

Russian 347 Paper
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“The Woman Who Reveals Two Sides of a Man”

In Lermontov's novel *A Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin is a man who is known for the peculiar ways in which he interacts with people. Based on his overall relationships with people, there seems to be this gap that causes him to detach himself from others and act very two-sided in his personality. In the beginning of the novel, the reader finds that Pechorin's utmost priority is himself and that he has a love-hate relationship with his identity on many occasions, portraying self-deprecation and excessive pride within the same story. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that Pechorin was once more naïve, emotional, and romantic in his younger days, but over time, he separated himself from his emotions. In all these stories, there seems to be a common theme of Pechorin actively searching for something greater in his life, but seeking it out in ineffective ways that only lead to unwanted outcomes and hardships. This failure to achieve a deeper meaning in his life is due to the constant power struggle between his heart and his mind. The gap in his personality causes conflicts within his relationships with people and results in failures in searching out life's deeper meaning. His internal struggle influences how he views people, especially women.

Pechorin deals with women in a very manipulative, disrespectful, and downright objectifying manner. Every time he meets different women, he describes them as if they were a breed of horses and focuses on their physical aspects rather than their inner qualities. He plays with them as conquests for his own enjoyment, and then leaves them when he's bored of them. But his interactions with his former lover Vera are different

than the rest. Through his journal entries about Vera, we see a different, deeper side of Pechorin that reveals this tension between his old, emotional self and his new, cold self. Pechorin's interactions with Vera differ from his usual interactions with women in that he truly cares about her and sees her as his equal. And while his relationship with her does not fully reinforce his interactions with women in general, it does partially explain the reason behind Pechorin's attitude and actions towards them because of his internal struggle between his emotions and his mind.

Pechorin shows that he thinks of Vera differently in comparison to other women in his life through his actions but also through his descriptions of her. Throughout *A Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin consistently describes women in a very physical manner, focusing on one specific part of their body rather than describing their personality and character. What's even more interesting is that he tends to describe women as horses and examines their physical traits as if he was evaluating their status in order to buy them. He does this with Bela, the mermaid, and Princess Mary. The way he describes Princess Mary shows this clearly: "actually, her whole face seems excellent. Are her teeth white? That's very important. Pity she didn't smile at that fine phrase of yours" (97). Instead of talking about her pleasant attitude or how his impressions upon interacting with her, he simply judges her physical qualities. Even Grushnitsky notices his attitude: "You talk about a pretty woman as if she were an English thoroughbred," declared Grushnitsky indignantly" (97). The way Pechorin talks about women shows us that he considers many of them as being on the same level as animals and sees them simply for functional or enjoyable purposes rather than for relational ones.

On the contrary to other women, Pechorin's descriptions of Vera are very different, revealing that he thinks of her as more than just an animal. His first reaction to Vera is strikingly different in that he responds emotionally. When the doctor mentions a mole on a woman's face, he immediately thinks of Vera and responds with an emotional gut reaction of hope and anticipation. Rather than fixating on the physicality of her appearance like he did with the others, Pechorin starts thinking of how Vera makes him feel. When they actually meet face-to-face, Pechorin's description of her is minimal, and he focuses more on their feelings and conversations, rather than her physical features: "A long-forgotten thrill passed through my body at the sound of that sweet voice. Her deep, tranquil eyes looked straight into mine, and there was mistrusts and something like reproach in them" (110). He describes how she makes him feel and what her eyes communicate to him. Pechorin is able to emotionally connect with Vera and values her relational qualities rather than her physical ones. While he sees other women with animal standards, or with a materialistic standard, he sees Vera as an equal and values her as someone he can connect with.

Pechorin's attitude about Vera is also different from his typical idea that women are things to be conquered in a power game. In addition to seeing them as horses, he also associates getting a woman with hunting an animal in a chase. He does all he can to manipulate and convince women that he cares for them, but once he has conquered them with his charms, he moves on and sees no more value in them. This desire for power and enjoyment of domination can be seen when he talks to Maxim Maximych about Bela: "That's no woman, it's the devil himself," he said. "But I give you my word that she'll be mine..."(41). In fact, Pechorin continues to even make a bet with Maxim Maximych

saying that he would make her as his in a week. The way that he says that clearly shows that he doesn't even see Bela as a woman; he sees her as the devil that won't relent, and he wants to beat the game by winning her over. He's more concerned with winning the bet than truly loving her.

