THE BYRONIC HERO

Cristina Gabriela MARIN
University of Craiova

Abstract: *George Gordon Byron wrote poetry of an extraordinary range and diversity. It has been said that Byron could only represent himself under various disguises that "Childe Harold", "The Corsair", "Lara" and "Don Juan" are variants of a single personality who sins and suffers and yet, is to be pitied for his suffering.*

The present paper wants to highlight an important component of Byron's creation- the construction of the Byronic hero. The literary works of Byron were often characterized by characters who lead a rebellious, nonconformist streak.

The Byronic hero is one of the most prominent literary character types of the Romantic period. He exhibits several characteristics traits, and in many ways he can be considered a rebel. He is usually isolated from society as a wanderer or is in exile of some kind.

Within Byron's own work, an example of the Byronic hero may be the protagonist of the dramatic poem, Manfred. In this case, Manfred is found to be of guilty conscience over the death of Astarte and the forbidden, lustful act the two committed, most likely forbidden due to their relation as brother and sister. Another example is the poem "Prometheus". Byron makes Prometheus to be the suffering, isolated hero, who is shown to be victorious over the oppressors despite its eternal torture.

Byron is one of the most colourful figures in literature personifying the Romantic Movement in his life as well as in his multi faceted writings.

The shortness of his life and his dramatic death enhance his stature and the term Byronic hero is as vital as a reference today as it was during his lifetime.

Keywords: *vindication, strength, rebellious, masculinity, nonconformist.*

The Romantic Revolt in England coincided with a similar movement in France about the same time, the beginning of the 19-th century. Byron represents the universal reaction of the 19th century against the ideas of the eighteenth. It is the influence of the French Romanticism that had its repercussions in England, too. Walter Scott began the reaction but Byron's protest was more comprehensive.

The Byronic Hero - so named because the character evolved primarily due to Lord Byron's writing in the late 18-th and early 19-th century, which fused existing characteristics into a single literary character- is one of the most prominent literar character types of Romantic period. Romantic heroes represent an important tradition in British literature. In England, Milton's Paradise Lost, a number of Gothic novels and dramas, the heroic romances of Sir Walter Scott, some of the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and the works of Lord Byron, all contain a protagonist who is a Byronic hero.

A Byronic hero exhibits several characteristics traits, and in many ways he can be considered a rebel. The Byronic hero does not possess "heroic virtue" in the usual sense instead, he has many dark qualities. He is usually isolated from society as a wanderer or is in exile of some kind. It does not matter whether this social separation is imposed upon him by some external force or is self-imposed. A Byronic hero is any character that is modeled after Lord Byron. A Byronic hero is a character marked by splendid personal qualities, has a hidden sin and many other versatile attributes. Through his poetry, Byron developed his views and expanded them. In fact, Byron developed a hero; a hero that would not back down to a challenge, rather, a hero that

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)

would stand up courageously and fight for what was good and true. In “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” Byron represents a hero who faces defeat. This poem serves as an example of Byron’s unique style, philosophy, and ideals. Byron created heroes who embody the ultimate in individualism, self-sufficiency, ambition, and aspiration, yet who are isolated, gloomy, unsatisfied, and dangerous to themselves and others. In their autonomy, their insistence on defining their own moral code, and their superhuman abilities, they provide a vicarious antidote to their readers' own sense of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of institutional oppression. By bringing his anger and hatred to the lyric, the Byronic hero reveals the dark side of the “true voice of feeling” and the “spontaneous overflow” of emotion that characterize Romanticism.

Vindication (that is revenge and its justification) remains central to Byron’s poetry. By fusing anger and patience, or outburst and deferral Byron creates a seductive mode of intense expression that opens up for readers’ sympathy. A mysterious, deliberative blend of confession and accusation defines the Byronic speech. The angry Byron frequently lets his mask slip and strong overtones of vindictiveness appear. To this his audience typically responds not with sympathy, but with a disturbed fascination, by means of its angry moods the Byronic personality compels attention. Yet, Byron refuses to set his heroes up as role models, leaders, or guides, showing us the alienation and the perpetual inability to be satisfied that comes with "a fiery soul." Despite their bitter misanthropy and inability to form meaningful connections with others, Byron's outlaws are attractive in their staunch refusal to abide by society's codes and in their flamboyant self-realization.

Byron’s” Manfred” presents a character who wandered desolate mountaintops was physically isolated from Europe. Although Harold remained physically present in society and among people, he was not by any means “social”. Often the Byronic hero is moody by nature or passionate about a particular issue. He also has emotional and intellectual capacities, which are superior to the average man. These heightened abilities force the Byronic hero to be arrogant, confident, abnormally sensitive resulting in his rebellion against life itself.

In one form or another, he rejects the values and the moral codes of society and because of this he is often unrepentant by society’s standards. Often the Byronic hero is characterized by a guilty memory of some unmanned sexual crime.

“Childe Harold” introduced the concept of the Byronic hero. He is a type of romantic alpha male and shows up in novels, poems, plays and movies. He is kind but capable of cruelty-devoted to his current lover, yet never able to remain faithful and always moving in search of new sensations. After Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage the Byronic hero made an appearance in many of Byron’s other works including his series of poems on Oriental themes: The Ghiaour (1813), The Corsair (1814) and Lara (1814).

