

Exploring Boredom, Maladaptive Day-Dream and the Search for Self-Actualization in Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Dream of the Ridiculous Man"

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Abstract

The research paper explores how a state of "existential boredom" could lead someone into the state of Self-Actualization, a concept introduced by Abraham Maslow. The concept of "existential boredom" centers on how an individual loses its zeal towards life. A situation of lived experience where there is constant dreads looming and not touched or moved by anything. In my paper, the short story of Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The dream of the Ridiculous Man" introduces an unnamed character who contemplates about committing suicide, he is driven by this purpose to eventually end his life by committing suicide. This thought of committing suicide for the ridiculous man could be due to various reasons. However, in this paper the suicidal tendency of the ridiculous man has been investigated as an extreme form of boredom which is termed as "Spleen" and "Tedium" a concept of Charles Baudelaire and Martin Heidegger. Previous scholarly reading of "The dream of the Ridiculous Man" has used the perception of existentialism, nihilism and absurdism but has not been attempted to understand the story from the perspective of extreme form of boredom and maladaptive day-dreaming. In this paper, it explores how the lack of psychological stimulus pushes the protagonist into a state of maladaptive day dreaming. Though in technical form he does not indulge in Maladaptive day dreaming but his dream shares the same attributes of maladaptive day dreaming not in a clinical sense but the patterns are similar where the experience is prolonged that does not occur in usual dream.

This paper refers to several writers and thinkers such as David foster Wallace, Alexander Pope and Carl Jung to get a closer understanding of boredom and day dreaming. So my argument is focused on how existential boredom leads the protagonist into an immersive dream and it how it further paves the way to self-actualization or a moment of epiphany. The arguments are based on the synthesis of these three things and by using the method of close reading of the text, the arguments are drawn based on this method. The question that has been answered is how exactly he moves away from his decision to commit suicide because at last he awakes from this existential numbness gaining a new purpose towards life which becomes possible through his lived experiences in the dream.

In "Man's search for meaning", Victor Frankl an eminent psychiatrist raises an important existential question. Frankl who was imprisoned at Auschwitz and other concentration camps for three years during the Second World War observed some of his fellow prisoners not only survived the horrifying ordeal in the concentration camps but had also somehow grown in midst of all the suffering (9 Kushner). This

becomes an intriguing case to observe human being's ability to survive extreme adversity when they possess the willingness to not only survive but to also grow and live. Frankl quotes Nietzsche saying, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any How." So if prisoners at Auschwitz who are subjected to torture, starvation and existential dread can succeed in reviving their zeal towards life, then why individuals who are completely sovereign in the world are still faced with the dread of boredom and existence. When I use the word "boredom", I am not only referring to boredom that usually comes with the lack of mental and physical stimulation but the existential boredom that causes despair and meaninglessness. According to the studies done on boredom, it indicate there are no definitive signature markers to diagnose the root cause of boredom. Therefore, its connection to the myriad of moods, situations and individual's psyche also makes it difficult to crystallize the term.

There have been writers and theorists who have taken keen interest in "boredom" as a phenomenon deeming it as, "a central twenty-first century problem" (Avramenko, 108). Even though it cannot be exclusively associated as a modern problem, it is still a recurring experience for human beings and unexpectedly the most common of all the human emotions. We never put too much effort dealing with boredom because of our tendency to replace it with other leisure activities. Traditionally, boredom has also been conceived as characteristics of the elite and aristocratic class for whom it was both a privilege as well as a sign of social stature (Bernstein, 512). However, it does not mean that the other representatives of the social strata can escape from the clutches of boredom. The nature of boredom may differ according to the social strata but it is an ailment from which none can remain immune. Virginia Woolf offers her perspective breaking down boredom into two classes: The upper class boredom, which can be seen as "ennui", "melancholia" and "spleen". Then there is the boredom of the non-privileged classes and the working class where indulging everyday in repetitive labor and monotony becomes a major problem. So, when we speak of boredom as problematic occurrences, we cannot confine it into a single box. On the other hand, it is also not the "boredom" itself that becomes destructive, creative or pathological but the act of escaping it is central to this entire discussion. Charles Baudelaire talks about one strand of boredom known as "Spleen" which he describes as profound melancholy and unshakeable boredom. For Baudelaire "spleen" is more sinister leading to depression and self-alienation. In his collection of poetry *Les Fleurs du Mal*, he says "spleen" even denies hope. It is because "Spleen ensnares hope, which, starving eventually dies" (Athwart). Baudelaire perceived "spleen" as the main reason for existential melancholy and imprisonment much similar to the case of the ridiculous man.

