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An analysis of foil characters and how they illustrate the fact that everybody perceives differently in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, translated by Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov.

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# A Villain of Their Time

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*A Hero of Our Time* is a novel by Mikhail Lermontov and translated by Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov. In his novel, Lermontov shows Pechorin, the main character, through the eyes of foil characters like Maksim Maksimych, Werner, and Princess Mary. Each character develops a different image of Pechorin; however, with every character, regardless of gender or age, Lermontov illustrates the existence of a judgment flaw: a gap between what they think are Pechorin's motives and his actual motives. Thus, Lermontov, through the flawed judgment of Pechorin by foil characters, emphasizes that everybody perceives differently.

The judgment flaw of Lermontov's first foil character, Maksim Maksimych, is that he ignores Pechorin's faults. Simply put, Pechorin does not always do the most laudable things, like when he kidnapped Bela. Maksimych, instead of focusing on the fact that Pechorin kidnapped a young girl from her village, focuses on how "Pechorin would make [Bela] some present every day" (Lermontov 35). In the face of an offense like a kidnapping, a "reconciliatory present" hardly seems adequate: especially so after it becomes apparent that Pechorin merely seduced her to ease his boredom,

hoping "[t]he love of a wild girl [was better] than that of a lady of rank" (Lermontov 48). Here, Lermontov illustrates the gap between Maksimych's perception of Pechorin and reality; where Maksimych sees Pechorin giving presents, Pechorin thinks of using Bela to ease his boredom. Later, around the time when Pechorin and Maksimych reunite, Lermontov again emphasizes Maksimych's flawed perception of Pechorin. Maksimych, after hearing that Pechorin was in town, believes that "[Pechorin would] come right away at a run" (Lermontov 59), but is instead met with "a friendly smile [and a] stretched out [hand]" (Lermontov 62). Lermontov, in this scene, uses a different method: first, he introduces Maksimych's false image, then counters it with the "real" Pechorin. Even so, Lermentov still effectively demonstrates that Maksimych has a false perception of Pechorin. Maksimych still believes, even after learning that Pechorin gets bored with most *everything*—even a woman's love—that Pechorin will come to him as an "old pal". Lermontov further emphasizes this when Maksimych says to Pechorin, "[t]his is not the way I thought we would meet again" (Lermontov 63), referring to Pechorin's "cold" treatment of Maksimych upon their reunion. Simply the fact that Maksimych had a different expectation for his reunion with Pechorin reinforces Lermontov's point: Maksimych's flawed judgment is illustrated through Lermontov's comparison of Maksimych's relatively "flawless" image of Pechorin to the *real* Pechorin.

Werner's judgment flaw, on the other hand, is that he assumes Pechorin's motives are mostly intellectual in nature, while in reality, Pechorin is much more affected by his emotions. Later in *Princess Mary*, when Werner finishes talking to Pechorin about being careful of marriage, he assumes that

Pechorin would heed his advice, "convinced that [he] had put [Pechorin] on his guard" (Lermontov 129). However, Pechorin only focuses on the fact that rumors have been spread about him by Grushnitsky, and that "[he would] have to pay" (Lermontov 129). Here, Lermontov unearths an obvious contrast between Werner's image of Pechorin and Pechorin himself. On one hand, a forced marriage could end Pechorin's current lifestyle, on the other, a personal affront of sorts. Where Werner believes Pechorin will focus on the important information: that Pechorin should beware of being obliged to marry, Pechorin focuses on the fact that Grushnitsky spread a rumor about him. Lermontov, through this contrast, emphasizes Werner's false image of Pechorin. When Werner is first introduced, Lermontov outlines Werner's false image: as he is having a philosophical discussion with Pechorin, Pechorin remarks that "between [them] there can be no exchange of feelings and thoughts" (Lermontov 92). While this is Pechorin's own statement, it can speak for Werner's perspective of Pechorin; Werner's image of Pechorin is governed by what he is "shown", per se. If Pechorin chooses not to exchange feelings or thoughts, then all Werner will see in Pechorin is the intellectual. Lermontov, however, shatters this image during Pechorin's duel with Grushnitsky. Before the duel, Werner asks Pechorin to immediately expose the trickery of Grushnitsky; Pechorin simply responds that he wants "[Grushnitsky to] hugger-mugger a little" (Lermontov 150). There is no difference in the end result—a bullet in Pechorin's weapon—whether he does it earlier or later; the only difference is that Pechorin gets to see Grushnitsky struggle with his own reservations about the duel. Essentially, Pechorin does it as a form of entertainment for himself, not for efficiency or strategy. Lermontov's