The English Romanticist George Gordon Byron, Lord Byron wrote as a contemporary of such writers as Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. In his time, most European critics outside of England praised Byron as being the greatest of the English poets. He was more than a poet though. Byron was the politician who was willing to side with those workers who took arms against the Industrial Revolution which would send them to ruin, the traveller who journeyed across European continent, the fighter who battled for independence’s sake where independence was most desired and the lover who was infamous for his several affairs.

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)

His greatest contribution to literature is the Byronic hero. The definition given by " The Norton Anthology of English Literature" is: " an alien , mysterious and gloom spirit, superior in his passions and the torturing memory of an enormous, nameless guilt that drives him toward an inevitable doom. He is in his isolation absolutely self reliant, pursuing his own ends according to his generated moral code against any opposition, human or supernatural." This vehicle for such a dark protagonist has become a continually echoed voice from Moby Dick's Captain Ahab to Nietzsche " Superman", the hero is not subject to ordinary concepts of good and evil. Harold Bloom in "English Romantic Poetry", 1961, page 243 notes that "between them, the Brontes can be said to have invented a relatively new genre, a kind of northern romance, deeply influenced both by Byron's poetry and by his myth and personality, but going back also . . to the Gothic novel and to the Elizabethan drama" When Byron died at the age of thirty-six in 1824, Bronte was but eight years old. Bronte's youthful age, however, did not preclude Byron and his works from having a profound effect on her and her writing; indeed, the "cult" of Lord Byron flourished shortly after his death "dominating the Brontes' girlhood and their young womanhood". Of the Bronte sisters' background, Tom Winnifrith comments that a "study of the Brontes' juvenilia provides confirmatory evidence of the sisters' preoccupation with the aristocracy, their emancipation from Victorian prudery, and the attraction of the Byronic hero, beautiful but damned". Bronte was deeply affected by the movement that took place during what is now called the Romantic period. She makes repeated references to Romantic works, and there is some evidence that suggests Jane Eyre was set in the Romantic period. For example, Blanche Ingram asks Rochester to "now sing, and I will play for you." When Rochester replies that he will indeed sing for them, she says, "Here then is a Corsair-song. Know that I dote on Corsairs; and for that reason, sing it 'con spirito'". Bronte's allusion to Byron's immensely popular work "The Corsair," which was published in 1814, suggests that Jane Eyre was set sometimes after this date. Since Jane and Blanche are technically rivals for Rochester and Jane politely dislikes Blanche, Bronte's placement of this allusion into Blanche's reply implies that on one level Bronte may not have thought highly of certain works by Byron or "Byronic" characters.

Within Byron's own work, an example of the Byronic hero may be the protagonist of his dramatic poem, Manfred. In this case, Manfred is found to be of guilty conscience over the death of Astarte and the forbidden lustful act the two committed, most likely forbidden due to their relation as brother and sister. But upon the chance to become reliant upon the powers of darkness and be reunited with his lost sister, he contemptuously reject the offer. Even so, it is prior transgression that Manfred seeks punishment for, and seeks punishment in the form of death. Although his attempts prove fruitless, Manfred does die so with the clear conscience of not partaking in the powers of darkness for his own gain. In Manfred the Byronic hero of the oriental tales, an outcast from society, stained with crime and proudly solitary, reappears under a tenser and more spiritualised form. There is something Promethean in his nature, and he towers above the earlier Byronic heroes both by the greater intensity of his anguish of mind and, also, by the iron resolution of his will. Over the drama there hangs a pall of mystery, which the vision of Astarte, instead of lightening, serves only to make more impenetrable. Speculation has been rife as to the precise nature of that "something else" which, Byron tells us, went to the making of the play, but all attempts to elucidate the mystery remain frustrate. In *Cain,* we witness the final stage in the evolution of the

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)

Byronic hero. It is a play which bears somewhat the same relation to *Paradise Lost* that *Manfred* bears to *Faust.* The note of rebellion against social order and against authority is stronger than ever; but the conflict which goes to form the tragedy is, unlike that of *Manfred*, one of the intellect rather than of the passions. *Cain* is a drama of scepticism—a scepticism which is of small account in our day, but which, when the "Mystery" first appeared, seemed strangely like blasphemy, and called down upon Byron a torrent of anger and abuse. The scepticism finds expression, not only on the lips of Cain, but, also, on those of Lucifer, who is but Cain writ large, and whose spirit of rebellion against divine government gives to the drama its Titanic character. The story of Cain had fascinated Byron since the time when, as a boy of eight, his German master had read to him Gessner's *Der Tod Abels*, while the poet's indebtedness—first pointed out by Coleridge - to Milton's Satan, in his conception of Lucifer, needs no elaboration here. But what marks *Cain* off from *Manfred* and the verse-tales in that element of idyllic tenderness associated with the characters of Cain's wife, Adah, and their child, Enoch. This is beautiful in itself, and also serves as a fitting contrast to those sublimer scenes in which the hero is borne by Lucifer through the abysses of space and the dark abodes of Hades.

