

# **SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND MIKHAIL LERMONTOV AS FIRST EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHERS**

**Natalia B. Kirillova\* and Natalia M. Ulitina**

*Ural Federal University named after the First President of Russia B.N. Eltsin, prospekt Lenina 51,  
620083, Yekaterinburg, Russia*

(Received 17 October 2016, revised 4 November 2016)

---

## **Abstract**

The article analyses and compares philosophical ideas and ethical considerations of two geniuses of the XIX century, two masters of ideas and words - a Danish philosopher, theologian, and religious author Søren Kierkegaard, and a Russian poet, author and playwright Mikhail Lermontov. They have a lot in common, starting with their outlook (both protested against reality, endured personal tragedies, and felt absolute loneliness) and to the confessional character of their works in which they tried to deal with existential problems and individual's inner conflict, as well as individual's conflict with the world, and relationships with God. Both Kierkegaard and Lermontov focus on a new type of hero - a 'strange' man who is deeply dissatisfied with the reality and suffers greatly, but whose inner freedom merges with sense of lawlessness. Although Kierkegaard's life and works were different from those of Lermontov, both of them made a great impact to the understanding of the problems of personality and the uniqueness of any individual, who is always balancing between good and evil, life and death. We can, therefore, say, that Kierkegaard, who coined the term 'existentialism', and Lermontov were both precursors of existentialism as a new philosophy.

*Keywords:* existentialism, human, existence, 'strange' man, man's individuality

---

## **1. Introduction - personality and historical background**

XIX century was rich in genius scientists, prominent philosophers, and outstanding writers. It would be enough to remember works of Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, findings of Georg Ohm, Louis Daguerre, Guglielmo Marconi, or Thomas Edison, novels by Honoré de Balzac, Prosper Mérimée, Stendhal, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, or Anton Chekhov, paintings of famous impressionists or music of Ludwig van Beethoven, Claude Debussy, Peter Chaikovsky, Frédéric Chopin, etc. Among them were another two geniuses, masters of ideas and words - a Danish philosopher, theologian, and religious author Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and a Russian poet, author and playwright Mikhail Lermontov (1814–

---

\*E-mail: urfo@bk.ru

1841). A question is bound to arise - what do they have in common? Why are they presented as precursors of a new philosophy - existentialism - in this article? These questions encouraged us to compare and analyse the works by these authors, as the problem of the origins of existentialism is the key problem for various research fields, including Cultural studies, Philosophy and Philology.

Both Kierkegaard and Lermontov, although coming from different countries, lived in very difficult times and harsh environments (both political and cultural) that influenced their outlook and ideas. The fascinating fact is that Lermontov's paternal ancestors came from Scotland, and his family tree goes back to a Scottish bard Thomas of Learmont. In 1613, one of his descendants, George Learmonth, being a lieutenant in the Polish army was taken prisoner by prince Dmitry Pozharsky's troops, after which he joined the army of the then Russian Czar Mikhail Romanov [1].

Søren Kierkegaard was born and brought up in Europe just after the revolutions, when many people, including Kierkegaard himself, were greatly influenced by Georg Hegel's ideas. Later, Kierkegaard rejected classical philosophy and developed his own theory that was to become a new philosophy - existentialism. Most of his philosophical works (*Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Seducer's Diary*, etc.) analyse the nature of human beings, giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking and highlighting the importance of personal emotions and self-analysis. Such attitude resulted from his personal experience, which is also true for Mikhail Lermontov, whose outlook was greatly influenced by several factors, such as his mother's death, family problems, living with his grandmother, as well as by his social and cultural environment and education.

Kierkegaard and Lermontov had very similar outlooks that they expressed in their most prominent works. For Lermontov they were his novel *Hero of our time* (1840), a verse play *Masquerade* (1835) and a philosophical poem *Demon* (1839).