In contrast with his relationship with Bela, Pechorin doesn't seem to assert power over Vera and instead makes efforts to please her, which seemingly look like obedience. In "*Princess Mary*", Vera has more influence over Pechorin than he admits. At her request, he's more inclined to do things so that he can spend more time with her. He listens to what she suggests without demanding that he has to have the utmost power: "As I passed Vera, I asked her if she was satisfied with my obedience, and she gave me a loving look of gratitude" (122-123). This is quite possibly the first time in the entire novel where Pechorin mentions his obedience to a woman. Pechorin is encouraged to get to know Princess Mary better partially at Vera's request so that they can meet more frequently. While he always enjoys playing with the lives of women without thinking of the consequences, he rarely tries to play with Vera. When she asks him to do something, he is more inclined to do it. When Vera gets jealous, he immediately tries to ease it by showing her his love in a subtle way. And even though Pechorin listens to Vera only when it's convenient, he does respect Vera's wishes and never goes to meet her husband until the very end, contrasting his blatant desire to be in power over the other girls. Everything he does in regards to Vera is with a sense of respect, even when he says it's not. His willingness to listen to Vera's favors shows that he sees Vera differently from the other girls. It reveals that he really cares about her and is drawn to her in a way that's more real and authentic than the others.

Pechorin's true feelings towards Vera are especially portrayed when he responds to her departure. In other stories, Pechorin's responses to women leaving him are very non-emotional. He laughs when his wife Bela dies. When the mermaid leaves, he's quite confused, and with Princess Mary, he actually leaves himself, telling her that she should hate him because he played her. With all of these women, he seems to always be the one in control. Even when they leave him, there is no reaction of true, raw emotion. But when Vera leaves him, Pechorin's reaction is completely different. In fact, he chases after her emphatically. "If only I could see her for one more minute, to say goodbye, to press her hand...I prayed, cursed, wept, laughed" (170). As he continues to chase after her, his horse eventually dies, and he crashes to the ground. "I thought my chest would burst. All my coolness and self-control vanished, my heart wilted, reason deserted me" (170). The fact that Pechorin mentions self-control and coolness means that he admits his efforts to seem non-emotional and coolheaded. And he succeeds in acting this way when he interacts with the other women. But after discovering that Vera has left, his cold, logical exterior breaks and we find Pechorin in his raw, emotional state.

Pechorin and Vera's interactions not only give insight on his problems with women, but they also show that his internal struggle reveals holes behind his reasons for behavior. With the other stories, it is harder to see this problem because the narrators describe Pechorin through their opinions. But the first clue that gives the reader a hint of the internal identity struggle is when Maxim Maximych first describes Pechorin to the first narrator in *Bela*. Maxim Maximych claims that Pechorin is a confusing fellow, saying, "For instance, he'd spend the whole day hunting in rain or cold. Everyone else would be tired and frozen, but he'd think nothing of it. Yet another time he'd sit in his room and at

the least puff of wind reckon he'd caught a chill, or a shutter might bang and he'd shiver and turn pale" (27). Pechorin's tension in his identity seem to cause him to contradict himself by acting in ways that were opposite of his previous actions. He doesn't act in accordance with his character, but rather behaves in opposite ways that don't make sense. Another example of this is when the narrator meets Pechorin for the first time, he says, "I must say a little more about his eyes. In the first place, they never laughed when he laughed. Have you ever noticed this peculiarity some people have? It is either the sign of an evil nature or of a profound and lasting sorrow" (68). The narrator can't really figure out Pechorin based on his first impression because he sees this gap in personality. He recognizes that Pechorin is caught in limbo between evil and sorrow, but he can't clearly identify which one it is.

