

Analysis of Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time": Love, Friendship and Adventure

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ABSTRACT

Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time" (《当代英雄》) is a world masterpiece whose unique creative process has resulted in the multiplicity of the themes of the novel. There are three core themes of this novel: the theme of love, the theme of friendship, and the theme of adventure. In the novel, these three themes blend, dialogue, and resonate with other themes, jointly expressing and presenting the spiritual world of the superfluous man in the multi-theme variations.

Keywords: Lermontov, "A Hero of Our Time", Multiple themes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lermontov was an outstanding poet and novelist in the history of Russian literature in the 19th century. In 1840, the full-length novel "A Hero of Our Time" marking the highest achievement of Lermontov's creation came out. This is another masterpiece of realism in Russian literature after "Eugene Onegin", showing the spiritual outlook and destiny of aristocratic youth in the 1830s, thus revealing the characteristics and contradictions of the times.

"A Hero of Our Time" is composed of five independent and interrelated novellas. The author first created three independent novellas and published them, and then added two chapters and a preface. The protagonist Bijolin strung them into a complete full-length novel. This creative method makes the novel have the complexity of the theme. This article intends to analyze the multiple themes of "A Hero of Our Time" and the interactive relationship between them from the perspective of novel thematology.

2. UNUSUAL CREATIVE METHOD

Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time" is a rare masterpiece in the history of world literature. As a novel with huge space for speech and interpretation, it has many commonalities with other classics: the

rich connotation of the character image, the deep reflection on the culture of the times, the innovation in art, etc.; at the same time, it also has some unique characteristics of its own, the most unique of which is its creative process.

Generally speaking, before a writer creates a full-length novel, he always has a general idea or framework, and then writes in an orderly manner according to this idea and framework — Of course, novels also have their own laws, and writers' thinking will also change in the process of writing, which is not uncommon in the history of world literature. Surprisingly, the creation process of "A Hero of Our Time" is not in order. It consists of five novellas and short stories in total. The order of the chapters in the novel separate edition is "Bella" (《贝拉》), "Maxim Maximovich" (《马克西姆·马克西梅奇》), "Tamman" (《塔曼》), "Duchess Mairi" (《梅丽公爵小姐》), and "The Fatalist" (《宿命论者》). Among them, "Bella", "The Fatalist", and "Tamman" were published as independent novellas in the "Otetschestvenyja Zapiski" in 1839. Lermontov later added the chapters of "Maxim Maximovich" and "Duchess Mairi" and the preface to Bijolin's diary. The author then assembled them into a whole and gave the novel a name: "A Hero of Our Time". This is the general process of the creation of the novel and the completion of the book. Comparing the time sequence of the author's creation of each chapter with the sequence of the

chapters in the separate edition, it can be seen that this full-length novel first writes the beginning, the end and a small part in the middle, and then supplements the middle part, connecting several parts with the common protagonist Bijolin and other recurring characters, such as the narrator "I" and Maxim Maximovich. What's more amazing is that the order of the chapters in the separate edition completely breaks the time sequence of the story. This creative method is very rare and has become a wonder in the history of world literature.

The integrated "A Hero of Our Time" is not a disorganized and illogical whole. Some commentators believe that it is arranged in the order of action-appearance-action and psychology. This sequence "reflects the inner logic of the work" and "is the logical need to shape the image of the protagonist" [1]. Belinsky wrote two short commentaries and one longer commentary for "A Hero of Our Time", and he said: "'A Hero of Our Time' is by no means a compilation of several novellas published in two volumes and linked together only by a common title: No, it is not a compilation of novellas or short stories, but a full-length novel in which there is only a protagonist and a concept that has been developed artistically." [2] He believes that this novel is soaked in the unity of thought; although the content seems purely accidentally incoherent, each part is closely linked by the strict unity of the ideas artistically reproduced. Judging from the author's creation process, Lermontov must have deliberated before creating, otherwise, there will be no common protagonist, no depressive and gloomy atmosphere that is consistent across the chapters of the novel, and no publishing of the full-length novel after being integrated. It is precisely because of the author's pre-creation deliberation that the whole novel has what Belinsky calls "the unity of thought", "a concept that has been developed artistically". This "concept" is also the theme of the whole novel that Lermontov wants to express — the writing of Bijolin, a typical representative of the aristocratic intellectuals of his time. Lermontov mentioned at the beginning of the novel that he wanted to draw a portrait of Bijolin: "'A Hero of Our Time' is indeed a portrait, but not a portrait of a certain person. This portrait is made up of fully-developed shortcomings in our entire generation" [3]. The whole novel closely revolves around Bijolin's extraordinary experience, showing in all directions the pain, struggle and decadence of an aristocratic intellectual with freethinking, extraordinary talents,