Alison Pease in "Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom" entails that, "Boredom is both an emotion, frustration and emptiness that occurs to and within the subject...at root boredom is a problem of meaning" (Allison, 4). Thus, adding meaning and value even to the fleeting and frivolous time becomes important because of an individual's urge to be productive. The gratification derived from this productivity also contributes meaning to one's life. In neo-classical age, Alexander Pope in his Mock-epic, "The rape of the Lock" explores the trivial affairs that emerges from boredom. He portrays the life of the character, Belinda as someone who wakes up at noon and spends most of her time around coffee houses playing cards. Pope through his characters vividly paints a picture of the aristocratic class who indulges in idleness and leisure activities. It is through this monotonous nature of time, Pope Illuminates how the character's reality is wrapped up in frivolous activities and how they insignificantly exaggerate petty issues which can be related to boredom as well. However, my intention in this paper extends beyond investigating boredom as a phenomenon but how it poses as a means of escapism through the concept of "dreams" touching upon the notion of maladaptive dreaming. Since the whole concept of

boredom is subjective, it varies upon an individual's demand for their level of stimulation rather than experiencing it uniformly. For example, a person's blissful solitude might become a moment of idleness and emptiness for someone else. According to the worldview of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, the individual and not God becomes the main source of knowledge as well as truth. To "Know yourself" becomes the task of the "Self" by accessing to its truth. So boredom can be counter-intuitively understood as the practice for the self to access its own truth (Allison, 4). The idleness and passivity of the ridiculous man reaches its threshold and turning it pathological. However, his encounter with the little girl becomes a moment of serendipity which tweaks something inside him and fortuitously saves his life.

When we first read Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Dream of the Ridiculous Man", we perceive the character of the ridiculous man as a social recluse. From the very beginning, he admits that he had always felt ridiculous right from the age of seven. He loses interest in the company of his friends and says, "Nothing in the world mattered". He confesses his enthusiasm towards life had been dimming slowly signaling his estrangement from life as well as from himself. Initially in the novella, his character may resemble a nihilist one. However, after a deeper examination I have tried to construe him through the attributes of a social recluse. The Nihilism movement in Russia created a wave of youth called the "New Man" of the 1860s. These nihilist young men displayed their love towards scientific materialism and utilitarianism which is a totally opposite ideology from the ridiculous man. There is no evidence of the ridiculous man demonstrating these ideologies and activism. For example, the nihilist characters like Bazarov from Ivan Turgenev's "Father and Son" as well as Pytor Verkhovensky from "Demons" display characteristics of a nihilist idealist. Though, conventionally, the ridiculous man has elements of a nihilist void within him, we can also negate the fact that he lacks the nihilistic trait in the ideological sense.

Therefore, to delve into the psychology of the ridiculous man, I have used the concept of 'boredom' to understand and trace his journey towards "Self-actualization". The ridiculous man does not seem to be suffering from a case of normal boredom but a pathological one or *spleen*¹. However, in the ridiculous man's situation the type of boredom that resonates is the way Kafry and Pines defines boredom not only as a lack of stimulation but a malady known as "Tedium". Tedium has been described as, "a general experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion...characterized by feelings of strain and burnout ...and by negative attitude towards oneself, one's environment and one's life" (433). "Tedium Vitae" also has its roots in the teachings of Seneca and is also responsible for triggering suicide. It resonates with the idea that life is extremely dull and to feel crushed by the weight of an existential dread. Martin Heidegger says that "Boredom is a confrontation with time." Tedium also prolongs time except it is excruciatingly unbearable. The prolonged time intensifies the chronic boredom of the ridiculous man which eventually leaves him with no choice but to take his own life. The ridiculous man reminisce his past days where he was seen as a "ridiculous individual" which had also traumatized him. It was also the reason why he became a social recluse. He confesses that he was always laughed at for being ridiculous even during his school days. However, according to the ridiculous man, he felt they knew nothing about his absurdity and malice as much as he knew about himself. The ridiculous man also feared about giving up information to his school friends on his decision to commit suicide. Hence, this confession displays his inner conflict and desire to self-destruct because of feeling ostracized. Later in his life, this ostracization amplified into intense *Tedium* or *ennui*, so death for him is not only a tragic end but also a means to escape life altogether.

¹ Charles Baudelaire concept of acute boredom.