contrast of Pechorin's "entertainment" and Werner's intellectualized image of Pechorin reinforces the fact that Werner's image is false, and, ultimately, Lermontov's contrast of Werner's image of Pechorin and Pechorin's emotions uncovers the fact that Werner's judgment of Pechorin is flawed.

Finally, Princess Mary: her judgment flaw is that she assumes that Pechorin is a grand, upper-class figure, while Pechorin is actually vain, and acts on his own desires. Princess Mary's first introduction to Pechorin does not come courtesy of himeself; it comes instead through her mother. After Princess Ligovsky describes Pechorin's "exploits [to Princess Mary]...in [her] imagination, [Pechorin] became the hero of a novel" (Lermontov 93). This, especially after Werner mentions that Princess Ligovsky must have met Pechorin "in Petersburg [] at some fashionable reception" (Lermontov 93), makes Pechorin seem like the classic upper-class figure. Lermontov continues to construct this image during the ball when Pechorin protects her from a drunken man, and "[is] rewarded by a deep, wonderful glance" (Lermontov 109). Here, Lermontov strengthen's Mary's image of Pechorin as being a grand figure using the stereotypical "male hero saves maiden" image. However, Lermontov quickly disproves Mary's image when she openly declares her love for him. Pechorin, in response, says curtly: "What for?" (Lermontov 133). This transaction is interesting because it occurs immediately after Princess Mary considers the possibility that Pechorin could just be toying with her "to trouble [her] soul, and then leave [her]" (Lermontov 133), but, in the end, displaying "tender trust" (Lermontov 133). Suddenly, the phrase "What for?" has a different meaning: Pechorin does not care. Lermontov, through this, counters Mary's grand image of Pechorin with the reality: Pe-

chorin is more interested in himself than the people around him. Lermontov, at the end of *Princess Mary*, makes a final blow to Mary's image of Pechorin, when Pechorin questions Princess Mary with: "Am I not right that even if you loved me, from that moment on you despise me?" (Lermontov 162). After all, Pechorin could not marry her; he was just using her to prevent himself from "[feeling] bored and oppressed" (Lermontov 162). Lermontov emphasizes Pechorin's vanity, that his need for stimulation takes priority; and, through this, exposes the flaw in Mary's judgment. Princess Mary saw Pechorin as he was initially presented to her, and Lermontov illustrates Princess Mary's judgment flaw through her relationship with Pechorin, and how Pechorin treats her through the course of their relationship.

To recapitulate: Maksim Maksimych sees Pechorin as relatively "flawless" when compared to "real" Pechorin; Werner sees Pechorin as almost exclusively intellectual, while "real" Pechorin is not always in control of his emotions; and Princess Mary sees Pechorin as a grand upper-classman, while he is, in fact, vain and acts in response to his desires. Every one of these judgments is flawed, and every one of them is different. Therein lies Lermontov's argument: everybody perceives differently. Lermontov's use of disordered chronology, his use of layered narrative, the unnamed narrators redactions of Pechorin's journal: all were simply examples of Lermontov's argument. Everybody perceives differently because nobody has all of the information available to them: not even the reader.

# Works Cited

Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. Trans. Vladimir Nabokov and Dmitri Nabokov. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Print.