strong will, and full of life aspirations but unable to display.

For a long time, everyone has noticed that this novel has a big unified theme, but the unique method of Lermontov's creation and the direct result of it have been ignored. "A Hero of Our Time" is not written from beginning to end. The writer first wrote the beginning, the end and a small part in the middle and published it as independent novellas and short stories. This means that the plot of the novel may lack an organic connection, and the theme doesn't arise naturally from the plot. Belinsky compared the plots and themes of "Eugene Onegin" and "A Hero of Our Time" and believed that all parts of the former were organically connected and couldn't be changed or replaced, "Because Pushkin has absorbed all his concepts in the frame of the novel he chose"[2], while the latter was to put several frames in a big frame with the same protagonist and novel name. Since they were just individual events in the life of the same person, they could be replaced by other events, for example, instead of writing about the entanglement with Bella in the fortress or a thrilling plot in Tamman, one could describe a similar thrilling plot with other people in other places. Belinsky came to a conclusion to "A Hero of Our Time": "This sensory rather than conceptual unity unites the entire full-length novel" [2]. As a great critic, he keenly discovered that the plot of "A Hero of Our Time" lacks organicity and its theme doesn't naturally develop from the plot, but he failed to point out the connection between the method and process of the novel's creation and this result.

3. MULTIPLE THEMES OF "A HERO OF OUR TIME"

One of the most important differences between a full-length novel, a novella and a short story is that there are quite a few small themes under its grand theme, and there will be conflicts, dialogues, and fusions between these small themes. The five major parts of "A Hero of Our Time" can all be used as novellas and short stories in themselves, and they are highly independent and all have their own themes: "Bella" and "Duchess Mairi" mainly deal with the theme of love, "Maxim Maximovich" involves the theme of friendship, "Tamman" involves the theme of happy encounter and adventure, and "The Fatalist" involves the theme of whether one can grasp fate. This makes "A Hero of Our Time" obviously show multi-subjectivity, like multi-theme music, it has multi-theme variations.

There are three main themes in "A Hero of Our Time": the theme of love, the theme of friendship, and the theme of adventure. However, these themes are not completely independent in the novel. They are interrelated and intergrated under the governance of a general theme — the description of the aristocratic intellectual Bijolin.

3.1 The Theme of Love

The two chapters of "Bella" and "Duchess Mairi" in the novel are about Bijolin's three love experiences, focusing on the theme of love. The young Bijolin wandered in the upper class, fell in love with the beauties in the social place, and was also deeply loved by them, but such love could only inspire his vanity and fantasy, and his heart was extremely empty. "Duchess Mairi" mainly writes that in Wufeng City, Bijolin met his former lover, Vera. Vera deeply loved Bijolin, was overwhelmed by his great charm, and was willing to make any sacrifices for him. In order to make it easier for the two to meet in the place of Duchess Li Guofuskaya and deceive the public, Bijolin began to chase after Duchess Mairi, the daughter of Duchess Li Guofuskaya, so as to distract people's attention towards Vera. At this time, the cadet Grusinitzki, who was pretentious, vain and cowardly, and pretending to be elegant, was also launching a love offensive against the Duchess Mairi. However, Bijolin was a veteran in places of debauchery, and with his own experience, will and talent, he defeated Grusinitzki severely. In the process of chasing, Bijolin deliberately tried to titillate and seduce Duchess Mairi, fooling with her easily, but his demeanor and personality charm won her preference. After Duchess Mairi expressed her feelings, Bijolin cruelly rejected her. He thought that he could cost his life and even his reputation twenty times, but he would never betray his freedom. During the whole process, Bijolin was somewhat proud and satisfied for a moment. At the same time, he also experienced the painful reflection on the meaning of life and the struggle of falling into love and being unable to extricate himself.

