

THE BYRONIC HERO: EMERGENCE, ISSUES OF DEFINITION AND HIS PROGENIES

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the work of Lord Gordon Byron, specifically the creation of idea of the *Byronic hero*. This paper aims at defining the idea of the *Byronic hero* that has been created from the period Byron created his heroes and continues to be shaped in history by literary critics till today. Although the majority of literary scholars agree upon the fact that the first literary *Byronic hero* was Byron's Childe Harold, the protagonist of Byron's epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, however, many literary scholars consider Lord Byron himself to exemplify his *Byronic hero*. The questions that are central to this discussion of the *Byronic hero* are: How can the idea represented by this phrase be defined? What are the characteristics of the *Byronic Hero*? How much has Byron's persona contributed to the creation of the *Byronic hero*? We, also, point to other literary examples of *Byronic heroes* from 19th-century onwards, as well as, present some antecedents of the *Byronic hero* in contemporary popular culture.

Key words: *Byronic hero, definition, characteristics, emergence, progenies*

Introduction

The three-century tradition of literary criticism on the *Byronic hero* has managed to offer various interpretations of this hero. The everlasting debates on what the *Byronic hero* represents range from the idea that he is a descendent of Milton's Satan, the Marquis De Sade, embodiment of Byron himself leading to post-modern representations of the *Byronic hero* as an antecedent of the cult of the vampire in the 21st century. Critics have concentrated on separate aspects of the *Byronic hero*, and generally each of them approaches the issue from a different perspective. Most of Byron's heroes in various literary criticism have been named as *Byronic Heroes*. This study focuses on the character traits that should be considered as *Byronic*; what the archetypal type of *Byronic Hero* is, and where his boundaries should be enclosed.

Various criticism on the *Byronic Hero*

The idea of the *dark hero* in English literature is noticeable even before Lord Gordon Byron, whose name it carries, in Gothic novels and Horace Walpole's novel "The Castle of Otranto" from 1764. The difficulty in defining the *Byronic hero* is partially due to its complex nature: it shows elements of the *Romantic hero* combined with traits of the *Tragic hero* and the Anti-hero characterization of the protagonists in the Gothic novels. Its hybrid constituency makes it even more difficult to define. Samuel C. Chew (1965) referred to the Byronic concepts of "the daemonic male and the fame fatale". Eino Railo in "The Haunted Castle" (1974) shows deep interest in the Byronic Hero only as an outgrowth of the villains and heroes of the Gothic novel. In the chapter "The Byronic hero" he elaborates the close relationship between Mrs. Redcliffe's villains and *Byronic heroes* especially in the romances. Byron's Conrad, according to him, is a direct descendant of the Manfred and Walpole's Otranto. However, when trying to define the hero, Railo places more emphasis on the *Byronic Hero's* physical characteristics than on his psychology, and maintains the position that they are descendants of the heroes of the romances and not dramas. Mario Praz's chapter on Byron in "The Romantic Agony" (1979) added to the *Byronic Hero* vices and made Byron's works and characters even more obscure. His thesis is that in the Romantic Movement there appeared a new erotic sensibility, in which pleasure and pain, love and hate, tenderness and sadism are blended to such an extent that they lead to "algolagnia", a term which refers to sexual gratification derived from inflicting experiencing pain, such as masochism and sadism. In his chapter on Byron, Praz is concerned to prove three points: the *Romantic hero* is descended from Milton through Mrs. Redcliffe; he is fatal and cruel lover, linked with the Marquis de Sade; and he was the progenitor of a long series of 19th century vampires. One of the major faults of his elaboration was reducing Romanticism and through it the *Byronic Hero* to aesthetics of the debased. Hentshell (1978) is in line with Prazi when he conceives the *Byronic Hero* as a "tripartite individual". He is satanic, descendant of Prometheus-Lucifer, and sadistic, in the shadow of the "divine Marquis". According to Hentshell, the sadistic element is disguised in vampirism, in his fondness for ruins as a poetic background. *Child Harold's Pilgrimage* is in his words "a necrophylistic orgy". Susan Wolfson (1991) mainly focuses on homoeroticism in *Don Juan*. Jonathan David Gross (2001) identifies a gay narrator in the same poem and proceeds to discuss the political significance of this voice. The narrator's homoerotic engagement with the hero, Gross argues, reinforces the poem's endorsement of political and sexual liberty. Gross also situates Byron within a homo-social sphere in which his relations with women merely enhanced his prestige amongst other men. Caroline Franklin (1992) emphasizes that Byron's rebelliousness appealed to women writers in the 19th century, while also representing a masculine type to oppose. According to her, from the fiction of Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, to the Brontes and George Eliot, the egotism of the

