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Fantasy Land

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Lord Byron lived the contemporary male fantasy during the nineteenth century. At an early age, he inherited the wealth and idleness of the upper class, allowing him to pursue women and sex nearly exclusively. Gifted with good looks and literary genius, he needed to do little pursuing himself. Because Byron chose poetry as a creative outlet for what would have been wasted genius, the contemporary reader can look into the life of such a male ideal through the almost strictly autobiographical lens of Childe Harold and Don Juan.

To the contemporary male reader, this lens is misted with the oblivion of the Byronic hero, who passively accepts a new kind of chivalric code. This code requires the hero to have sex with only the willing beautiful ladies, though this is every woman that the hero meets. The duty extends across boundaries of marriage and law, and requires the hero to fight if necessary.

But as the reader peers through the numbing mist of the fantastic Byronic life, he sees that love becomes a meaningless word in the shadow of endless sex and objectification. Despite the ideal occupation of pursuing sexual gratification as a daily ritual, life is empty of true love because the Byronic women are emblematic and inhuman. They are placed on pedestals of purity and innocence and become prizes to be won in a game of seduction, instead of being lowered to the spiritual plane, within reach of emotional attachment.

Byron was forced into the world of sex and seduction at an early age. Looking beyond the mist of his fantastical initiation by a Scottish lady shortly after his arrival in Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire at the age of ten, the roots of his inability to love can be seen. His father, Captain John Byron, had spent the family fortune by the time Byron reached the age of two; Captain Byron died a year later in 1791. His mother, separated from him at the time of George Gordon Byron's birth in 1788, moved to Aberdeen for the financial support of relatives, and proved to be a poor mother. This lack of parental love also contributed to the development a

Byronic code without the inclusion of love.

Byron inherited the title of Lord from his great uncle in 1798, causing him to move to the seat of the Byron family in Nottingham where he was mistreated by the Scottish lady. Shortly thereafter, he was sent to boarding school at Dulwich until 1801, then to Harrow school until 1805, during which he had his first romance in 1803 with Mary Chaworth of Annesley Hall. In 1804, he began to write to his half-sister Augusta Leigh.

Immediately following Harrow School, Byron entered Trinity College in Cambridge, where he began to write *Fugitive Pieces*, his first privately printed poems. In 1807, his first major work *Hours of Idleness* was published, drawing him into a tight circle of liberals and intellectuals. Upon his graduation in 1808 with a master's degree he moved to London, already engaged in a life of sensuality. The *Edinburgh Review* quickly criticized his *Hours of Idleness*, and after publishing a retaliation, he began a tour of Europe with John Hobhouse through Portugal, Spain, Albania, and Greece.

While in Athens, Byron completed the first canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, his first epic poem detailing the life of the Byronic hero. Remaining in Greece for several years, he finished the second canto of *Childe Harold* and swam the Hellespont reenacting the Greek myth of Hero and Leander in 1810. A year later, he returned to England and in 1812, he published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*, bringing immediate fame. Becoming the desired object of fashionable women, he begins an affair with his half-sister Augusta and publishes the Oriental poems *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*.

In 1815, Byron married Annabella Milbanke and had a daughter, whom he named after Augusta. A year later, ending a hopeless marriage, he signed their formal separation, leaving for Switzerland never to return to England. In Switzerland, he wrote the third canto of *Childe Harold* and had a child with Claire Clairmont. He then left for Venice, Italy, having an affair with Mariana Sagati and Margarita Cogni, while finishing his play *Manfred* and the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*. In 1819, he began his final affair with Countess Teresa Guiccioli, and begins work on *Don Juan*.

While continuing his affair with Teresa, he fought in revolutionary struggles with the Carbonaris against Austrian rule in Italy and in the Greek war for independence. From these he drew the major inspiration for the remaining cantos of *Don Juan*, solidifying the Byronic hero in his writings as well as his own life. In 1824, after the publishing of cantos XV and XVI of *Don Juan*, Byron finally died from repeated medicinal bleedings.

The language in the poetry of Lord Byron is simplistic and ordinary, creating emotions through vague and abstract images. In "To a Beautiful Quaker", published in *Hours of Idleness*, Byron builds a sense of hopeless desire which "bids [him] curse Aurora's ray For breaking slumbers of delight" (lines 34-35). He abstracts the beautiful Quaker to a fleeting dream, thus the yearning for "endless night" (line 36). "To a Lady Who Presented to the Author a Lock of Hair Braided with His Own, and Appointed at a Night in December to Meet Him in the Garden", a poem from the same collection, begins with a description of the braided locks, "which firmly thus entwine, In firmer chains [their] hearts confine". In these first two lines of the poem, with the simple abstract images of entwined hair and firm chains, Byron makes the reader feel the sense of secure, yet binding emotion that he feels for his awaiting love.

The rhyme schemes of his poetry also enforce the unsophistication of Byron's poetry. The body of his work consists almost entirely of rhyming couplets, sestets and octets. For his "Epistle to Augusta" and *Don Juan*, he employs ottava rima, with an ABABABCC scheme. "She Walks in Beauty" is three sestets with ABABAB scheme, and "To a Beautiful Quaker" and "To a Lady..." are simple rhyming couplets. In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he borrows the nine-line Spenserian stanza, emphasizing its epic qualities.