"Bella" tells a story that during his service period in Caucasus, Bijolin met Bella, the beautiful young daughter of the Lord's family, during a trip with his friend Maxim Maximovich to attend a wedding feast for the girl's wedding of the Lord's family. Bella was very fond of the handsome Bijolin. Bella's younger brother Azamat was fascinated by the horse of his agnate Kazbic and

was willing to exchange his elder sister for this well-known horse, but he was refused. After Bijolin knew, he tempted Azamat to secretly give his sister Bella to him, and then figured out a way to get Azamat to ride Kazbic's horse. After getting Bella, Bijolin spent a few months doing everything possible to win Bella's heart, but he soon got tired of her, thinking that "the love of a wild girl is not much better than the love of a noblewoman, and the simplicity and ignorance of a wild girl is just as weary as the coquetry of a noblewoman" [3]. And the detested Bella was finally killed by Kazbic.

The love themes in the two chapters of "Bella" and "Duchess Mairi" showed Bijolin's pursuit and boredom of love. No matter whether it is a noblewoman or a wild girl, one time of true love or one time of flirtation, it couldn't make his heart truly have a sense of belonging, nor could it satisfy his empty heart. In the process of love, his heart was cold, his motives were selfish, and he brought endless pain and even the tragedy of death to the women who loved him.

3.2 The Theme of Friendship

Bijolin's two times of friendship are written in the three chapters of "Bella", "Maxim Maximovich" and "Duchess Mairi". In the novel, he had two friends: Maxim Maximovich and Verner. The former was his superior on the front line of the Caucasus who had a generous heart, was benevolent and kind, and treated Bijolin like a brother. After Bijolin got Bella, Maxim Maximovich dearly loved Bella like a father. When Bijolin detested Bella, Maxim Maximovich felt grieved; after Bella was stabbed to death by Kazbic, Maxim Maximovich could hardly suppress the pain; when Maxim Maximovich saw that Bijolin didn't betray any pain, he felt puzzled and resented. In "Maxim Maximovich", when Maxim Maximovich learned that Bijolin happened to be here, he waited anxiously and excitedly all night. The next day, he delayed to meet his old friend who had come eagerly on official business. Unexpectedly, he was coldly received by Bijolin. He wanted to hug Bijolin, but Bijolin held out a hand to him extremely coldly. Maxim Maximovich was an excellent Russian soldier with the Russian spirit, a charitable heart and a deep and rich nature. Belinsky commented on him: "His behavior is dull and rude, but he has a beautiful soul, a golden heart. This is a pure representative of Russia, and its artistically shaped merits are reminiscent of some of the most peculiar characters in the full-length

novels of Scott and Cooper. But in terms of its novelty, originality and pure Russian spirit, it is not like any such character." [2] Belinsky's love for Maxim Maximovich was beyond words, but Maxim Maximovich's spiritual vision was limited: He just treated his friend Bijolin with a simple heart and tenderhearted nature but failed to understand Bijolin's melancholy and pain.

Bijolin's second friend was Verner, the doctor he met in Wufeng City who was a skeptic and materialist. The two quickly understood each other and became friends. Verner understood Bijolin indeed. Before Bijolin chased after Duchess Mairi, Verner foresaw the occurrence of this romantic relationship and the unfortunate ending of Grusinitzki. When the duel between Bijolin and Grusinitzki was unavoidable, Verner stood by Bijolin as his assistant, but when he saw the terrible ending of the duel, he left Bijolin and walked away alone, which broke their friendship.

In "A Hero of Our Time", the two characters Maxim Maximovich and Verner form a sharp contrast: the former is pure in nature and doesn't understand Bijolin's pain; the latter is selfish, but has a world view similar to Bijolin. The novel shows Bijolin's pain and loneliness deeply through the friendship theme of these two characters.

