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To Love and Lose

Those who have chased after lost loves find solace in the words “Tis better to have loved and lost/Than never to have loved at all” from Lord Tennyson’s moving poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, but certainly not everybody finds is even capable of demonstrating such emotions, as Pechorin will demonstrate. In *A Hero of Our Time*, written by Mikhail Lermontov and translated by Paul Foote, the use of Grigory Alexandrovich Pechorin’s limited and dysfunctional relationships with the several female characters alongside the calmness that appears during internal monologues creates a gap that reveal the struggles of insecurity that he, and much of Russian society, faced. Lermontov explores the cowardice of human nature and teaches the reader to embrace the struggle of life and love instead of running away, as he saw in the aftermath of the Decembrist revolts.

Through Pechorin’s attempts to charm the various women of the novel, the reader discovers Pechorin’s blatant inability to love or interact with society. The first case emerges from Pechorin’s youth in an incident with an undine in Taman. Lermontov reveals Pechorin’s animalistic instincts when dealing with women, immediately taken over by “a moist passionate kiss”, finding that he is left with “black before my eyes” and his head swimming (66). With the blood drained from his head, Pechorin’s rational mind shuts down and he simply follows,

“before [he] realized what was happening” (67). Lermontov uses this moment of passion to reveal how powerless and weak Pechorin really is against other women, even though Pechorin thought that he was in control of the situation, remarking that “he was on the point of putting a highly prosaic end to the silence” earlier (66). Looking at the section as a whole, even though the tone of this portion of the journal revealed arrogance and boredom, what Pechorin writes conflicts with what he does, which is key to unlocking his mind. His hubris in dealing with the undine nearly leads to his immediate downfall, but in his journal, he still dares to remark on the romantic notion of “honest smugglers”, accidentally “shattering their calm”, instead of admitting his fault (68). In creating a gap between what is thought and what is done, Lermontov forces the reader to consider such unbecoming duality in regards to the true nature of Pechorin.

Pechorin’s interactions with Princess Mary are more prolonged and described, revealing much more of Pechorin’s delusions in his ability to charm others. Although Pechorin believes himself to be in control of the entire situation, remarking that he already “[knows] it all by heart”, his actions reveal a distinct cover-up effort (107). In the overtly dramatic but fake breakoff with Princess Mary, Pechorin leaves with a few parting shots and then “fell on [his] bed in a state of utter exhaustion” (114). Those who already know the script “by heart” should not be subject to such drastic emotions, yet Lermontov clearly continues to portray Pechorin as such, hinting to the reader of Pechorin’s lack of power. Although he attempts to exclaim how falling in love is “nonsense!”, his emotions continue to slip up, as seen in the final conversation with Princess Mary (114) In this emotionally charged monologue, even Pechorin admits that it “was getting too much ... another minute and [he’d] have fallen at his feet”, clearly revealing those same emotions that he denies ever having (147). Lermontov directly contrasts these emotions with just a moment before, where Pechorin “couldn’t find the least spark of love ... for [his] charming

Mary”, revealing the duality of nature which seems to lie within Pechorin and the contradictory character traits that he takes on (146). These sharp contrasts achieve the effect of displaying Pechorin as a foolish man who puts more into his words than his actions, believing himself in control of all but not able to control even his own life. Lermontov draws this image of contradiction within the reader’s minds between what Pechorin’s thoughts and his actions, demonstrating how fake Pechorin is. Thus, he also reveals to the reader how different – and useless – mere words or thoughts are if one is incapable of carrying out such actions.

Finally, a third key character interaction most deeply reveals the uncertainty Pechorin has towards to his own settlements. At the first mention of her description, his heart began “beating faster than normal”, and he actually feels a “desperate pang of sadness” (82-83). This rare expression of emotion comes from the chance encounter with Vera. Pechorin comes closest to expressing himself, but sadly, catches himself before he believes to have “fallen in love myself” (114). It seems that Pechorin has built a safety net around him out of fear, preventing himself from slipping through to access his emotions. Even in his dramatic breakdown after the duel and Vera’s letter, he quickly attempts to collect himself after he is overcome with emotion, exhibiting signs of covering up his inner feelings by rationalizing a despondent future. Lermontov uses his feeble attempts of cover-up as to reveal that Pechorin does have feelings deep down, but is just unable to express them due to deeply rooted internal conflicts.

While Pechorin contradicts himself multiple times through his actions with others, his mind is actually clear and focused when contemplating internal ideas. Instead of being bored with the standard procession of love, Pechorin’s writing style becomes lively and engaged, truly thinking about both sides of certain controversies and using more flowing, more lyrical language than seen in the rest of the book. The key argument against love is punctured with a series of

rhetorical questions, such as “Why do I bother? Is it envy of Grushnitsky?” and “...isn't that the first symptom and the supreme triumph of power?”(102-103). Lermontov also uses lengthy, legalistic sentences in crafting Pechorin's speech as well as thoroughly developing complicated trains of thought, providing a level of depth not seen elsewhere in the book. Further on in his life, within the chapter “The Fatalist”, he is able to poetically grasp the mystery in the heavens and the mystery of fate, concluding with the life lesson of how “the worst you can do is die, and you've got to die some time.” Pechorin's clear thinking in these passages mocks the haze at which he proceeds to interact with the women. Clearly, Pechorin is capable of rationally and methodically thinking out the dilemmas in his life. Thus, this begs the question: why doesn't he? Why isn't Pechorin able to apply this better view of life to his actions, instead of bottling them inside of him, leading to much of the boredom and frustration that the reader sees?

Lermontov's commentary through Pechorin's discrepancies reveals a psychological analysis portion to the novel, dealing with the human reaction of trust and openness, which Pechorin clearly lacks in this book. Why is Pechorin so sealed off from the rest of humanity, choosing to believe that he's “incapable of friendship” (79), instead of connecting at a deeper level with anyone? Lermontov's answer is clear, as Pechorin almost immediately remarks how he “can never be a slave” (79). That, along with a multitude of hints to the pride that is Pechorin's only refuge reveals a basic flaw in his character: his cowardice of losing even a sliver of dignity drives him away from others and into self-imposed isolation. Lermontov crafts Pechorin so that he doesn't dare reveal inner emotions to the other women, instead creating an alternative reality where he is the puppetmaster, in control of the strings of fate. However, when he does attempt to move out into the real world, his ego and emotions get in the way and the result is but a tangled mess.

The readers of this book often come off with the impression that Pechorin has been too hasty, or much too rash in his actions, effortlessly taking advantage of those around him for his own desire; however, they are only half correct. What Lermontov creates is a sad example of what Russian society would likely fall to if the current trend of indifference continued. After the crushing of the Decembrist revolt, many Russians dared not to oppose any more in fear of again being crushed or in fear of the established society. Lermontov's message was a clear rallying call, attempting to awake the masses to the problems they have avoided. However, his message still has clear implications to the modern reader as well. Who are we but more hopeless masses, longing to seek but too cautious to do so? Who are we but a cast of the brave and the foolish, rushing in with careless abandon for those things that hold passion? Lermontov warns the readers to not fall into the trap of self-neglect and self-pity, and to love, even if it will be lost, for such action would be better than to have never loved at all.

Word Count: 1476