Byronic hero is exposed in its versions like Heathcliff and Rochester, who have become synonymous with the *Byronic hero*. In one of the chapters of “Configuring Romanticism: Essays Offered to C.C. Barfoot” (2003) written by Wim Tigges, the *Romantic Hero* is compared to the “pirate chief” who is “demon driven”, fatal to himself and to others”, an angry rebel against all authority except his own, an individualist, with the polished manners of an aristocrat, and a Satanic one. He even compares his physical appearance to renowned pirates in literature who are often impaired; either lack a leg or eye, or both. The author might be directing towards Byron’s own physical defect which is blurring the limits between the author and his characters. In his essay The Byronic “Hero Theatricality and Leadership”, Gabriele Poole applies Erwin Goffman’s ideas of the two kinds of self-expression of an individual and asserts that there is a close relationship between Byron and his character. He uses this analysis of Byron’s self-expression in everyday life to draw conclusions about the actions of his characters. He asserts that it is not the case that his characters were modeled on the author’s personality, but rather of Byron public persona being constructed on the basis of same topoi as his heroes. He asserts that the public view of Byron’s heroes was mediated by the public image of Byron; Byron the man was read through the lens of his literary creations. He presents Millbanke’s view that Byron’s behavior is related to Byron’s works, that is, Millbanke’s response to Byron is actually an established response to the *Byronic hero*, specifically a reaction to his limited position between hero and anti-hero. According to the author, such divergences in critical opinion are the product of a latent contradiction between the Byronic hero’s actual behavior and his self-representation.

Some common traits

Overlapping traits of the *Byronic hero* are evident in the attitudes of many critics, still the contours of the character are not clear. So critics agree that the Byronic hero appears in Byron’s “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (1812-18), “The Giaour” (1813), “The Corsair” (1814), “Lara” (1814) and his play “Manfred” (1816) (Lutz 2006, Thorslev 2010). One of the traits that these and other critics agree upon is that it represents a *noble outlaw*. It is a solitary person from noble origins who is disrespectful of hierarchy and social institutions, or rebels against the whole society. This trait is present in all Byron’s characters, with the exception of the character of Lara. They possess the trait of lacking respect for authority despite the fact that they themselves are of a high-ranking position. Due to boredom Childe Harold abandons his aristocratic life. They all have in common their abhorrence for society. Often, they are self-exiled, or like the Giaour and the Corsair, criminals and outlaws who are either passive, or actively work against society, as “a pirate or vengeful lover” (Lutz 2006 p. 50). Conrad is a pirate who has been repudiated by the society which he abhors as canto 1, lines XI “The Corsair” demonstrate:

“He knew himself a villain- but he deem’d

The rest no better than the thing he seem’d;

And scorn’d the best as hypocrites who hid

Those deeds the bolder spirits plainly did.

He knew himself detested, but he knew

The hearts that loath’d him, crouch’d and dreaded too.” (Byron 281)

The literary sensibility of the *noble outlaw* is said to have originated in the effects of the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century which had produced such “aristocratic rebels against their hereditary class, like Byron’s later heroes”(Thorslev).

Byron’s figure of the *traveler / wanderer* occurs also as a prototypical trait of this character. The Byronic hero in the *Giaour* and *Childe Harold* “roams disenchanting”, or “circulates the earth in passionate torment” (Lutz 2006). The wondering hero is longing for a transcendental home which could be a metaphor for their salvation or redemption. Childe Harold compares himself to the Wandering Jew: “It is that settled, ceaseless gloom/ The fabled Hebrew Wanderer bore; / That will not look beyond the tomb, / But cannot hope for rest before” (1.86.26-29). Conrad wanders the seas in search of venture. He is willing to jeopardize everything even his love Medora to rescue Gulnare from the Turkish harem. Manfred feels guilty of committing an unknown crime associated with his beloved Astarte. Although, not portrayed as a wanderer at the beginning he is in quest of deliverance. Manfred turns to the assistance of the supernatural in order to erase the past that is haunting him. Ultimately, he is at ease in his death. In “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” the protagonist reminisces about an unnamed woman in the third canto (Lutz 51). This memory makes Childe Harold’s thoughts and spirit wander home, despite him being a true one in the physical world.