Vera's effect on Pechorin heightens this tension even more and causes him to clearly express how his mental side tries to take over his emotions, even when he doesn't realize it. In his journal, Pechorin describes that Vera as "the only woman in the world I could never deceive...I felt a pang in my heart, as I did at our first parting. How I rejoiced to feel it. Was it youth coming back to me with all its healthy passions, or was it just youth's farewell glance, a parting gift to remember it by?" (112). He continues in the following paragraphs afterwards about how lovely it is to ride on a horse, and interestingly enough, his words sound very emotive and youthful. It's as if meeting with Vera takes him back to his innocent, pure stage when he was not broken or bitter. But then after a couple more paragraphs, he returns to his cold, un-emotional state once he has released his emotions. Even when Vera leaves, Pechorin's glimpses of truth and vulnerability are quickly dismissed by his "logical" nature. After Pechorin breaks down from Vera's departure, he

states, "When the night dew and mountain breeze had cooled my burning head and I could think clearly again, I saw how futile and senseless it was to pursue lost happiness...Still, it's nice to know I'm capable of tears...It's all for the best. This new suffering has, in military jargon, 'created a successful diversion'" (170-171). As every new paragraph starts, we see Pechorin's cold side take over his emotional side, and quickly reassuring himself that he is not that kind of senseless person. Based on his words, it seems as if Pechorin writes honestly about his emotions, but then quickly covers them up because he can't handle being vulnerable, even to himself. Perhaps this is because Pechorin thinks that to be emotional is to lose control, and to lose control is to lose face.

Although the reason behind Pechorin's conflicted behavior is not completely known, it can be inferred that through his relationship with Vera, his old perhaps "true" character shows. Pechorin's attitude about himself and his desire for pride clearly shows when he's telling Mary about his past. "I felt superior to them, and was set beneath them, so I became jealous. I was ready to love the whole world, but no one understood me, so I learned to hate...one half of my soul had ceased to exist. It had withered and died, so I cut it off and cast it away" (130). While Pechorin's motivation behind saying this is very manipulative and shallow, there is some kind of truth to the words that he says. Based on the text, it can be inferred that Pechorin's old self was a person who was ready for love and ready for happiness, but was slighted due to the struggles of his life. And so in response to his struggles as well as his desire for pride and power, his new, cold character began to grow and take over the old one. He refuses to give into his "old" self, or his more innocent, hopeful, emotional self by disclaiming it as his "youthful" personality.

Instead, he hides that old part of him by dismissing it with his “new” self, which is cold, logical, manipulating and prideful. This gap between wanting a deeper connection and wanting to be in control all the time causes him to disconnect with the women that he is interacting with. And while Pechorin claims that his old self has died and completely gone, his interactions with Vera show us more clearly that he is still struggling with it. In Pechorin’s entire life, we see a constant internal battle of his past identity, and his present identity. And this gap is what drives Pechorin to constantly manipulate, and control women. It is through his relation with Vera that it happens to be revealed more clearly.

At a first glance, Pechorin seems to be the stereotypical, womanizing, selfish, prideful man that makes more sense as an anti-hero than a hero. But as his story is revealed in stages, from an outsider’s perspective to a friend’s perspective to his own personal journal, his true emotions and thoughts reveal a complicated character that tries to box himself into his own preferred, new identity: an un-emotional, cold self that’s always in control. Through his interactions with other women and men, Pechorin portrays himself successfully as a prideful man who is always in power and never gets hurt. Nothing happens without it being part of his plan. And while Pechorin admits that he was much more emotional back in his younger days, he rejects that side of him as his “youth,” and constantly tries to prove to others and to himself, that he is not like his old self anymore. And this causes Pechorin uses women’s weaknesses and their desires to defeat them and control them. And while Vera’s relationship with Pechorin is different from all the other women, it confirms perhaps the reason why all of these problems are occurring. Her unique connection to Pechorin’s past and present causes Pechorin’s dual personality gap to be heightened and hints at his main problem. He could have really achieved the deeper

meaning to life that he had been searching for had he not been so focused on his own battle for his new self to “win” over his old self. Pechorin is so fixated on sealing his character that he loses his one chance to feel a real connection and find a deeper meaning in life. What’s interesting is that in Russian, the name “Vera” actually means truth. In that sense, Vera really is the only person who reveals perhaps the truth about Pechorin, despite his inability to admit it. It is through Vera that we see who Pechorin really is: a conflicted hero that constantly searches for the deeper meaning in life, but is too caught up in trying to win every single battle of his life, including his own internal battle of identity.

Source:

Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987. Print