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A Hero of Our Time

Mikhail Lermontov · *1840 · J. H. Wisdom and Marr Murray*

Pechorin, a young officer in the Caucasus, tells—and is told—as a 'hero' of his time: brilliant, bored, and ruinous to the people who come near him. Bela, Princess Mary, a ruined friendship, and a last road to Persia make up Lermontov's novel of linked tales. This is the Wisdom and Murray English.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

If Pechorin is a hero of his time, what is wrong with the time—or with the man who cannot love without destroying?

"I have an innate passion for contradiction--my whole life has been nothing but a series of melancholy and vain contradictions of heart or reason."

Pechorin · Pechorin's journal, in his own voice

The book is a portrait assembled in pieces: a traveler's account, Maxim Maximych's story of Bela, then Pechorin's own journal. He knows himself with a bitter clarity and will not change. The Caucasus setting is not only romance; it is a frontier where a bored officer can experiment on other lives. Wisdom and Murray's English, with its dashes and somewhat stiff dialogue, is the text to quote. The preface's irony—that this is a portrait of a generation's vice—should be heard, not used as a simple excuse for him.

KEY CHARACTERS

Grigory Pechorin
The officer-hero: intelligent, vain, self-aware, and destructive.

Maxim Maximych
The honest older captain, loyal longer than he is loved.

Bela
The Circassian girl whose taking and death begin the moral case.

Princess Mary and Grushnitski
The spa's young lady and the poseur-rival, both used in Pechorin's game.

the traveler-narrator
The first voice, who collects the stories and the journals.

A PASSION FOR CONTRADICTION

> *"I have an innate passion for contradiction--my whole life has been nothing but a series of melancholy and vain contradictions of heart or reason."*
>
> **Pechorin** · The journal

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Traveler in the Caucasus

BELA, THE OPENING NARRATIVE

An unnamed traveler meets Captain Maxim Maximych and hears of Pechorin and a Circassian girl, Bela, taken and then lost.

- The first narrator is a device: we see Pechorin first through another man's memory.
- Bela's story is already a moral charge against the hero.
- The mountains are beauty and a hunting-ground.

02

Maxim Maximych

THE MEETING

The traveler and the old captain meet Pechorin again. The reunion is cold. Journals change hands.

- Pechorin's courtesy can be a form of indifference.
- Maxim Maximych's hurt is the measure of a used friendship.
- The book now gives the man his own voice.

03

Taman

A NIGHT ADVENTURE

A short, strange episode: smugglers, a blind boy, a girl, a stolen chance. Pechorin is almost the one robbed.

- The tale is swift and uncanny, a different key.
- He is not always the hunter.
- Even a slight adventure is told as a test of nerve and curiosity.

04

Princess Mary

THE PYATIGORSK JOURNAL

At the spa, Pechorin plays at winning Princess Mary, torments Grushnitski, and writes down his own contradictions of heart or reason.

- The love-plot is a campaign he half despises as he runs it.
- Grushnitski is a foiling romantic, and the end of their quarrel is deadly.
- The self-analysis is brilliant and does not become repentance.

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05

The Fatalist, and a Road

THE LAST PIECES

A bet about fate, a shot, a later street arrest. Then Pechorin leaves for Persia, and news of an end on the road comes back like a postscript.

- The fatalism is a philosophy and an alibi.
- The book does not give him a last conversion.
- 'Hero of our time' remains an ironic title, not a compliment.

A Superfluous Hero | Self-Knowledge without Change | Used Lives | Fate | The Caucasus

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The hosted text is the English of J. H. Wisdom and Marr Murray (Project Gutenberg #913). Quote this translation, not a later one. The typography uses two hyphens in "contradiction--my whole life."
2. Exact: "I have an innate passion for contradiction--my whole life has been nothing but a series of melancholy and vain contradictions of heart or reason."
3. The novel is a cycle of tales, not a single straight plot. Keep Bela, Maxim Maximych, Taman, Princess Mary, and The Fatalist in their order.
4. The book includes a kidnapping, a duel, and the deaths of people Pechorin has used. It is for older students. The title's irony is the point: he is a portrait, not a model.

Quotations are verbatim from the J. H. Wisdom and Marr Murray, Project Gutenberg #913, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/lermontov-a-hero-of-our-time/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.