In modernist literature, words like “Boredom” are often replaced by rhetoric such as “stillness”, “Dull”, “weary”, “nothing”, “emptiness” and “tired”. Although they are different forms of expression the meaning that it derives are almost similar, except the extremity of boredom is best expressed without the use of rhetoric but through ennui, spleen and Tedium. Ralph Clare in his essay, “The politics of Boredom and Boredom of politics” talks about David Foster Wallace’s “The Pale King”, where he addresses the problem of defining boredom and deeming it significantly as a modern problem. David Foster in his “Pale King” attempts to investigate boredom and its complexity (430 Clare). In “Notes and aside” at the end of the novel, David Foster Wallace writes, “ it turns out bliss...lies on the other side of crushing boredom. Pay attention to the most tedious thing you can find..., and, in waves, boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you...Ride these out and it’s like stepping from black and white to color” (546pale king). Wallace’s observation suggest that individual’s search for meaning and finding one’s true self is only possible by confronting boredom. One has to wrestle his way through the tedium. The struggle is not about defeating one’s tedium but to come out the other side with meaning. To escape from the recurring attack of tedium, meaning should be established first and foremost. Similarly, in this essay I have intended to show how the ridiculous man gains mental acuity after his experience with chronic boredom while he embodies the elements of a social recluse stripping away all the zeal for life. In the “Pale King”, David foster Wallace addresses anxiety – the “dread” that one feels while confronted with overwhelming responsibilities. He discusses the extreme tedium of the employees in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) where repetitive bureaucratic work takes a toll on the employee’s existence. Therefore Wallace in his novel portrays boredom as a state that one can either try to avoid or embrace. In the case of the Ridiculous man, he at first tries to escape it but later through his corporeal dream he embraces the life that he intensely deterred. This whole idea can be well articulated through Soren Kierkegaard, he argues that “there is no ‘true core’ that an individual always already ‘is’ or ‘has ‘and’ that underlies selfhood. “Becoming” a self is the task of Human Life (250 Dulk). The identity of the ‘self’ is not easily shaped but through trials and tribulations. Individual before it transcends into its true ‘self’ needs to understand and learn about his limitations, weakness and ability. The ‘Self’ therefore is always in the state of “becoming”. Here, the ridiculous man’s endurance of his existential despair through his dream eventually gains renewal of his faith and spirituality.

The scene where the Ridiculous Man contemplates suicide after he witnesses the star is also absolutely bizarre. Nothing interests him, even when the little girl pleads for his help he dismisses the little girl and walks away. His estrangement becomes prominent during this interaction with the little girl. His tedium weighs on him hindering his ability to indulge in both the ecstasies as well as the ordeals of life. Thus suicide becomes an apparent reason after his absence to feel and display emotions. However, when he witnesses the star, this single thought of committing suicide stirs intensely within him. Here suicide becomes an agency to feel something other than his lifeless existence. Suicide for him is not only an end to life but to experience the jolt of life or intense pain amidst his numb existence. In “The Concept of Irony”, Kierkegaard calls existence as, “eternity devoid of content” (285 Dulk). It is within these hollow conditions, human beings tries to establish meaning and content fighting against one’s lifelong tedium. Allard Den Dulk, entails that “the dynamic of seeking distraction from nothingness which leads to even deeper boredom, emptiness and unhappiness” (56 Dulk). Allard Den here emphasizes how human being in their quest for distraction and content often leads to various forms of addiction which have also been exemplified in Wallace’s “The Infinite Jest”. External stimulants are an immediate way of escaping boredom. As a result, when these stimulants disappear, more acute tedium sets in. In Dostoevsky’s “The

Underground Man”, the underground man says to his readers that he has been suffering from an extreme case of boredom. In order to escape boredom, the underground man chooses to write about his life in the underground. Writing acts as a stimulant for the underground that keeps him occupied most of his time. It is therefore extremely important to divert the self into meaningful activities. Thereby, an individual can commit themselves to the world and start to take up their task of self-becoming. In this way, boredom can lead human beings back to meaning and real existence (58 Dulk).

Svidrigailov, a nihilist character in “Crime and Punishment” commits suicide because of his realization that he could never win the love of Dunya. Committing suicide is a way to free his body from the burden of expectation which is a case of unreturned love from Dunya. Kirillov another character of Dostoevsky’s “Demons” commits suicide to prove himself as the prototype of Mankind who acts according to his free will. His suicide is an act of rebellion against the laws of nature and God, Kirillov quotes, “ I am bound to shoot myself because the highest point of my self- will is to kill myself with my own hands.” However, in the Ridiculous man’s case, his pathological boredom becomes the root cause of contemplating suicide. Soon it becomes an inescapable burden that starts gnawing him each day. Suicide for him is an escape from the extreme boredom of life failing to recreate the spark of life. Towards the end, however, his eventual act of embracing life becomes only possible when he immerses in the world of dreams.

