

George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)



A Dangerous Romantic?

- “[Byron is the] passionate and dauntless soldier of forlorn hope, who, ignorant of the future, and unconsoled by its promises, nevertheless waged – against the conservation of the old impossible world – so fiery battle; waged it till he fell – waged it with such splendid and imperishable excellence of sincerity and strength”.
- “Wordsworth’s value is of another kind. Wordsworth has an insight into permanent sources of joy and consolation for mankind which Byron has not; his poetry gives us more which we may rest upon than Byron’s – more which we may rest upon now, and which men may rest upon always.” (Matthew Arnold, 1881)

His works

- Inseparable from his life (public vs private)
- Author – character (*Byromania*)
- ✓ In his works (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – disguised autobiography)
- ✓ In other authors' works (e.g. *Glenarvon*, 1816)
- ✓ Byronic hero (e.g. Horace Walpole, William Beckford, Ann Radcliffe)
- ✓ Hero of Gothic melodrama (e.g. Monk Lewis)

His life

- Extravagant living (Art or life?)
- Numerous love affairs
- Debts
- Allegations of incest and sodomy
- Leader of Carbonari against Austria
- National hero in Greece for fighting against the Turks in the Greek War of Independence.

Gothic and Satanic

- Lame foot
- Imperious and crass mother
- Prodigious swimming abilities
- Sexual ambivalence
- Incestuous attraction to his half-sister
- Illegitimate children
- Publicised separation from his wife
- Exile from England
- Death while promoting Greek independence

From Byron's *Letters and Journals*

"I have seen myself compared personally and poetically [...] to Rousseau – Goethe – Young – Aretine – Timon of Athens – [...] Satan – Shakespeare – Bonaparte – Tiberius – Aeschylus – Sophocles – Euripides – Harlequin – The Clown – [...] to Michelangelo – to Raphael [...] – to Diogenes, to Childe Harold – to Lara – to the Count in Beppo – to Milton – to Pope – to Dryden – to Burns [...] – to Kean"

Liberty

“I wish men to be free
As much from mobs and
kings, from you as me”

(*Don Juan*, IX. 25. 7-8)

Political career: another split

- Cambridge: a Lord with Whig affiliations (Hobhouse; Kinnaid; etc).
- Radicalism: he visited Leigh Hunt in jail.
- Mythology of the Glorious Revolution (1688): Whig William of Orange vs Stuart “tyranny”.
- Whig crisis following the French Revolution:
 - one side vs Jacobinism; another pro it;
 - Republican ideas yet need to maintain order and harmony between King and Parliament.
- First speech on 27 February 1812: advocate of social reform, defender of the Luddites.
- He also spoke in defence of the rights of Roman Catholics.
- Increasing disenchantment especially during Napoleon’s fall which led to the restoration on *ancien regimes*.

- Napoleon vs Bourbons / William III vs Stuarts – vs hegemonic power
- Waterloo: defeat of a hero (*CH* III) attacked and undesired by most members of Parliament (his restoration meant war and they voted against resuming it)
- Post-Waterloo exile – parallel with Napoleon: he signed his letters N[oel] B[yron] and in *Don Juan* claimed to be “the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme” (XI.55.8)

Affairs and scandals

- 1812: a well-publicised affair with Lady Caroline Lamb
- Close relationship with his half-sister Augusta interpreted as incestuous.
- 1815: unhappy marriage with Caroline Lamb’s cousin Anne Isabella Milbanke; disappointment at the birth of a daughter (Augusta Ada).
- Rumours of marital violence, adultery with actresses, incest with Augusta, and sodomy were circulated, assisted by a jealous Lady Caroline.
- 16 January 1816: Lady Byron left him, taking Ada with her.
- 1816: affair with Claire Clairmont, M. Shelley’s step-sister at Villa Diodati (Lake Geneva); they had a daughter, Allegra.
- Many affairs with Italian women.

Women

... with women he was what
They pleased to make or take him for; and their
Imagination's quite enough for that;
So that the outline's tolerably fair,
They fill the canvas up – [...].
If once their phantasies be brought to bear
Upon an object, whether sad or playful,
They can transfigure brighter than Raphael.
(*Don Juan*, XV.16.1-8)

The Byronic Hero



The Byronic Hero

Idealised but flawed character whose attributes include

- having great talent
- exhibiting great passion
- having a distaste for society and social institutions
- expressing a lack of respect for rank and privilege
- thwarted in love by social constraint or death
- rebelling (hero, anti-hero and cultural villain)
- suffering exile and alienation (outsider figure)
- hiding an unsavoury past
- ultimately, acting in a self-destructive manner

Character – “Byron phenomenon”

- Particularly magnetic personality
- Unconventional, eccentric, flamboyant and controversial.
- Given to extremes of temper.
- Looking back to the 18th century yet also forward to postmodernism.
- Embracing contradiction.
- Protean man, “*born for opposition*” (*Don Juan*, XIV. 22. 8).

From *Don Juan*

“Temperate I am – yet never had a temper;
Modest I am – yet with some slight assurance;
Changeable too – yet somehow “*Idem semper*”:
Patient – but not enamoured of endurance;
Cheerful – but, sometimes, rather apt to whimper:
Mild – but at times a sort of “*Hercules furens*”:
So that I almost think that the same skin
For one without – has two or three within”

“*My muse admires digression*”

- Brilliant and perverse
- Magnanimous and competitive
- Egotistic and idealistic
- Homosexual and heterosexual
- Domineering and acquiescent
- Whig aristocrat with radical sympathies
- Hater of war yet approving of it against oppressors and despotism.