As a "novel of superfluous man" in the history of Russian literature, "A Hero of Our Time" inherited Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" on the two themes of love and friendship, and later, the "novel of superfluous man" such as "Whose Fault" (《谁之罪》), "Rudin" (《罗亭》), "Oblomov" (《奥勃莫洛夫》), etc. also displayed these themes, presenting a kind of tradition: the themes of love and friendship had become the core themes of the novel, and the spiritual world of "superfluous man" was expressed and displayed through the protagonist's love and friendship. Through the theme of love, the writer expressed his appreciation for thoughtful aristocratic intellectuals who had been nurtured and educated by Western culture on the one hand. In the writer's works, these aristocratic intellectuals could often win the envy and love of women. On the other hand, the writer expressed his criticism of the emptiness, selfishness, individualism, fantasy and lack of practice possessed by "superfluous man". As the "novel of superfluous man" developed later, this kind of criticism became more and more intense. In the end, it was difficult for the "superfluous man" in the work to win the hearts of women. The theme of friendship in the "novel of superfluous man" is often expressed by setting

characters that contrast with the protagonist: the characters may possess traditional cultural virtues, such as Krupov in "Whose Fault"; or, like the protagonist, they have been nurtured by Western culture and identified with Western culture, but their spiritual realm is different from the former, and there is no pain of splitting their minds. Some (such as Reznev in "Rudin", Stolz in "Oblomov") also have very strong pragmatic ability. Through this comparison, the writer either expresses his identification with Russian traditional culture, or shows the shortcomings of "superfluous man" and points out the path they should take. There is something special about "A Hero of Our Time". In the theme of friendship, it sets two characters. Through Maxim Maximovich, who has the "pure Russian spirit" (by Belinsky), Lermontov expresses his identity with Russian traditional culture. Through this identification, Lermontov criticizes Bijolin's "demon-like" and Western individualistic culture. Although Verner is somewhat similar to Bijolin, his spiritual realm is far lower than the latter. Through him, the writer agrees with Bijolin, who is often reflective, doubtful and painful, and eager to make a difference.

3.3 The Theme of Adventure

As for what should be done with the "superfluous man", unlike other "novels of superfluous man" that set talented and capable aristocratic intellectuals to contrast with the protagonist, "A Hero of Our Time" put forward the theme of adventure.

In "A Hero of Our Time", Bijolin went through three adventures: the first happened in "Duchess Mairi". Because Bijolin's pursuit of Duchess Mairi was met with the envy of his failed love rival Grusinitzki, Grusinitzki and the senior captain of the cavalry tried to catch Bijolin and make him embarrassed after Bijolin dated with Mairi. However, Bijolin escaped unexpectedly. Grusinitzki spread the secret date of Bijolin and Duchess Mairi, which was heard by Bijolin accidentally, who then proposed a duel. At the instigation of the senior captain of the cavalry, the cowardly Grusinitzki accepted the challenge, hoping to frighten Bijolin through the duel. Bijolin was a strong-willed and very courageous person. He felt empty and boring when he had nowhere to display his talents. Therefore, for him, this kind of adventure only meant more excitement in his life, which was a way to divert him from boredom. He was not afraid of death, and won the duel and killed

Grusinitzki. During this adventure, Bijolin had a lot of thinking. He felt that he should have a lofty purpose in life, but he didn't know the direction of his life. He hoped to fight, but it seemed that he entered the Array of Nothing, unable to exert his own strengths.