Another example may be within in his poem "Prometheus". Although this poem was not directly of Byron's creation, rather his telling of a mythological story it may be said that is presented in such a way that the character of Prometheus is a Byronic hero. The immortal Prometheus, according to mythology brought fire the gods to man, and for this trangression against the gods he was punished by being chained to a mountain where a vulture would eat his liver each day for all eternity. Byron makes Prometheus to be the suffering, isolated hero, who is shown to be victorious over the oppressors, despite his eternal torture.

Byron's influence was manifested by many authors and artists of the Romantic movement and by writers of Gothic fiction during the 19-th century. The Byronic hero provides the title character of "Glenarvon" (1816) by Byron erstwhile lover Caroline Lamb and The Vampyre (1819) by his personal physician, Polidori.

Heathcliff from Emily Bronte "Wuthering Heights" (1847) and Rochester from Charlotte Bronte " Jane Eyre" (1847) are other examples. Scholars have also drawn parallels between the Byronic hero and the solipsistic heroes of Russian literature.

In particular, Alexander Pushkin's famed character Eugene Onegin echoes many of the attributes seen in "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", particularly Oneghin solitary brooding and disrespect for traditional privilege. The first stages of Pushkin's poetic novel "Onegin" appeared twelve years later after Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" and Byron was of obvious influence.

The same character themes continued to influence Russian literature particularly after Mikhail Lermontov invigorated the Byronic hero through the character of Pechorin in 1839 in his novel " A Hero of Our Times".

Within his own life, Byron also showed signs of the Byronic Hero. He turned more and more for comfort to his half sister Augusta Leigh and it is certain that their relationship was a sexual one. It is possible that Byron was the father of Augusta 's daughter Elisabeth Medora Leigh, Augusta urged Byron to marry and he proposed Annabella Millbanke, an intelligent but somewhat prudish young woman. The marriage was an unmitigated disaster. Annabella and Byron were totally unsuited for each other

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)

and Byron behaved abominably toward his wife. Rumours of Byron's relationship with his half sister got out and public outrage was such that in 1816 Byron left England never to return. Byron worked on his long poem Don Juan in Europe and composed other verses as well. Byron became friends with the poet Percy Bhysshe Shelley , another exile from England. Then he dabbled in Italian politics and even briefly joined a secret society the Carbonari, but he was never seriously involved in the fight for Greek independence from Turkey. Byron could not share in the generally held English reaction against all the original ideals of the French Revolution.

At one point, Byron sat as a liberal Whig in the House of Lords. During this time he advocated the rights of the weavers who destroyed newly created bold step of liberalism, but it also shows his romanticist side through his siding with the common man. His personal life was littered with promiscuity and although he married for one year, many of his relations were brief and sometimes incestuous. It may be said that in his way he was rather self-reliant and alien, but perhaps better to say he was closed off from any strong relationship on that level. Finally, Byron set out to follow the morals he set forth in "When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home". In this poem Byron talks of the nobility of fighting for freedom, and if not within one's homeland, then within another's. His life finally came to an end on the battlefield of the Greek war of independence from Turks. Byron pursued this noble cause until he died of feverish exhaustion, but to this day it is fitting that he is looked upon the Greek people as, without any sanction, a hero.

Lord George Gordon is one of the most colourful figures in literature, personifying the Romantic Movement in his life as well as in his multi-faceted writings. The shortness of his life and his dramatic death enhance his stature and the term Byronic hero is as vital as a reference today as it was during his lifetime. No surprise, then, that both his writing and his life have inspired countless composers, from the time of his life to the present; only Shakespeare and Homer can claim such a lasting influence. It is that brooding, tortured magnificently and satiric works have also attracted composers.

The most striking thing about Byron's poetry is its strength and masculinity. His works were characterized by heroes who had a rebellious, non conformist streak. To some extent the hero of Byron's poems had a degree of autobiography. Trunchantly wilt he used unflowery colloquial language in many of his poems. He made little use use of imagery and did not aspire to write of things beyond this worlds; the Victorian critic John Ruskin wrote in "Praeterita", 1884 of him that " he spoke only what he had seen and known; and spoke without exaggeration, without mystery, without enmity and without mercy". His attitude towards writing poetry is summed up well in a letter to Thomas Moore on July 5-th 1821: "I can never get people to understand that poetry is the expression of excited passion, and that there is no such a thing as a life of passion any more than a continuous earthquake or a eternal fever. Besides, who would ever shave themselves in such a state?"

Bibliography

Byron, George Gordon. *Don Juan. English Romantic Writers.* Ed. David Perkins. San Diego: Harcourt, 1967. 829-910.
Cambridge History of English and American Literature, vol XII.
English Literature, Griffith Belbin, Sanda Mateiu, Ed. Cartea Romaneasca, Bucuresti, 1965.
Manning, Peter J. "*The Byronic Hero as Little Boy.*" Bloom 43- 65.

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)

Notices of the life of Lord Byron by Thomas Moore, 1835.
P.G Thorslev-*The Byronic Hero*, Minneapolis, University Press, 1964.
The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.

BDD-A5640 © 2008 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:37:08 UTC)