

## "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov as the Novel-Based Story

Alexander E. Eremeyev<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Omsk Humanitarian Academy, RUSSIA.

### ABSTRACT

The paper analyzed genre and style nature of the literary work "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov. Creative pursuit of the well-known Russian author was comprehended in the context of the Russian philosophical prose, particularly in terms of narrative experience of Alexander Herzen. The unity of genre features and philosophical character of the Russian prose in 1830-1840s was presented as different levels of the general historico-literary process in the Russian tradition of the 19th century. The paper also compared the literary work "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov with the work "Notes of a Young Man" by Alexander Herzen. The authors used comparative-literature and literary-analytical methods. The authors suggested a new genre concept - the "novel-based story" that fully characterized the work "A Hero of Our Time". The paper substantiated similarity of literary works by Mikhail Lermontov and Alexander Herzen, determined by relevant trends in the development of literature and the personality of the 19th century.

### KEYWORDS

Philosophical prose; biographic genre; storyline problem; prose; poetics; classic literature

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### Introduction

The literary work "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov is considered a classic masterpiece of the Russian and world literature (Rose, 2015; Yukhnova, 2015). The work is considered pioneering for the Russian literature as the first lyrical-psychological novel (Gladkova, 2013; Bakhtin, 2012).

Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov (1814-1841) was a Russian poet and prose writer, as well as artist and playwright. His works had a great influence on the writers of the 19-20th centuries. His works are characterized by a wide variety of themes and lyrical motifs. The poet made an invaluable contribution to the formation of the realistic novel of the 19th century. Lermontov was born in the family of an officer, and brought up by his grandmother. He studied at the

**CORRESPONDENCE** Alexander E. Eremeyev ✉ [nou\\_ogu@mail.ru](mailto:nou_ogu@mail.ru)

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Moscow University. He entered the military service. Later, he was challenged to a duel and died (Morfell, 2014; Yukhnova, 2014).

The plot of this literary work is unusual. It lacks exposition: the reader knows nothing about the life of the hero before his arrival to the Caucasus. The plot, has no set-up – such as the arrival of the protagonist to the Caucasus. The action itself is represented as a series of life episodes of the protagonist, described in five stories. Therefore, the novel has five catastases, which simultaneously represent catastases of individual stories. The novel has its denouement: it is a message stating that "Pechorin, returning from Persia, died". Thus, the overall storyline of the novel is presented only by catastases and denouement (Lermontov et al., 2013; Arian, 1968).

Lermontov did not describe his work in terms of a certain genre. The problem of defining the genre of "A Hero of Our Time" is still being discussed (Nikishov, 2014; Kaida, 2015). Attempts to determine the genre of this work were made by many literary critics (Krylov, 2015; Manuilov, 1966).

The first objective of this work is to provide a genre classification of Lermontov's works. The definitions of the genre will fill one of the gaps in literary knowledge.

The paper also compared the literary work "A Hero of Our Time" by Mikhail Lermontov with the work "Notes of a Young Man" by Alexander Herzen (1961). This comparison is determined by similarity of their ideas in an attempt to reveal the spiritual world and the social attitudes of a young man. Uniqueness of Herzen's story is determined by its autobiographical character (Shakhova, 2014).

## Method

This paper is based on a set of principles developed by the literary and philosophical science. In particular, these include the principle of historicism, objectivism as well as comparative-literature, literary and analytical methods. In addition, the authors used the following theoretical methods:

1. Analysis, which provided the possibility to divide the studied material into separate parts.
2. Comparison: the authors compared similar and different elements
3. Classification, which was helpful in distributing the studied information into separate parts
4. Generalization that allowed determining common features of both literary works.

## Data, Analysis and Results

The prose of the 1820-1830s had one of the most important problems – the creation of the psychological novel and story: at that stage the Russian prose in its modern understanding didn't have such genres in a complete form. M. Lermontov's contemporaries, like himself, tried to find the protagonist of their time, and forms of his reflection.

At this time A. I. Herzen (1961) noticed: "My story is my life... there will be everything here: philosophy, poetry, life...". In his sketch "Hoffman", the young writer welcomed the "anatomic unclenching of human soul" undertaken by young France, which revealed "all stinking wounds of a public body", and novels turned into psychological reasoning" (Herzen, 1961).

Lermontov left his "Vadim" incomplete and continues working on "Princess Ligovskaya", having seen new psychological tasks for literature, determined by time. This gave him an idea to write a book about this tragic generation, about the "illness" which affected young people at that time. While working, his conception gradually took shape. "The history of human soul at least the smallest soul, is hardly more curious and useful than the history of the whole people" (Rose, 2015), – noticed Lermontov in the preface to "Pechorin's Magazine". It was symptomatic that at the beginning of the 1830 Herzen wrote the article "Development of Humanity as One Person" where he argued that "...human mind has to be rewarded – skepticism and analysis should appear" (Herzen, 1961).