## 2. Søren Kierkegaard and Mikhail Lermontov in theoretical works

A lot of authors and critics in Russia in XIX-XX centuries wrote about Lermontov and tried to analyse his poems and novels. Thus, V. Belinsky [2] along with religious and philosophical aestheticians V. Solovyov, D. Merezhkovsky, and V. Rozanov [3], focused on the theme of demons and considered it to be the first signs of Nietzscheanism, while the so-called formalists were interested mainly in the style of Lermontov's poems and verse [3].

In their recent article 'Kierkegaard and Lermontov - an image of a self-analysing seducer', N. Tetenkov and V. Lashov compare the heroes of the works by the two writers, noting the same feelings, emotions, deeds, and motives. They also mention that it was not just a formal similarity they were looking for, but something much deeper, the similarity of ideas and their direction, the similarity of the inner vision: "Kierkegaard and Lermontov's works should not be

considered as just fiction or any other literary work. Hence, it is of no use to search for any similarity between them as authors. Their works are a mixture of literature and philosophy, as they concern various philosophical problems.” [4]

Professor V. Mildon in his article ‘Lermontov and Kierkegaard - the Pechorin phenomenon - regarding a Russian-Danish simile’ [5] also compares literary and philosophical works by Kierkegaard with the ones by his Russian coeval. Indeed, they have a lot in common - they both lived in the XIX century that gave birth to a new type of people, and much of their work is focused on the problems of human existence. Another common feature is that they both rejected harsh living conditions; both had to endure a personal tragedy, both felt lonely and used their talents as writers to tell about their feelings.

“Lermontov’s mission is still one of the greatest mysteries of our culture,” - wrote Daniil Andreev in *The Rose of the World*. “From the very early age he felt that he was chosen, that he was entitled to some personal duty, which prevailed his soul and determined his destiny. He had an extremely fierce imagination and an extremely cold mind at the same time. Psychologically, he was a supernationalist, but all his feelings had genuine Russian strength. He was extremely religious and even such notion as *doubt* he considered in terms of rebellion against God, rather than as a philosophical position.” [6]

Kierkegaard, as the first existentialist philosopher, also has his own mission in the world’s culture. His works focus on feelings, emotions, fears, and passions. In *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* he says: “I am alone, as I have always been... My grief is my castle, which like an eagle’s nest is built high up on the mountain peaks among the clouds; nothing can storm it. From it I fly down into reality to seize my prey...” [7]. In the *Seducer’s Diary* we learn that the hero Johannes suffers from a disease that is actually a disease of the century [8]. The same could be said about Pechorin. *A Hero of Our Time* presents a deep analysis of man’s soul, the controversy in its development, the self-analysis method and the analysis of the hero’s interior life. Like Johannes, Pechorin is a ‘strange man’ - something strange keeps happening to him all the time, but still it is for him to decide and to choose the way of life. He wants to find his place in the world, in the society, but he mixes up the notions of inner freedom and total anarchy. He finally realises that he is alone, that he is different from everybody else. He has no hope to find any ideals for himself, and the only way he can be satisfied is by winning over others. Lermontov was the first Russian author who performed such a deep psychological analysis of his hero, as there were no such heroes before, and no such vision of human existence.

Kierkegaard wrote the *Seducer’s Diary* after *A Hero of our Time* was published, but Johannes is very similar to Pechorin in his passions, plans, deeds, his violence and his sense of lawlessness. They both want to enjoy life to the full without considering the ethics and the moral side of their deeds.

V. Peremilovsky in his work ‘Lermontov’ [9] also compared the Russian poet to the Danish philosopher, noting that their novels and poems demonstrate how similar their philosophic views were. Kierkegaard analysed the soul of Johannes, Lermontov - the soul of Pechorin. They both had deep psychological

reasons for doing so, and many of their ideas, even words, coincide. Pechorin asks himself: "Why have I lived? For what purpose was I born? A purpose there must have been, and, surely, mine was an exalted destiny, because I feel that within my soul are powers immeasurable. . ." [10] Lermontov was the first one who managed to express those feelings and thoughts so clearly. Kierkegaard, in his turn, gives the answer - the key, the solution is not in the words, it is inside, in the soul, as every man is the author of their fate, the master of their life. Pechorin knows that his soul is spoiled, it was ruined by the society, and he cannot endure life any more. Kierkegaard writes in the *Seducer's Diary*: "My soul is like the Dead Sea..." [8].