In Literature, dreams have always played a significant role. For example, In Homer’s “Illiad”. Zeus deceives the Greek King Agamemnon by advising him in a dream to advance his warrior, Achilles. In another Homeric tale, Penelope who is Odysseus’s wife conceives a prophetic dream about an eagle killing twenty geese- a dream interpreted as her husband coming to vanquish her suitors for her hand in marriage. These dreams foreshadow a certain coming of event and could be classified as “Prophetic dreams”. Contrary to this idea I have tried to understand the dreams of the Ridiculous man not as a prophetic dream but through the concept of “Maladaptive day-dreaming”. A prophetic dream is apparent, mostly revealing the outcomes of the future. However, in the case of the Ridiculous man his dreams lead him to spiritual awakening. After he transgresses to the simulated world which is a utopian image of the real world, he soon becomes the reason of corruption. Through this amalgam of experiences he learns about destruction, corruption but essentially the significance of love towards others. This dream though in technical aspect does not follow the repetitive pattern of “maladaptive day-dreaming” but it shares certain attributes of it.

Firstly, maladaptive day-dreaming is more than an occasional and harmless day dreaming. In maladaptive day-dreaming, the dreams are excessive, vivid, detailed and extremely engrossing that it can take hours of a person’s time. These dreams even hinder a person’s social life because of their deep entanglement with the dreams. Though maladaptive day-dreaming follows a recurring pattern and is more frequent. The Ridiculous Man’s dream does not follow this recurring pattern but his dreams do imbibe the detailed scenario which can be found in the cases of maladaptive day-dreaming. While dreams are a natural phenomenon and everyone dreams in a regular basis. Some dreams have connection to the real life while some doesn’t. In maladaptive day-dreaming, the dreamer’s dream acts as a coping mechanism for the lack of social interaction, emotional stress and loneliness. According to Thompson, “people who are alone tend to have vivid imaginations, love day dreaming and enjoy telling stories. It is loneliness and the capacity for solitude that foster daydreaming and growth of the creative mind,” (Peplau, Thompson). The Ridiculous man has always been a solitary figure. Even when we are introduced to his apartment set in the fifth storey. He talks about his fellow neighbors and the

commotions in the building but he remains mostly isolated and not displaying signs of being bothered by the ruckus at all. He says,

“I sit up all night and forget them so completely that I do not even hear them. I stay awake till daybreak, and have been going on like that for the last year. I sit up all night in my arm-chair at the table, doing nothing. I only read by day. I sit--don't even think; ideas of a sort wander through my mind and I let them come and go as they will. A whole candle is burnt every night. I sat down quietly at the table, took out the revolver and put it down before me”(2).

Most of the time, the ridiculous man is seen spending his time in existential numbness. The only activity he engages in is reading books besides that he is encapsulated by his chronic tedium. This amplified tedium is so loud even the noises around him are barred. It is only through dreams he realizes his true mission in life. The ridiculous man talks of dreams, “Let it be a dream, so be it, but that real life of which you make so much I had meant to extinguish by suicide, and my dream, my dream--oh, it revealed to me a different life, renewed, grand and full of power!”(10). He soon realizes that he survived his chronic tedium only through his revelation of dreams. The agony he feels while buried in a coffin and water droplets falling in his eyes is a moment he had never anticipated in his real life. Dreams not only lead him to self-actualization but it also reveals the daunting epiphany that follows after a person dies. Therefore, his dreams no longer qualify as an ordinary dream but follow detailed patterns of maladaptive day-dreaming. Dreams also give him access to the possibility of what might happen after he dies. He had eventually misinterpreted the preconceived notion that suicide would finally put an end to his boredom and existential numbness but as it turned out he is sucked into a tapestry of vivid abstract experiences.

In some strands of the story, I have also found certain affinities to concept of “lucid dreaming” because, if we look into the dreams of the ridiculous man, he transitions into a world similar to earth but more is utopian in nature. His dreams start to unfold right from his apartment after shooting himself in the heart. His experience has a realistic touch and his transcend into a meta-physical world also resembles the experience of an “Astral projection” which is a practise closely related to lucid dreaming. Dostoevsky here deliberately blurs the line between dream and reality. While he is being carried away by the ‘being’ he also gets a closer look at the stars that triggered in him the very idea of committing suicide. Therefore we can trace the sequence of the dreams right from the chair where he decided to commit suicide. Even if it is a dream, the ridiculous man is highly consciousness. This consciousness can mostly be found in lucid dreaming where one also has the ability to manipulate the dreamscape. He also thinks about how there is life after death because he remembers the pang after he shoots himself in the dream. However, the pang was not from the bullet wound but the somberness of death and the coldness that comes with it. His dream not only connects him to the “self-actualitized” version of him but also exposes him to the desolation of being alone buried inside a wet and cold grave. Therefore, Dostoevsky is using the concept of dreams in this novella not only as tool for existential reawakening or towards self-actualization but also as something that propels the unprecedented gloom of death.