"A Hero of Our Time" became the first Russian prose work, which stemmed from a cycle of stories ("Béla", "Fatalist", "Tamans" printed in "Domestic notes" from 1839 to 1840) where the storyline center was presented by the history of the personal identity, his sincere and intellectual life perceived from within as a process. The intense consciousness, extremely categorical judgement of the person were inherent both in Lermontov, and in Herzen. L.Y. Ginzburg (1957) noted that "the autobiographical protagonist of early Herzen is so close to the Lermontov's lyrical protagonist of the first half of 1830s" (Kozhinov, 1971). Both authors similarly described the protagonist and defined genre tasks. Lermontov created the egocentric protagonist within "demonism" and Herzen tried to depict his original character and thinking, to explain theoretically his essence in a historical and social context, to catch his attitude to life, to learn the contemporary's character and his ideological destiny.

The name "A Hero of Our Time" is denoted by Lermontov in his preface from a capital letter that indicates equivalence, equal significance of these three concepts. It should be noted that that Lermontov originally entitled the novel "One of Heroes of the Beginning of the Century".

The one of many became the subject of narration for both writers; in other words, the personality with heroic features, but turning into the "anti-hero". Therefore, Lermontov and Herzen analyze the time and "one" from those whom it generated. Although, one of them depicted "soul history", another – "reflection of history in the person", – they had a common feature – creation of the original epic genre – the story.

The name "A Hero of Our Time" as well as the name "Notes of a Young Man", synthesized and united different genre tendencies: aspiration to get inside the protagonist's inner world in its specifically novelistic aspect and the desire to cover life process through formation of the personality finding relevant historical shape, characteristic for the story. The titles being generally uncertain, are given from a far, panoramic distance of the author-creator of an art ensemble, they obviously don't belong to protagonists having specific hint of estrangement from concrete events and persons, which provides art unity and the apparent objectivity of the author's view. Speaking about the time-related characteristic of titles – they sound extremely objectively, as if finishing and removing thoughts of young people to the past that appear in the light of today's knowledge of the author-storyteller who makes an attempt to appeal to the milestones of yesterday's spiritual development being not involved in them; therefore, his interest is merely objective.

The analyzed titles in which the main semantic moment refers to the nature of the subject (its patrimonial quality that assumed specific social and ideological content in a socio-historical context of that epoch) and stresses the written form of such statements. Such names characterize not the subject and not the protagonist, but rather the existential situation (cf. novelistic names like: "Eugene Onegin", "Anna Karenina", "Oblomov") and the subject of narration that largely refers to the novel, rarely – to the sketch or to the story (for example, "The hunter's notes", "The Diary of the Excess Person", "Student Diary", "Fathers and Children", "War and Peace").

The titles "A Hero of Our Time" and "Notes of a Young Man" emphasize the characteristic of the main subject of narration. This reveals the genre dominant of the novel; it "adjusts" the reader to a certain attitude, getting him/her ready to perceive the subsequent text in terms of the heading.

Both Lermontov and Herzen, strive for incompleteness, fragmentariness, scantiness. Here many things are consciously given in order to "turn on" the reader's thinking and conjecturing. Both writers regard the form of a fragment in terms of general coherence of the life phenomena and facts, they are convinced that "sketchy" parts of the whole hero and notes provide the thoughtful reader with an idea of the world integrity, being a reflection of history in the person.

Keeping in mind originality of literary works by Lermontov and Herzen, they represent a typical form of the biographic novel, despite the presence of other genre tendencies. Both writers define perception of events with specific commitment and clearness, mastering the epoch in the aspect, which leads them to creating the story genre. Anyway the transition from youth to maturity matters for both writers; in other words, a natural life process and human development through contacts with the surrounding world. It is in full compliance with the esthetic task of the story. In this respect, V. Kozhinov (1971, p. 225) notices that "the main development of art sense in the story is carried out not in actual subjects, rather in expansion of the world variety in a simple time-related course of life [emphasized by the authors – A. E.]".

Lermontov:

*"... truly, I have a high mission because I feel immense force in my soul... But I didn't guess the mission ....I lost the ardency of noble aspirations" forever (Rose, 2015, p. 321).*

Herzen:

*"Life revealed before us solemnly, majestically; we frankly swore to sacrifice our existence to the benefit of humankind; projected unrealizable future to ourselves without the slightest hint of vanity, personal attitudes. Light days of youthful dreams and sympathy... they put me far into life ... (Here again there are no two-three pages)" (Herzen, 1961, p. 282).*

As regards defining the genre of "A Hero of Our Time", most likely, this work was conceived as the novel. Lermontov used achievements of modern (of that time) Romance, as well as a number of traditional situations and motives typical for works of this genre.

