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A Literary Analysis of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*

*A Hero of Our Time* is a Russian novel written by Mikhail Lermontov and translated by Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov. The main character of the novel is Pechorin, a situational hero with a superfluous existence. Lermontov, by using foil characters to portray Pechorin from different perspectives, alters how Pechorin is viewed as a character in each of his interactions with the foil characters. Thus, Lermontov expresses how perceptions do not reflect the truth because they are manipulated by our personal beliefs and experiences.

Maksim Maksimych's ignorance of Pechorin's shortcomings is a product of Maksim's own shortcomings. Maksim would rather see Pechorin in his own distorted way than see him in reality.

Pechorin "[is]...a charming fellow" (Lermontov 23) according to Maksim. Maksim only focuses on what he perceives as fitting of his ideal persona. Saying that Pechorin is "charming" is a representation of this ideal persona. Maksim is not the most charming character; he is rather coarse in both culture and speech. Maksim, to compensate for his own shortcomings, projects his ideal persona onto Pechorin, and refuses to believe that Pechorin is not a hero, and may well be a monster. Lermontov emphasizes how the Pechorin Maksim sees and the Pechorin in reality are two different people. Maksim's projection only covers up the imperfect Pechorin that he does not want to see. Even though "[Pechorin] cause[s] [Maksim] no end of trouble, [that]...is not what Maksim [chooses] to remember him by" (Lermontov 23). Lermontov explores how people, regardless of circumstance, only choose to perceive what they want to perceive, and how Maksim, ignoring all of Pechorin's mistakes, maintains that Pechorin is a "Hero" figure; he believes that it was "assigned, at [Pechorin's] birth, to have all sorts of extraordinary things happen to [him]" (Lermontov 23). Lermontov exposes a key fact with Maksim: Maksim is not upholding Pechorin

as a hero. Instead, Maksim is uplifting his ideal hero, cast onto Pechorin, as a hero. Lermontov extends this to perceptions, that they are not the product of logic and reason, but more the product of emotion: love, hatred, envy, vanity. Maksim “is nonplussed” (Lermontov 34) after hearing Pechorin explain his reasoning for kidnapping Bela. Lermontov notes that what people cannot understand, they ignore, as it unbalances their overall perception of the world around them. Maksim cannot understand why Pechorin chose to kidnap Bela, so he passes over the reasons behind Pechorin’s actions in lieu of his preferred reality.

Grushnitsky’s inability to see beyond his own shortcomings makes him unable to see that Pechorin is also a less than ideal character.

Grushnitsky’s envy for Pechorin is resultant from his pride; while Grushnitsky “has the reputation of an exceptionally brave man” (Lermontov 85), he cannot become the hero of a novel as Pechorin supposedly is. Grushnitsky “rushes [into battle] with closed eyes” (Lermontov 85) which, according to Pechorin “is not Russian courage” (Lermontov 85). Grushnitsky, almost in retaliation, creates an alternate image for himself, trying to imitate what seems to come to Pechorin so naturally. Lermontov shows how Grushnitsky, in his efforts to protect his pride, produces a false expectation of himself by comparing himself to someone he is not. When Pechorin expresses his indifference at Grushnitsky’s relationship with Princess Mary, Grushnitsky, his pride hurt, says “‘so much the worse for you’” (Lermontov 105). Essentially, Lermontov emphasizes Grushnitsky’s lack of self-composure in the face of indifference. Lermontov seems to extend this to how Grushnitsky cannot see beyond his own faults into Pechorin’s own. When Grushnitsky finally realizes that Pechorin is as imperfect as him, he “despise[s] [himself] and hate[s] [Pechorin]” (Lermontov 155) for trying to emulate the monster that had, moments before, promised that he would kill Grushnitsky without hesitation. Lermontov seems to explain, through Grushnitsky’s final realization, that regardless of power and influence, perceptions will always be limited by what people want, not by what they have.

Princess Mary’s innocence in regards to social interaction makes it easy for Pechorin to manipulate her perception of him.

After Pechorin ignores Princess Mary, she “accuses herself of having treated [Pechorin] coldly” (Lermontov 126), while it is actually Pechorin manipulating her. Princess Mary cannot see past the fact that while the men around her are constantly chasing her, Pechorin is indifferent to her existence. Lermontov seems to suggest that people try to adhere to a specific perspective with specific expectations. When Pechorin is indifferent to Princess Mary, Princess Mary cannot make sense of why Pechorin is indifferent. Her perception shifts away from *who* Pechorin is to *why* Pechorin is not paying attention to her. Pechorin effectively skips his introduction to Princess Mary, and immediately gets to occupying her thoughts, “[bringing] [her] to a point where [she can] convince [herself]” (Lermontov 131) to love Pechorin. Princess Mary does not see or look for Pechorin’s true character. Much like Maksim Maksimych, she ignores Pechorin’s idiosyncrasies for what matters to her, passion.

After realizing the truth about Pechorin’s character, Maksim Maksimych, Grushnitsky, and Princess Mary all experience disillusionment with Pechorin. After realizing that Pechorin is not the loyal, charming, witty person that he idealized, Maksim Maksimych is immediately put off by Pechorin, as if “know[ing] all along that [Pechorin] was a volatile fellow on whom one could not rely” (Lermontov 64). Grushnitsky, after realizing that Pechorin is more of the monster than the hero of a novel, says that “[he] despise[s] [himself]” (Lermontov 155) for trying to be like a monster. Princess Mary, after understanding that Pechorin will not reciprocate on her feelings, says that “[she] hate[s] [Pechorin]” (Lermontov 162). Every character, after realizing the truth about Pechorin, cannot accept his reality, and reject him for it. Lermontov exposes the simple fact that people would rather accept a lie than a truth if the truth were contrary to their perceptions.