


George Gordon Noel Byron

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Born: January 22, 1788 in London, England

Died: April 19, 1824 in Missolonghi, Greece

Other Names: Byron, Lord; Hornem, Horace; George Gordon, Lord Byron; Byron, George Gordon Noel Byron, 6th Baron

Nationality: British

Occupation: Poet

The English poet George Gordon Noel Byron, 6th Baron Byron (1788-1824), was one of the most important figures of the romantic movement. Because of his works, active life, and physical beauty he came to be considered the personification of the romantic poet-hero.

George Gordon Noel Byron was born on January 22, 1788, into a family of fast-decaying nobility. His lame foot, the absence of any fatherly authority in the household after Captain "Mad Jack" Byron's death in 1791, the contempt of his aristocratic relatives for the impoverished widow and her son, his Calvinistic up-bringing at the hands of a Scottish nurse, the fickleness and stupidity of his mother--all conspired to hurt the pride and sensitive nature of the boy. This roused in him a need for self-assertion that he soon sought to gratify in three main directions: love, poetry, and action.

On the death of his granduncle in 1798, Byron inherited the title and estate. After four years at Harrow (1801-1805), he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he became conscious for the first time of the discrepancy between the lofty aspirations of idealism and the petty realities of experience. "I took my gradations in the vices with great promptitude," he later reminisced, "but they were not to my taste." His obstinate quest for some genuine passion among the frail women of this world accounts for the crowded catalog of his amours.

Early Works

In 1807 Byron's juvenilia were collected under the title *Hours of Idleness*; although the little book exhibited only the milder forms of romantic *Weltschmerz*, it was harshly criticized by the *Edinburgh Review*. The irate author counterattacked in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), the first manifestation of a gift for satire and a sarcastic wit that single him out among the major English romantics, and which he may have owed to his aristocratic outlook and his classical education.

In 1809 a two-year trip to the Mediterranean countries provided material for the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Their publication in 1812 earned Byron instant glory, as they combined the more popular features of the late-eighteenth-century romanticism: colorful descriptions of exotic nature, disillusioned meditations on the vanity of earthly things, a lyrical exaltation of freedom, and above all, the new hero, handsome and lonely, somberly mysterious, yet strongly impassioned for all his weariness with life.

Social Life

While his fame was spreading, Byron was busy shocking London high society. After his affairs with Lady Caroline Lamb and Lady Oxford, his incestuous and adulterous love for his half-sister Augusta not only made him a reprobate, but also crystallized the sense of guilt and doom to which he had always been prone. From then on, the theme of incest was to figure prominently in his writings, starting with the epic tales that he published between 1812 and 1816: *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *The Siege of Corinth*, and *Parisina*. Incestuous love, criminal although genuine and irresistible, was a suitable metaphor for the tragic condition of man, who is cursed by God, rebuked by society, and hated by himself because of sins for which he is not responsible. The tales, therefore, add a new dimension of depth to the Byronic hero: in his total alienation he now actively assumes the tragic fatality which turns natural instinct into unforgivable sin, and he deliberately takes his rebellious stance as an outcast against all accepted notions of the right order of things.

While thus seeking relief in imaginative exploration of his own tortured mind, Byron had been half hoping to find peace and reconciliation in a more settled life. But his marriage to Anna Isabella Milbanke (January 1, 1815) soon proved a complete failure, and she left him after a year. London society could have ignored the peculiarities of Byron's private life, but a satire against the Prince Regent, "Stanzas to a Lady Weeping," which he had appended to *The Corsair*, aroused hysterical abuse from the Tories, in whose hands his separation from his wife became an efficient weapon. On April 25, 1816, Byron had to leave his native country, never to return.

His Travels

In Switzerland, Byron spent several months in the company of the poet Shelley, resuming an agitated and unenthusiastic affair with the latter's sister-in-law, Clare Clairmont. Under Shelley's influence he read Wordsworth and imbibed the high-flown but uncongenial spirituality that permeates the third canto of *Childe Harold*. But *The Prisoner of Chillon* and Byron's first drama, *Manfred*, took the Byronic hero to a new level of inwardness: his greatness now lies in the steadfast refusal to bow to the hostile powers that oppress him, whether he discovers new selfhood in his very dereliction or seeks in self-destruction the fulfillment of his assertiveness.