No doubt, "A Hero of Our Time" is connected with the early forms of epic art that played a key role in Lermontov's creative work. This connection, according to G. W.-F. Hegel (2001, p. 409), is shown first of all in more apparent (as compared with the novel) "reconstruction of a national community and its substantive unity".

In modern theory, the classical epic and the novel are perceived as separate and qualitatively various stages of historical development within the epic genre. In "A Hero of Our Time" genre elements and tendencies related both to the novel and to the story are united in their syncretism. This is clearly visible in the narration principles of this work. According to M. M. Bakhtin's (2012) definition, the classical epos is presented by a "single system of the language and the individual who speaks this language". Classical epic narration presents a "simple" story about an event and represents this event "objectively", that is, in terms of a single and unique viewpoint or prospect. This principal "monmelody" is resisted by the polyphony of a novelistic narration complicated by various subject attitudes of story-tellers and protagonists.

"A Hero of Our Time" reflects various subjective aspects: the words of Pechorin-protagonist and other characters are reinterpreted and reassessed in the words of Pechorin-story-teller for the reader. They are both inseparable and indivisible in a single whole of Lermontov's work. Different narrative positions – Pechorin-protagonist, Pechorin-story-teller, Maxim Maksimych and the reader – form polyphony of this work. This single and many-sided subject of narration presents the combination of opposite genre traditions in "A Hero of Our Time". Genre complexity of this work is also aggravated by a diary form which in turn is "expanded" by the novelistic plots reflected in "Pechorin's Magazine" ("Taman", "Princess Mary", and "Fatalist"). Interpenetration of various genres turns out to be a necessary form of art historicism in "A Hero of Our Time", reflecting the new stage of epic development. The foundation of this variety is presented by the author's word, which is directly expressed in both Prefaces: "Now I have to somewhat explain the reasons which induced me to betray to public warm secrets of the person whom I never knew. If I were still his friend... but I saw him only once in my life on a public road..." (Lermontov, 2013, p. 248). The author's position harmoniously unites contrasts and creates art ensemble, which reflects internal communications of spiritual life of the protagonist and related existence. Therefore, the unique genre of "A Hero of Our Time", which can be defined as the "novel-based story", epically recreated Time in unity of its historical life contradictions, its Protagonist and the ideal prospect of historical development.

Therefore, "A Hero of Our Time" and "Notes of a Young Man" presented further philosophization of the Russian prose, which organizing principle was determined by a self-conscious and self-comprehending protagonist of conditional and biographic or autobiographical type, who triggered the extra-personal historically significant image of the world. Both Lermontov, and Herzen created works where the biography of the personality expressed the entire existence. These works determine the subject of art-related life studies by means of their biographic element, philosophical figurativeness and the rhetorical beginning.

The original comparative analysis provides the possibility to conclude that "A Hero of Our Time" by Lermontov and "Notes of a Young Man" by Herzen

combine genre elements and tendencies, which were further developed in prose of the 19-20th centuries.

### Discussion

"A Hero of Our Time" by Lermontov reflects more than one genre, and presents a multi-genre literary work because its features are inherent in novels, cycles of novellas and in short stories. The authors of this research suggested the new genre definition – the "novel-based story" which implies the combination of genre styles. Y.M. Nikishov (2014) attempted to classify "A Hero of Our Time" upon two genres – the novel and the cycle. The arguments are in favor of both genres, therefore Y.M. Nikishov (2014) could not give a precise definition. This is determined by the fact that this literary work presents a unique combination of genres, therefore, attempts to classify "A Hero of Our Time" with regard to the existing genres is inappropriate, since it presents a new literary trend.

"A Hero of Our Time" and "Notes of a Young Man" have the following common features:

1. Both works describe the spiritual world and social relations of a young man.
2. Cyclical narrative form is inherent in both works.
3. Both works are biographical by nature.
4. Both works restrict certain details, in order to generate readers' thinking

The main difference is that "Notes of a Young Man" is more autobiographical, as compared with "A Hero of Our Time". In turn, the work "Notes of a Young Man" is characterized by a realistic manner, in contrast to Lermontov's romanticism. The biggest difference is a multi-genre character of Lermontov's works, in contrast to Herzen's specific works.

### Conclusion

Genre classification of "A Hero of Our Time" is impossible within the framework of established genres. The author of this research suggests considering a new genre – the "novel-based story", which presents a generalization of the novel, short stories, and the cycle.

Common features of "A Hero of Our Time" and "Notes of a Young Man" are explained by literary trends of that time as well as by social factors that influence the formation of a young personality in a rapidly changing life of the 19th century.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

**Alexander E. Eremeyev** is a Doctor of Philological Sciences, Professor, Rector of Philology, Journalism and Mass Communications Department, Omsk Humanitarian Academy, Omsk, Russia.

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