

Nihilism in a hero of
our time and the
sailor who fell from
grace with the sea



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Nihilism plays a dominant role in both Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* and Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea*. Both novels target a particular character to be made an example, but the circumstances of this undertaking are notably different. In *A Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin "[experiences] all that life has to offer and [finds] nothing to give him more than passing satisfaction" (Lermontov xviii). Life failed to provide any purpose worthy of his powers, and as a result he turns against life and society. In *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea*, Noburo and his group try to go beyond the established societal boundaries; they don't think that rules apply to them because they are above law and order just as Pechorin is. Unlike the boys in Mishima's novel, Pechorin doesn't purposely try to destroy anyone's life. His escapades are just an attempt to create "a temporary escape from boredom" (Lermontov xviii). But the boys murder the kitten and later the sailor because they believe that only by "acts such as this [could they] fill the world's greatest hollows" (57). In both novels, the main characters act with no regard for morals, and their contempt for mundane platitudes drives them to hurt others. Pechorin targets and eventually kills Grushinitsky for the lack of anything better to occupy his talents, while Number One and his followers use killings to test their theoretical worldview and attempt to fill the emptiness in the world. Both novels were written in times when people were suppressed and suffering. *A Hero of Our Time* takes place in 1830's Russia, when Czar Nicholas I suppressed anyone who wanted to speak his mind; the author uses this context to explain the tragic side of the human existence. Here, a man like the protagonist - "proud, energetic, strong-willed, self-assured" - may find "that life does not measure up to his expectations [and] become embittered," <https://assignbuster.com/nihilism-in-a-hero-of-our-time-and-the-sailor-who-fell-from-grace-with-the-sea/>

cynical and bored" (xvii). The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea takes place within the conservative culture of Japan after World War II. In Lermontov's novel, Pechorin, the true nihilist, is bored and tired of life since he always knows what it has in store for him. He purposely goes against the rules of the society in order to make life more interesting and to amuse himself. The only thing he's convinced of is that "one foul evening [he] had the misfortune to be born" (79). He considers his victims grist for his amusement, saying, "the world would be [a dull place] if there were no fools" (79). Similarly, in Mishima's novel, Noburo and his group believe that they are above law and order and can do whatever they want. The chief, left by his parents and allowed to do whatever he wants, leads the group to kill the kitten and then the sailor. Their actions are driven by hatred towards authority figures, who only want to take freedom away: "They hover around our heads waiting for a chance, and when they see something rotten, they buzz in and root in it. And there's nothing they won't do to contaminate our freedom and our ability" (138). Only by killing the kitten and sailor could the group "achieve real power over existence" (57). The act of killing gave the boys a kind of "snow-white certificate of merit" (61) that meant they could now do anything, "no matter how awful" (61). Although Pechorin violates societal rules, he does so purely out of boredom and not malicious intent. He plays with Bela, Mary and Vera to amuse himself, not to cause pain and suffering. In the same way, Pechorin competes with Grushinitsky but does not want to kill him: "[He's] delighted. [He] love[s] enemies, though not in the Christian way" (113). In fact, during the duel, he gives Grushinitsky another chance to back off and stop all of this: "'You won't apologize?'" he asks him. "'Think carefully'" (139). For Pechorin, "life's a bore" (139), and <https://assignbuster.com/nihilism-in-a-hero-of-our-time-and-the-sailor-who-fell-from-grace-with-the-sea/>

only by playing with people can he feel alive and not useless. For him, living means “ being always on alert, catching every [person’s] glance, the hidden meaning of every word, guessing [that person’s] next step, confounding their plans, pretending to be taken in and then with one fell blow wrecking the whole elaborate fabric of their cunning schemes” (113). Even though he knows how everything will end before it starts, the process of playing with the person’s mind is the only time that he feels he can really use his knowledge and skill. Unlike Pechorin in Lermontov’s novel, Noburo and the boys don’t know what to expect from life, though they are not bored and sick of it. Their purpose of killing is different; they want to get rid of everyone who has any authority in the society and in that way “ fill the world’s great hollows” (57). Only by killing the cat and the sailor could they fill in the hollow space in the world: “ The chief always insisted it would take acts such as this to fill the world’s great hollows. Though nothing else could do it, murder would fill those gaping caves... Then they would achieve real power over existence” (57). Just as the chief’s house was empty and hollow, so was the world for him: “[Chief’s] hollow house had nourished [his] ideas about the overwhelming emptiness of the world” (55-6). The chief and the group share same feelings towards authority; they think of fathers as “‘ machine[s] for dishing up lies to kids’” (137) and “‘ the flies of the world’” (138). Like flies, the chief meant that they lay in wait for a flaw and then “ buzz in and root in it” (138). The boys want to achieve absolute power, real power over their existence which they don’t have if people higher than them, like fathers, are present. Thus as they achieve their goal and kill the kitten and the sailor, it’s important that they practice absolute dispassion as Noburo does. The protagonists of these novels can be seen in two different ways.

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The first, most obvious, one is that they are true nihilists who reject societal norms. Although this characterization is accurate, one might also consider them as praiseworthy in a way. By rejecting standards, they set themselves apart from those who accept things as dictated by others; by refusing to pretend normalcy, they remain true to themselves. Perhaps the “hero” in Lermontov’s title describes Pechorin more aptly than it might appear on first glance.