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Marx and Freud depended so much on underground imagery that it is now virtually impossible to read a text about the underworld without filtering it through a Marxist or Freudian interpretation, Williams claims.

More literally, the underground basis of modern industry began between the late 1700s and the late 1800s with the building of a transportation network of canals and railroads. The construction of sewers, water mains, steam pipes, subways, telephone lines, and electrical cables followed, requiring interaction and coordination of the city aboveground with its vital innards below.

As new material foundations of industrial and urban life were laid, so were new social foundations. Excavation projects were metaphors for profound changes being made in existing society and even for the abstract progress of civilization. Established neighborhoods and communities were uprooted for the construction of subway lines. Daily traffic patterns and workplaces were changing because of the rapid transit subways offered. With such advances came anxiety about the new order. In the nineteenth century another type of underground story appeared: The underworld became a place where people not only visited but actually lived.

In Jules Verne’s 1864 *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, human life underground is completely independent of the surface world. This idea of permanently living below the surface of the earth coincided with the development of modern science and technology. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the possibility that the earth was hollow and habitable still had some respectable advocates. As scientific knowledge advanced, the idea of discovering a hidden inner world became less and less credible. However, with the march of technology, the idea of building an inner world became more and more legitimate.

The technological possibility of building an underground society brought concerns of social engineering, and with them, a profound fear that technology was growing beyond society’s control. While technology progressed, H. G. Wells complained that its uncontrolled growth and society’s uncritical faith in growth for its own sake might lead to a degenerative society that abused the working class. Wells’s narrator of the *Time Machine* explains to his readers of the 1890s that, although the evolution of an underground species might seem grotesque, “even now there are existing circumstances to point that way.”

“There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways, there are subways, there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply,” Wells wrote. “Evidently, I thought, this tendency has increased till Industry had gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time therein, till, in the end—! Even now, does an East-End worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?”

In exploring the implications of underground technological growth in the future, Wells touched on a past truth: underground laborers throughout history have been considered a lower form of life. Slaves of Egypt and Rome were forced to live and work in their mines. After the Middle Ages, subterranean life was experienced only by those at the bottom of the social ladder; the underground lost its “nurturing mother” mystique.

Most underground laborers were serfs, slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war. Mining was often a form of punishment. In almost all cases, their working conditions were morbidly inhumane. In the United States, convicts, prisoners of war, and slaves worked the underground until the Industrial Revolution when such labor, particularly mining, was reserved for immigrants—the newest segment of the

population and the one most desperate for money. The social degradation of underground laborers helps explain why the underworld came to be dreaded as a region of sorrow and death.

In the nineteenth century for the first time, railway and subway tunnels allowed the middle and even upper classes to taste the underground. The experience of being disconnected from nature and immersed in an artificial environment was no longer limited to lower classes and social outcasts. The more known and utilized for society's benefit, the less frightening and ugly the underground became. Gradually, with the advent of technology as an ideal—particularly with the advent of electricity to light the lower regions—the underworld came to be perceived as remote but also magical and sublime.

Some writers came forward in rebellion against the underground and technology, seeing it as a threat to society's future. H. G. Wells consciously used his stories to consider the relationship between technological progress and human degeneration. In the *Time Machine*, he displays fear that workers will become increasingly brutalized as their labor becomes more mechanized and repetitive, with the individual disappearing into a hostile collective force underground. He warns of “people calmly developing, in regions excluded from our sight and deemed uninhabitable by our sages, power surpassing our most disciplined modes of force.”

“The ages may yet elapse,” wrote Wells, “before there emerge into sunlight our inevitable destroyers.”

In today's world, the word *underground* carries a mosaic of contemporary social and political images, such as revolution, avant-garde newspapers, organized crime, left-wing terrorism, and drug trafficking. There is also the concept in literature of the “underground man,” who is the ultimate dissident from the modern world. Literary critic Edward F. Abood, while acknowledging that his *Underground Man* is a twentieth-century creature, guides us back to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

“Dostoyevsky's classic literary figure, an immortal neurotic, speaks to more kindred souls today than he did in 1864,” Abood writes.^[7] (/read-267812/?page=32#n_7) According to Abood, the underground man is a rebel against prevailing norms of the society he lives in and the forces that perpetuate them. His action (if he is capable of action) is always essentially personal. Even when he joins a group, his commitment is subjective, and he is thus ultimately isolated. He denies other codes of conduct, particularly the values by which the majority of his contemporaries live. Consequently he exists in a constant state of tension and anxiety, aggravated by what is perhaps his most distinguishing quality—a keen and often morbid sensibility.

This underground human is far from a romantic hero, primarily because his self is his main cause of agony. He is isolated, not because he chooses isolation, but because it is his burden and his fate.

Most characteristic of the underground man is his extreme withdrawal and isolation. He is a self-declared exile from human society, with which he maintains only as much contact as is necessary for survival. He has rejected the world outside, but, at the same time, he harbors an elementary fear that he will be forgotten in his “mousehole,” as Dostoyevsky's hero referred to his home. Though he has chosen his own exile, he finds society's indifference of him intolerable. His apartment is not a retreat but is more like a jail. Ultimately, he has nothing to believe in. He experiences anguish, estrangement, heightened consciousness turning in upon itself, and impotent rage at being reduced, misunderstood, and finally, forgotten.