In October 1816 Byron left for Italy and settled in Venice, where he spent many days and nights in unprecedented debauchery. His compositions of 1817, however, show signs of a new outlook. The fourth canto of *Childe Harold* does not reject the cosmic pessimism of *Manfred*, but the mood of shrill revolt is superseded by a tone of resigned acceptance, and sizable sections of the poem are devoted to the theme of political freedom and national independence. Equally significant of Byron's renewed ability to face the world in laughter rather than in anger is the witty, good-humored satire of *Beppo*, which should be considered a preparation for *Don Juan*, begun in September of 1818.

Spontaneous maturation had thus paved the way for the healing influence of Teresa Guiccioli, Byron's last love, whom he met in April of 1819. The poet had at last begun to come to terms with his desperate conception of life, to the extent of being able to debunk all shams and to parody all posturing, including his own, in *Don Juan*, the unfinished masterpiece on which he was to work till the end of his life. But this new balance also found serious utterance in *Cain*, the best of the plays that he wrote in 1821. It is a closely argued dramatic restatement of Byron's lasting creed that as the universe is swayed by a loveless God, the only greatness to which man can aspire lies in his foredoomed struggle for reason and justice. *Marino Faliero* illustrates the same pattern in the field of action, exalting the selflessness of the man who sacrifices his life in the service of popular freedom.

It is characteristic of Byron's integrity that he increasingly sought to translate his ideas into action, repeatedly voicing the more radical Whig viewpoint in the House of Lords in 1812-1813, running real risks to help the Italian Carbonari in 1820-1821, and collaborating with Leigh Hunt in launching the *Liberal* in 1822. His early poetry had contributed to sensitizing the European mind to the plight of Greece under the Turkish yoke. In 1824 Byron joined the Greek liberation fighters at Missolonghi, where he died of malarial fever on April 19.

The works of Byron have remained perennial favorites. His *Don Juan* in particular, though incomplete, inspired many projects. The 1994 film *Don Juan DeMarco* owes much to Byron, as does the ballet *Le Corsaire*, based loosely on the poem. Byron's works have been frequently referenced in many works of entertainment.

Further Readings

- While Byron's tumultuous life has inspired many biographers, the standard work is Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography* (3 vols., 1957). A first-rate, detailed look at Byron's life is Fiona MacCarthy's *Byron: Life and Legend* (2002). Byron's intriguing personality and his ambiguous ideological position are discussed in William J. Calvert, *Byron: Romantic Paradox* (1935); Edward Wayne Marjarum, *Byron as Skeptic and Believer* (1938); Ernest J. Lovell, *Byron, the Record of a Quest: Studies in a Poet's Concept and Treatment of Nature* (1949); and G. Wilson Knight, *Lord Byron: Christian Virtues* (1953).
- General critical introductions are Herbert E. Read, *Byron* (1951); Paul West, *Byron and the Spoiler's Art* (1960); Paul West, ed., *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1963); Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction* (1965); and W. Paul Elledge, *Byron and the Dynamics of Metaphor* (1968).
- No full-scale study of Byron's drama has appeared since Samuel C. Chew, *The Dramas of Lord Byron* (1915). However, much attention has been devoted to *Don Juan*, especially by Paul Graham Trueblood in *The Flowering of Byron's Genius: Studies in Byron's Don Juan* (1945) and by Elizabeth French Boyd in *Byron's Don Juan: A Critical Study* (1945).
- For Byron's influence, William Ellery Leonard, *Byron and Byronism in America* (1905), and Samuel C. Chew, *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (1924), have not been superseded. For general background information see Ian R. J. Jack, *English Literature: 1815-1832* (1963).
- "Lord Byron," IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0126406/> (October 22, 2012).

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