### 3. 'Strange' heroes of Søren Kierkegaard and Mikhail Lermontov

Pechorin and Johannes suffer from the same disease, the disease of all the strange people of the beginning of the XIX century. Like Johannes, Pechorin seeks in vain, and hence yields to melancholy and despair. Kierkegaard called this state of man's soul existential. The disease can be treated only via the man's mind. Pechorin knows that his soul will be cured, if he chooses the higher path, but then he will cease being himself, will lose his personality, as he will acquire faith and will have to believe in God, believe in the Absolute.

Both writers consider the dual nature of human beings, and the dual nature of their deeds. No one should know what the hero's thoughts are and what he is going to do, so the hero is wearing a mask. Even the women characters are similar in both works. Both heroes want to be happy, but they are unwilling to lose their freedom and take responsibility. Both heroes dwell on the border between life and death. For Lermontov life is unendurable, but death is terrifying, and as Kierkegaard puts it, "everyone faces death alone" [11]. This is an existential point in life, and an attempt to interpret it.

L. Shestov believes that Kierkegaard was the first European who considered life from the existential point of view. He also pointed out the connection between Kierkegaard and Russian literature, namely Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Shestov noted the similarity of philosophical ideas of Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard. "They both - consciously or not - saw the aim of their whole lives in fighting traditional ideas represented by Hegel's classical philosophy", - says Shestov [12].

But in Russian literature it was Lermontov, not Dostoyevsky, who first wrote about these feelings, emotions and ideas. "There exists nothing" – that's what scares Kierkegaard. Without hope, all the immeasurable powers of Pechorin's soul were useless. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843) [11] Kierkegaard says that lack of hope makes man believe in God, and the fight between faith and reason leads to despair. The truth lies in the individual himself. Man's mind, his intellectual power allows him to get out of the usual boundaries and reach transcendence. "Man is free, his aim is to understand himself and choose his own way", - says P. Gardiner [13].

This was the idea Lermontov had, when depicting his strange people. Apart from Pechorin, they are Arbenin from *Masquerade* and romantic Demon. Each of them, like Kierkegaard's heroes, has existential features. They are similar in character and emotions (disappointment, boredom, anxiety, self-analysis), ideas, deeds, and experiments they run with the souls of other people to find peace, which they do not find, because their ambitions are greater than this, they want more from life than these insignificant victories. A lot of scholars and critics noted this selfish individualism [14]. Lermontov and Kierkegaard demonstrate the development of personality, the process of searching for one's own self. Pechorin and Arbenin could not come to terms with life. Lermontov continued searching and, like his Demon, argued with God, exposed the sins of the society, fought for freedom and finally was killed at the age of 26. Kierkegaard chose religion and became a Protestant theologian. It was not, however, an immediate change. First, in his works *Practice in Christianity*, *Stages on Life's Way*, and *Philosophical Fragments* he criticised explicitly the established order, and this critique was getting fiercer and fiercer. In his works and diaries, we see how he challenges the reality and the world order. As L. Shestov put it, "he fights with two enemies at the same time: Hegel's philosophical ideas on the one side, and Church and Christianity on the other, the whole Christendom that - according to Kierkegaard - killed Christ" [7, p. 388]. Thus, Kierkegaard becoming a protestant is the result of his whole life and work.

#### **4. Conclusions**

As a result of our comparison of Mikhail Lermontov and Søren Kierkegaard, we can conclude that their outlooks and themes they focused on in their works are very similar. In Lermontov's novels and poems we can find existential features that are similar to those that later appeared in philosophical views of Kierkegaard. It is Kierkegaard who is considered to be the first existentialist philosopher.