In most of the cases either love or death are presented as a way for redemption. For Corsair the embodiment of love is Medora, for the *Giaour* Leila, for Manfred Astarte, for Childe Harold an unspecified woman. They consider love to be the purest good and highest truth. For Count Lara there is not a woman’s love that has a redemptive power, but rather death. In all of these cases the hero is cursed and fails to redeem himself. The Byronic hero’s *unredeemable nature* and fate is another common characteristic. He possesses self-destructive impulses, suffers and is damned. In none of the cases, however, does the hero possess an internal flaw, hamartia, which takes him down. The *Byronic hero* is dissimilar with the *tragic hero* in this case. He is merely a

tormented melancholy figure, who fails to achieve his goal and experiences eternal loss.

What many critics often point to is the *Byronic hero's satanic side*. Most of his protagonists embody traits of Milton's Satan. To start with Count Lara described in stanza XVIII as:

“There was in him a vital scorn of all:
As if the worst had fall'n which could befall,
He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurl'd;
A thing of dark imaginings, that shaped
By choice the perils he by chance escaped.” (Byron 307)

Lara was a stranger, someone who did not belong to this world, his dark spirit which has gone astray and is not earthly. “The Norton Anthology” also emphasizes the fact that Byron's heroes are constituted of the vanity and defiance which Satan from Milton's “Paradise Lost” displays. Pointing to the image of Napoleon Bonaparte, who after the defeat was banished, and from a heroic figure turned into a satanic one, suffering demonizing representations. Byron was particularly attracted to this “fallen angel”. He created this hero with his “Satanic-Gothic-Napoleonic line” (NAEL 8, 2.617–19). Conrad exposes an even darker side compared to the other heroes that Byron created: he is deeply detached, shadowed, experiencing a severe inner struggle. As Thorslev states, the Byronic hero shows apparent rebelliousness and desire for individual self-realisation (109-112) The Giaour is depicted in lines 912-914 as:

“If ever an angel bore,
the form of any mortal, such he wore;
By all my hope of sins forgiven,
Such looks are not of earth nor heaven.” (Byron 260)

The Giaour is portrayed as satanic in his physical appearance, but in his nature as well. The fallen angel” and *satanic side* goes in line with the *exiled wanderer* and *the outlaw*.

Another side of Byron's characters is their contemplative nature. They are *melancholic brooders* over a past sin or love, the darkness that is inside them. The hell they go through is inside them, in their memory, the past. The *Byronic hero* is "imprisoned in a soul tormented by remorse" in the past and the future can never happen (Lutz 55). He is imprisoned in his thoughts and eternal longing for something that is lost forever. In the *Giaour* Byron describes Giaour's thoughts of his past scene:

"But in that instant o'er his soul
Winters of Memory seemed to roll,
And gather in that drop of time
A life of pain, an age of crime...
Though in Time's record nearly nought,
It was Eternity to Thought!
For infinite as boundless space
The thought that Conscience must embrace,
Which in itself can comprehend
Woe without name, or hope, or end." (261-76)

Conclusion and the *Byronic Hero's* progenies

Not only the poetry, also the character of Lord Byron, which was qualified by his lover Lady Caroline Lamb as "mad, bad and dangerous to know", contributed to the creation of the archetype of the *Byronic hero*. Byron's personal characteristics are noticeable in the character of Lord Ruthven in Lady Caroline's Gothic novel "Glenarvon". Byron's personal influence was key to the creation of Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein", which started its life on the banks of Lake Geneva in the famous ghost story competition between Byron, Percy Shelly, John Polidori and Mary Shelly. Under this influence, Polidori's "The Vampyre" is also considered to feature a *Byronic hero* in the form of a vampire which has remained one of the most renowned works of fiction influenced by the Gothic tradition and following the line of *Byronic heroes*. Literary scholars have also pointed out to the influence of the *Byronic hero* to the heroes in Russian literature, particularly Alexander Pushkin's character of Eugene Onegin. He shares many of the characteristics of Childe Harold, especially the isolated thoughtful nature and unacceptance of the privileges of higher classes. Forty years after the publication of the first two cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage in 1812,

Herman Melville published his “Moby Dick” in America. Although his Captain Ahab is distinct from Byron’s heroes on first sight, it shares some of the traits of the *Byronic hero*, such as the solitary brooding wanderer who defies all norms of society

The continuing popularity of vampire fiction and film nowadays is predominantly based on the creation of these characters, the *Byronic hero* and Byron’s personality at the beginning of the 19th century. The Byronic hero traits are evident in many contemporary novels, and Byron’s influence is apparent in modern literature as the predecessor of a frequently encountered type of antihero, from Dan Simmons’s “Hyperion”, and Tom Holland’s “*Lord of the Dead*” to the presence of the Byronic hero in popular culture, films and music.

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