According to Northrop Frye, "the poetry seems to be a plain man's poetry, making poetic emotion out of the worn and blunted words of ordinary speech." (*Lord Byron - Major British Writers*) However, Byron was by no means a plain man, nor was his poetry plain. Instead, says Edmund Wilson, "he was a force of enormous energy, running amuk through a world in which he could not find peace." (*Byron in the Twenties - The Shores of Light*) It is because of this tremendous impact on the common man that his is dubbed "plain man's poetry." Paul Trueblood

asserts that the impact of *Childe Harold* upon the British people was that Byron "was everywhere regarded as less as a poet than as a mysterious romantic figure, satiated and secretly wicked, but magnetically attractive." (Lord Byron) Though Byron strictly denounced the resemblances between Harold, the narrator, and Byron himself, the autobiographical aspects of his poetry are evident.

Byron's early poetry betrays his own romanticism in adolescence. "To a Beautiful Quaker" and "To a Lady...", from his *Hours of Idleness*, were written when he was only eighteen and still at Cambridge. These poems contain emotional, compassionate accounts of perfect love, untainted by carnal desire. Both the Quaker and the lady are elevated on pedestals, symbols of love and desire, not sex and lust. Both represent a vision of a blissful future, unlike Don Juan's account of past exploits. They present a more idealized, abstract love than the mechanical, ritualistic sexuality following *Childe Harold* in *Don Juan*.

In "She Walks in Beauty" and "Epistle to Augusta", Byron begins to show signs of his developing new chivalric code. Written when he was twenty-seven, "She Walks in Beauty" reveals a new admiration for the physical qualities of women, specifically his cousin Lady Wilmot Horton. He praises her eyes, her face, her hair, her black spangled gown, and her "Mind at peace with all below, A heart whose love is innocent!" Of this Jenni Calder asks "Did a man for whom fornication was so significant an activity really set such store by purity and innocence?" Calder further asserts that "the evidence suggests, particularly the evidence of his relationship with Augusta, that like so many men Byron wanted women to be both angel and temptress" (*The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women* - Byron: Wrath and Rhyme) In his "Epistle to Augusta", Byron asserts the purity of his half-sister in the first two lines, and "The Passions which have torn [him]" and his "false Ambition" (line 97) hint at his desire for her to be a temptress. As a result of his numerous sexual experiences, Byron's romantic love waned, allowing his carnal desires to penetrate his poetry.

The Byronic hero becomes prominent in his epic works, paralleling a similar change in his own life. His affair with Countess Guiccioli is clearly incorporated into Juan's relationship

with Julia, as are Byron's exploits in Greece and Italy parallel to Juan's own. Though Paul Trueblood refers to Harold as "the original 'Byronic hero'" (Lord Byron), to Calder, *Don Juan* is Byron's "solution to the problem" of women being both angel and temptress. (*The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women* - Byron: Wrath and Rhyme)

These two concepts became irreconcilable for Byron outside of his poetry. Northrop Frye points out that Byron "thought of sexual love as a product of reflex and mechanical habit, not of inner emotional drives." (*Lord Byron - Major British Writers*) Byron himself said he "did not believe in the existence of what is called love" in one of his numerous self-contradictions. Yet Jenni Calder affirms that Byron "indeed enjoyed courtship rituals" and "protested eternal love" to Countess Guiccioli (*The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women* - Byron: Wrath and Rhyme).

Contemporary concerns of sexual versus emotional love are further plagued by recent knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and the advent of a new women's consciousness. Men today do not enjoy the same freedom that Byron did in the sexual arena and cannot easily gain the experience that he could. Byron's time was "responsive to sexuality and conducive to sexual adventuring." (*The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women* - Byron: Wrath and Rhyme) and among the upper class, sexual competition was the primary occupation.

However difficult it is to live as a perfect Byronic hero, there are still lessons to be learned from the passive acceptance of Harold and Don Juan. Though it may be the perfect male fantasy, it is still a fantasy. It does not bear the rewards of the emotional commitment of which Byron denied the existence. What love he denied to the world, he denied to himself.

Superficially, the life of Byron does not seem plagued by indecision and empty of emotional happiness. To the contemporary male mind, Byron could spend the better part of his days seeking sexual gratification and prove that "writing was an ideal profession for a man of feeling who was not distinctly designed for a profession." (*The Hero as Lover: Byron and Women* - Byron: Wrath and Rhyme) However, Byron's inner conflict between physical love and true love is the hidden danger behind the objectification of women, however high a pedestal they are put on.

Because Byron was the victim of sexual and emotional abuse as a child, his conflict was that much more violent. His sexual initiation with a Scottish maid undoubtedly provided temporary euphoria in the emptiness of parental neglect. And indirect societal encouragement of sexual indulgence over emotional love further pushed Byron's morality off balance. Byron's poetry is both evidence for his increasing carnal need and his declining romanticism. Behind the misty euphoric lens of the nineteenth century cult of George Gordon, Lord Byron lay a dark and emerging self-destruction that became the Byronic hero.

Works Cited

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