"All the existentialist philosophers of the XIX-XX centuries, including N.A. Berdyaev, L.I. Shestov, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, etc., wanted to understand the existence in itself and rejected the rationalistic perception of reality. We can perceive existence only with our intuition; it is always connected to the irrational. The key feature of existence is that it is open. Hence, another important notion of existentialism - transcendence, i.e. getting out of the boundaries. Life, death, fear, consciousness, and freedom - the key aspects of human existence - are directly linked to the essence of human existence, its purpose, and thus, the quest for this purpose in our world that is far from permanent and ideal, that is absurd even for some philosophers, is the major objective of existentialism as a means of investigating the world and understanding one's own personality" [15].

In the beginning of the XIX century, long before the philosophy of existentialism appeared, the same problems and questions were of great importance not only for Søren Kierkegaard (and a lot has been said about this), but also for his coeval, a Russian poet, author, and playwright Mikhail Lermontov. The present article was an attempt to prove this.

But the theme still provokes a lot of thoughts and questions. Each of the works quoted in this article, covers only some particular aspect of the problem, just one of the great many questions on philosophy and ethics that Søren Kierkegaard and Mikhail Lermontov wanted to answer in their works. Finding your place in the world, the treasure of individuality, of every unique personality that balances between good and evil, between life and death - these are the problems that have always provoked thought.

As V. Strannolyubskij brilliantly noted: "The questions, that heroes of our time ask themselves, will never be answered. Therefore, these heroes are the heroes of any time. This is what you call eternal life." [16]

## References

- [1] L. Pal', *Lermontov's curse*, AST publishing, Moscow, 2014, 318.
- [2] V.G. Belinskij, *Complete set of works by V.G. Belinsky*, Vol. 4, Library of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, Saint-Petersburg, 1990, 193-270.
- [3] V. Manuilova (ed.), *Encyclopaedia on Lermontov*, Soviet Encyclopaedia, Moscow, 1981, 244-245.
- [4] V.V. Lashov and N.B. Tetenkov, *Philosophy and Society*, 4 (2010) 11.
- [5] V.I. Mil'don, *October*, 4 (2002) 177-186.
- [6] D.L. Andreev, *The Rose of the world*, Urania's world, Moscow, 1999, 608.
- [7] S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Frniks, Rostov-on-Don, 1998, 18-19.
- [8] S. Kierkegaard, *Seducer's Diary*, Russian translation, Azbuka-Attikus, St. Petersburg, 2011, 240.
- [9] V.V. Peremilovskij, *From "Lermontov". Fatalist: works of the first emigrants*, in *A book of articles*, M.D. Filin (Ed.), Russkij Mir, Moscow, 1999, 55.
- [10] M.J. Lermontov, *Poems. Demon. Mascarade. A Hero of Our Time*, Ecsmo, Moscow, 2013, 345.
- [11] S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling. The Sickness Unto Death*, Republic, Moscow, 1993, 380.
- [12] L.I. Shestov, *Kierkegaard and existentialism*, Progress, Gnozis, Moscow, 1992, 15.
- [13] P. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, Russian translation, Astrel', Moscow, 2008, 140.
- [14] N.B. Kirillova and N.M. Ulitina, *Proceedings of Ural University*, 3(141) (2015) 112-124.
- [15] N.B. Kirillova and N.M. Ulitina, *Romanticist, realist, existentialist*, in *Language culture*, N.B. Kirillova (ed.), Ur. Rabochij, Yekaterinburg, 2015, 34-37.
- [16] V. Strannoljubskij, *Samizdat: Online journal*, (2011). [http://samlib.ru/w/wladimir\\_strannoljubskij/ulitka-1.shtml](http://samlib.ru/w/wladimir_strannoljubskij/ulitka-1.shtml), accessed 19.09.2011.