Bijolin's second adventure occurred in "Tamman". He accidentally found a small smuggling gang in Tamman and took a fancy to a beautiful female smuggler like a Siren. When the latter found out that Bijolin knew their secrets, she lured him to go on a date on board at night and tried to kill him at sea, and Bijolin threw the "Siren" into the sea during the fight and escaped. "Tamman" is a section of Bijolin's diary. Bijolin's description of the unusually beautiful, wild and energetic "Siren" and the brave and fearless Janko showed Bijolin's envy of their lives. There is a scene in this chapter worth pondering: Bijolin followed the blind boy to the seaside, watching him and the "Siren" anxiously waiting for Janko there, who drove a small boat on the waves, defeated the stormy waves and patrols at sea, and successfully reached the agreed place. Lermontov himself painted a painting called "Tamman". There is a small island on the painting, there is a house on the small island. Down below is the sea with a few small boats floating on the sea. In Lermontov's "Sail" (《帆》), "Devil" (《恶魔》) and other poems, he repeatedly portrayed such scenes. It can be said that the image of the directionless boat in the sea is Lermontov's mental imagery, containing the writer's deep realization of the situation that the intellectuals of his time had no way out and were lost in confusion. However, the boat in "Tamman" had a direction, so Janko's boat ride in the wind and waves aroused Bijolin's envy. Bijolin's heart was full of enthusiasm for life, hoping to live a real life like Janko and the others, hoping that his talents would be useful, looking forward to the burning of hope, not the withering of life. "Tamman" is not just about Bijolin's happy encounters and adventures. In "Tamman", it also contains Lermontov's summary and expectations of intellectuals like Bijolin.

Bijolin's third adventure took place in the chapter "The Fatalist". Bijolin bet with lieutenant Fulich to see if a man could rule his own life or if everyone's fate was predestined by God. Fulich took a bullet-loaded pistol and fired at his own head, but the pistol miraculously didn't fire. Although Bijolin lost, he always felt that Fulich was going to die today. That night, Fulich was hacked to death by a drunk Cossack soldier. The murderer hid in a house with a sabre and a gun, and no one dared to

go in and catch him. Bijolin wanted to try his own fate, so he asked everyone to pretend to attack outside the door and he himself risked going in through the window to catch the murderer, and ended up catching him. The title of this chapter is "The Fatalist". Bijolin's premonition that Fulich was going to die became a fact. This chapter seemed to tell that Bijolin became a fatalist, and his hopes were completely shattered. It's very meaningful when it is deeply excavated.

In "A Hero of Our Time", Bijolin encountered a smuggling gang and prevented them from living a normal life; he met Duchess Mairi and made her miserable; he met Bella, causing her misfortune. Even Bijolin himself reflected as if there would be no disaster without him. However, in "The Fatalist", Bijolin didn't cause others to suffer or misfortune. On the contrary, he captured the murderer with wit and courage and did the only meaningful thing. It could be seen that Bijolin was eager to make a difference, and he also possessed these precious qualities. Here the writer pinned his deep hopes. Some commentators believe that "The Fatalist" is the eyes of "A Hero of Our Time" [4], which is a true penetrating judgment.

4. CONCLUSION

Lermontov used a unique creative method when creating the novel "A Hero of Our Time", and each part showed a high degree of independence. The main five parts of the novel had their own titles, stories and themes. The novel is connected by the protagonist as a whole, "the author's full attention is focused on the image of the protagonist" [5].

The novel mainly involved three small themes of love, friendship, and adventure under the governance of a general theme — describing "a hero of our time". Of course, there were other small themes in the novel, such as the theme of youth, the theme of death, etc. These themes presented a state of blending and dialogue in the novel. These five chapters had contrasts and developments between themes. For example, "Bella" contained two themes of love and friendship; "Maxim Maximovich" developed the themes of love and friendship in "Bella"; the themes of love and friendship in "Duchess Mairi" and "Bella" formed a certain contrast. In these three themes, by describing Bijolin's fooling with love and ignoring friendship, the writer intended to criticize the various shortcomings of the aristocratic intellectuals, and through the theme of adventure, the writer seemed to intend to explore their way out: how the

aristocratic intellectuals could get rid of their mental confusion and make a difference was a dialogue of the three themes implicitly. The three themes of the novel blended with each other, dialogued, and resonated with other themes, jointly expressing and presenting the spiritual world of the superfluous man in multi-theme variations. "With its unique artistic aesthetic structure, it carries the author's search for the meaning of life" [6].

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Zuji Wang wrote the manuscript, Siqu Lu contributed to editing, Huaiju Wei contributed to revising.

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