Carl Jung argues that, “Not all dreams are merely iterative of unresolved childhood conflicts, but are efforts to reposition the self in the social world and to constitute identities by fitting new experiences into existing narratives of self” (49 Ewing). This also suggests the dreams of the ridiculous man as an opportunity to reinstate his value back in the eyes of the world. Douglas Hollan says that the reconfiguration of the self in dreams mostly stems from an articulation of existing self schemas with everyday experiences. The “dreams” of the ridiculous man functions as an event to restore the value and

essence of his life. It is also the result of his chronic tedium or ennui that had strong hold over his waking life and subconsciously slips into this utopian world which was similar to the one he came from. The idealized world he had designed unconsciously materialized through his dreams.

According to Kelly Bulkeley, Lewis Carroll the author of the whimsical book “Alice in wonderland” was subtly illustrating his young listeners about the true nature of dreaming. She says that Carroll was “cultivating their critical capacity to look beyond the status quo of supposedly “normal” imperial reality. He taught them to question at the most fundamental level of ‘what is’, and to imagine with the greatest creative freedom ‘what might be’ (Bulkeley 49). Also in the case of the ridiculous man, dreaming stimulated the psyche of the ridiculous man altering his perception about his life as well as the world. Dreams in this sense not only become an existential escape but also aid to the journey of “Self Actualization”. Though in the later part of his dreams he confesses becoming their main source of corruption stating, “I will tell the truth. The fact is that I . . . corrupted them all!”(7). He not only regrets the vileness that emerges from his heart that has contaminated the minds of those utopian inhabitants. However, he tries to persuade them to take his life as well,

“Alas! I always loved sorrow and tribulation, but only for myself, for myself; but I wept over them, pitying them... I could not kill myself, I had not the strength, but I wanted to suffer at their hands. I yearned for suffering, I longed that my blood should be drained to the last drop in these agonies. But they only laughed at me, and began at last to look upon me as crazy”(8).

The above passage reveals the profound change of the ridiculous man’s dream-self in the utopian world. Unlike the real world where he had experienced existential and emotional numbness, here he feels remorse, empathy and guilt. It is through his dream he find the renewal of vision to see the world in a new light. Abraham Maslow explains the concept of self-actualization as a psychological growth. It is human-centered, based on human needs with full realization of human potential as its final goal. Karen Horeny also writes “Each person naturally strives for self-realization and self-actualization: in each of us there is a desire for personality development, the desire to become a strong and integral person, in each of us the abilities and talents, usually inhibited by neurotic tendencies, doze”(17 Horeny). The correlation here between dreams and self-actualization is how the simulation of the real world in his dreams creates the “value realization” of the real world. The dream world ultimately realigns itself as his real world where the latter was only filled with pathological tedium and resentment.

The Ridiculous Man’s journey to self-actualization is not only through the dreams but starts from the moment he was induced by his extreme boredom. He attains self-actualization not only by learning the “laws of happiness” but realizing the intrinsic value of life and living. Formerly, he never valued his life but in his dreams even though he became the main source of corruption, he was engaged in worldly affairs. This whole affair can also be understood through Heidegger’s concept of “being in the world”, where human beings derive meaning through interaction, relations and involvement. Therefore the ridiculous man in his stimulated world engages in communions where he was exposed to love and suffering that eventually gave him meaning. He mentions how he felt a jolt of ecstasy and a fresh attitude towards life after he wakes up from his dream, “While I was standing and coming to myself I suddenly caught sight of my revolver lying loaded, ready - but instantly I thrust it away! Oh, now, life, life! I lifted up my hands and called upon eternal truth, not with words, but with tears; ecstasy, immeasurable ecstasy flooded my soul” (9). In his real world he remained passive but in the dream world he was a central figure and had more emotional participation. He says, “. I could not kill myself, I had not the strength, but I wanted to suffer at their hands. I yearned for suffering, I longed that my blood

should be drained to the last drop in these agonies. But they only laughed at me, and began at last to look upon me as crazy”(9). Prior to his decision to kill himself, now the ridiculous man lives not for himself but for the sake of others. He no longer bothered, even if the world continued to perceive him as the “ridiculous figure”. It is because his main objective of life became spreading compassion, truth and love and attaining self-actualization.

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