The best amalgamation of the metaphorical and literal underground man is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. He comes closest to telling it the way many tunnel dwellers see their situation—that they have been pushed underground by a society that considers them lost, without identities. In Ellison's terms, they are “invisible.”

Ellison's protagonist is an African-American man who explains that he is invisible in New York's racist society of the fifties “simply because people refuse to see me.” He struggles to survive aboveground, but, in the end, he is literally chased by a mob into an abandoned coal pit under the streets of Harlem. White men cover the top with a heavy iron lid, imprisoning him.

“You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world,” he says, “that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.”

He returns aboveground but decides he really belongs in a “hole” because it more honestly and correctly expresses his invisibility. “I did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility,” he explains. Invisible and underground, he sets up a home, siphons off electricity, and lives. From there, he seeks retribution for society's poor sight. He wages his own independent fight against society and its institutions in his own terms, such as stealing the electricity of Monopolated Light & Power.

“They suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where.... Several years ago I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment and my old way of life. That was based on the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free [under] a building rented strictly to whites, in a section ... that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century.”

Is he abdicating his responsibility to humankind?

“Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; anyway you face it, it is denial,” he admits. “But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? and wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests on recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.”

In a passage that resonates in the tunnels of today's underground homeless, for it articulates their reasons for taking peace underground, Ellison's invisible man insists that he has not run into the earth because of fear or self-pity.

“I found a home—or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a hole, it is damp and cold like a grave. There are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole.... My hole is warm and full of light. Yes *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all of New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a

photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our civilization."

Ellison ends his book with the invisible man deciding to stay underground until he is chased out. "Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning."

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Wanderers

NEAR THE ENTRANCES TO SOME TUNNELS THERE ARE WANDERERS, those who meander, drift, and almost seep unknowingly and unintentionally toward the underground. They are usually exhausted, mentally ill, or drugged. Some are simply looking for shelter from the weather or for a place that promises uninterrupted sleep. Some seek a place to shoot, snort, smoke, or drink drugs. Others look to submerge their depression in solitude.

The underground is a dangerous place for wanderers. Most are unaware of the electrified third rail, of tracks that can trap unwary feet, and of the speed of oncoming trains and the disorienting effect of their blinding headlights.

However, the most feared by wanderers are the gangs of youths, primarily in their early to mid-teens, who roam tunnels for helpless prey.

"Yeah, sure, we're looking for violence if you wanna put it that way," says a boy who calls himself "Stealth." He is fourteen years old, and, at about five foot seven, the largest of a gang of four boys who enter a tunnel near Riverside Park one afternoon while playing hookey from school. They are excited and edgy as they walk dangerously close to discovering some underground homeless they seek. One swings a wooden plank at the air, another is mesmerized by the leaping flame of his lighter. Their eyes are wide and disbelieving of the underground, and they keep close to each other, none willing to trail too far behind.

"These people down here ain't people," says Stealth as he approaches, uneasy at first but more confident as he tries to show leadership. "They're mole people." His head goes back in a laugh meant to be tough. One of the other kids giggles, another crinkles his nose and squeezes his eyes together to mime an ugly rodent face.

"They're moles," Stealth repeats. "No one cares what happens to them anyway."

They have no parents? or family?

Stealth pauses. He looks toward his twelve-year-old cousin, but Little Man, as he's called, is bewildered by the question.

"C'mon," he orders the others with a sharp jerk of his head back toward the entrance. "This is bullshit. I don't care who they are. They're ugly." As he saunters out, he looks back at me and says, "Anyway, we're doing you a favor, getting rid of these moles. The police would do it if they were allowed. You should thank us."

Real criminals, who not much older than Stealth and his gang, use the tunnels as meeting sites, hideouts, places to cache stolen goods including money and sometimes drugs—although the dampness damages dry powders. Even huge, five-gallon containers of flammable chemicals used to convert some drugs into more potent or more transportable forms are hidden underground.

Drug dealers and gangs of older males are less inclined to search out wanderers for senseless killing. "We got bigger things on our mind than outtin' a mole," one says, but they are no less violent toward underground homeless who may anger them.

"Killin' down here ain't like on the streets," says Slam, a beefy twenty-two-year-old whose scarred face displays a record of his battles. "It's harder to kill a dog on the streets than it is to do someone down here." Fewer eyes, he indicates.

Slam explains that the tunnels are also convenient for disposing of people murdered on the surface because they are hardly policed and contain many niches into which bodies can be hidden to decay beyond recognition.

"The tunnels are right for crime," Slam says, chillingly calm. "Look at them; they made for it."

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Harlem Gang

"In a world where you have to struggle to survive, I don't know how much 'goodness' is worth."

—Walter Mosley (*mystery writer*)

UNDERGROUND CRIMINALS BRAG THAT THEY DO NOT THINK twice about killing someone who happens across them at the wrong time. One of these gangs meets near the IRT (Interborough Rapid Transit) subway tunnels around 125th Street in Harlem, as I discover accidentally.