he describes his flat in this way: "it is a noisy house, full of sounds and disturbances caused by the weather,



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the wind, and the people. I live just above the street gate; every carriage that drives out or in makes the pictures on the walls move about." That means all the necessary elements of a hallucination are present: noises and shadows. Hence, his sicknesses together with his hyperactive imagination bring up ghostly delusions.

The hero has two pains: toothache and another one related to art production. The inspiration and source of both of them is his aunt. She spoils his teeth by giving him sweets from childhood and constantly encourages him to write. The first action is destructive and negative, while the second one is constructive and positive. However, the poor child can't comprehend how a single person can be the source of two opposite acts. –This inability of understanding is to an extent that the diabolic ghost resembles Aunty and promises to show up in the form of his aunt in the future. Also, in the next morning he is frightened of his aunt and suspiciously asking her whether she was real Aunty or not! - He is certain that the sweets given by Aunty are causing him unbearable toothaches. Hence, he may have concluded that the idea of writing and poetry, since motivated by Aunty, is also a bad thing and is comparable to the toothache. Therefore, he readily accepts the idea of giving up.

Anderson, through this shadowy character, writes probably one of the most artistic descriptions of toothache and compares it to playing musical instruments, as the ghost says: "So you are a poet! Well, I'll make you well versed in all the poetry of toothache! I'll thrust iron and steel into your body! I'll seize all the fibers of your nerves! ... A splendid set of teeth, just like an organ to play upon! We shall have a grand concert, with jew's-harps, kettledrums, and trumpets, piccolo-flute, and a trombone in the wisdom tooth! Grand poet, grand music! ... A great poet must have a great toothache, a little poet a little toothache!" [10]

Aunty Toothache is the last fairy tale written by Anderson. Interestingly enough, all of the three characters of the tale have toothache problems. At the beginning of the tale he states that the manuscript of the story was found in a bean full of scrap papers which belongs to a dead student and the rest of the student's writings have been used to wrap groceries and other random stuff. This may be another reflection of a general remark of most of the Anderson's works in which the author frequently reminds his readers that no story will remain forever and everything goes into the rubbish. In his last tale, toothache –a transient physical pain- overcomes the joy and ecstasy of producing an everlasting piece of art.

It is not odd to encounter this kind of serious and hard subjects in the works of Anderson, opposite to the popular misconception that fairy tales are written only to children. Anderson himself opposes this by saying: "I said loud and clear that I was dissatisfied ... that my tales were just as much for older people as for children, who only understood the outer trappings and did not comprehend and take in the whole work until they were mature – their naiveté was only part of my tales, that humor was what really gave them their flavor." [9]

"Once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after" are common opening and closing phrases in traditional fairy tales; however, this is not the case in most of Anderson's fairy tales, since he has introduced unhappy endings to many children generations. The sad end of 'Aunty Toothache' story has something of parallelism with the end and moral of the other tales of Anderson. For instance, Karen's yearning for a fancy shoes in 'The Red Shoes' is never attained, loyalty of the 'Brave Tin Soldier' doesn't save him from the fire; 'The Little Mermaid' will never marry the prince because he chooses to marry another woman; and few literary works have stimulated more tears than the death of the 'Little Match Girl'.

Every piece of art carries –much or less- something from the author, his/her character, imagination, worldview and real life experiences. Hans Christian Andersen was born to a washerwoman who couldn't read and write and a cobbler. He lived in abject poverty as a child. Andersen was aware of his lower-class roots despite his celebrity and fortune. He is fighting self-worth issues in several of his stories. As in "The Emperor's New Clothes" and "The Ugly Duckling", he was intensely concerned about what other thought of him and worried about integrating and fitting in. So it can be said that a strong autobiographical element runs through his tales, especially the sadder ones [12].

Toothache was a natural part of the quotidian life of people before the invention of modern dentistry tools and techniques; of course Anderson was not an exception. For instance, toothache was an intervening factor in the social relations of Anderson, as narrated by his autobiographer: "However, his wrath subsided as quickly as it had arisen, and it must also be borne in mind that he was suffering at the time from a combination of neuralgia and dyspepsia which would have tried the patience of Job." Most of his neuralgias were dental in origin and they were interrupting the plans of our author: "At Rome, Andersen had rather a miserable time of it. The weather was cold and wet, he suffered severely from toothache." [13] Regarding the fairy tale of Aunty Toothache, it is plausible that it reflects the experience of the author with toothache, especially in his childhood. Indeed, Bain, the writer of a splendid biography on Anderson states "Aunty Toothache is a clever phantasy that gives a humorous description of the author's own experiences of neuralgia, from which he suffered severely throughout life." [13]

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