

The portrait of the
hero of our time, as
defined



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The portrait of the Hero of Our Time, as defined by Mikhail Lermontov, is actually that of a villain. Though, to be accurate, not of a single person but rather “ of the vices of our whole generation in their ultimate development.”

1 And even the most conventional of villains, as Francois Truffaut once put it, “ always has a reason.” 2 Pechorin, as a “ superfluous man” disenchanting from a mediocre society represents the “ darkly heroic” characters that pervade Russian literature—in the vein of such characters as Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin and Turgenev’s Bazarov.

Notwithstanding Pechorin’s romantic sensibilities, his nihilism and negation of basic morality place him in an ambiguous no-man’s-land between the Byronic hero as noble outlaw and the simple opportunist. He is just as easily sympathized with as he is condemned and to call Pechorin a common villain would be simply naive, in light of the romantic qualities, charisma, and savoir-faire that allow any reader to empathize with him on some level. Pechorin’s appeal stems from the honesty with which he accepts these ambiguities in his character that sets him apart from the other members of his class who are comfortable living out their superfluous lives amidst the frivolity of decorum.

These contradictions are plainly acknowledged by Pechorin. “ I was born with a passion for contradiction. My whole life has been nothing but a series of dismal, unsuccessful attempts to go against heart or reason.” 3 Pechorin will be true to this statement by contradicting himself throughout the novel on a variety of topics. On the subject of women for example, he paints himself as a tragic fool for love: “ I who have loved nothing in the world but them and

have always been ready to sacrifice for them peace of mind, ambition, even life itself.”

Only to say thirty pages later that he’s “ never sacrificed a thing”⁵ for those he loved. He seduces Princess Mary for no good reason other than vanity, boredom, or as he puts it “ womanish coquetry”. Then, upon receiving Vera’s letter announcing that she is leaving the spa resort, he gallops his horse to exhaustion in a vain effort to “ squeeze her hand” one last time, collapses in a field, and quakes and sobs till daybreak. There is an overabundance in this novel of similar examples to elicit the impression that Pechorin’s actions are erratic and, to quote a phrase, ‘ out of character’.

These ambiguities are also physical. The discrepancies between the narrator’s impressions and descriptions provided by Maxim Maxymich are shocking. When the narrator, after a drawn-out literary strip tease describing the larger than life persona of Pechorin finally meets him, the macho veneer of his reputation is immediately dispelled. “ There was something childlike in the way he smiled. His skin was delicate, like a woman’s...”⁶

Being calculating and Machiavellian, Pechorin would like to think of himself as detached and emotionless. “ I’ve lived by intellect, not feeling. I weigh and analyze my emotions and actions with close interests, but complete detachment. There are two men within me-one lives in the full sense of the word, the other reflects and judges him.”⁷ But reading through his journal, one can’t help but realize that he is making an effort to be so. Yes, he is devious but not completely without compassion. He loves Vera, despite his base treatment of her—he even says that he feels “ sorry” for her at one

point. In keeping with the Romantic tradition, he has a poetic affinity for the organic—valuing the purity of the natural over the corruption of the civilized.

Absorbing the beauty of Kislovodsk he paints a lush tableau as vivid as any canvas. “...the murky shade of the lime walks above the foaming torrent that roars down from ledge to ledge, cutting its way through green-clad hills, and the ravines, full of mist and silence...the freshness of the scented air, heavy with perfume of tall southern grasses and white acacia, and the ceaseless, lusciously soporific sound of icy streams that meet at the foot of the valley and merrily race one another till at last they race into the Podkumok.”⁸ The key to Pechorin’s adolescent character may be found in Vera’s letter to him. “No one can be so genuinely unhappy as you, because no one tries so hard to persuade himself that he isn’t.”

Pechorin is a misunderstood character. Misunderstood by others and confused about his own identity. He tries to be the calculating “vampire” but fails to achieve total villainy when his emotions catch up with him. In the chapter, the Fatalist, Pechorin scoffs at predestination without providing a working alternative. “As our ancestors plunged on from illusion to illusion, so we drift indifferently from doubt to doubt.”¹⁰ Feeling very much the cosmic orphan, his dark Byronism takes him to extremes beyond the idealism of Romanticism.

“I prefer to doubt everything; such a disposition does not preclude a resolute character; on the contrary, as far as I am concerned, I always advance more boldly when I do not know what is awaiting me.”¹¹ In short, while Pechorin may be vain, lazy, and arrogant, he is not a coward, and that

is what is attractive in him. Though he contradicts himself, he acknowledges that he is a contrarian. He recognizes his faults and does not apologize for them. He is sincere. In a world seemingly dictated by moral and political cant, his attitude must have seemed refreshing. In this sense, he is a hero.