

LORD BYRON'S BIOGRAPHY

The English poet Lord Byron 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 perfect image of the romantic poet-hero.

His beginnings

George Gordon Noel Byron, sixth Baron Byron, was born on January 22, 1788, in a house on 16 Holles Street in London. His birthplace is now occupied by a branch of the English department store John Lewis. Byron was the son of Captain John "Mad Jack" Byron and his second wife, the former Catherine Gordon. His father, Captain "Mad Jack" Byron was a "gold digger" who married his second wife for the same reason that he married his first, her fortune. Byron's mother had to sell her land and title to pay her new husband's debts. After spending most of her money and fathering George, "Mad Jack" died in 1791, he cut his own throat when George was only three.

George was left with an unbalanced mother who drank too much and either spoiled or ridiculed him, and a birth defect, a deformed right foot about which he was extremely self-conscious for the rest of his life. All this worked together to hurt the boy's pride and sensitivity. On the death of his granduncle in 1798, Byron inherited the title and estate, becoming the 6th Baron Byron of Rochdale.

Byron had a frenetic energy inherited from his womanising navy father, 'Mad Jack'. From his mother, he inherited her weight problem. He was five feet nine inches tall (1,75m), but at one point he weighed over 14 stone (88,9 kg). Young George tried every diet from drinking glasses of sour vinegar to eating plates of only mashed potato drenched in vinegar too, bingeing one day and starving the next, or dining only biscuits and soda water. His level of celebrity was mind-boggling, a 'Byromania,' where the Byronic look was mimicked everywhere in mirrors, in the hope of catching the curl of the upper lip, and the scowl of the brow.

In 1801 he entered Harrow School, in London, and in 1805 he went to Trinity College, at Cambridge University.

While he was studying at Cambridge, he was told all pet dogs were banned (wanting his bulldog Smut living in his dorm). Byron was so annoyed he bought a tame bear instead. He'd walk the bear around the grounds on a chain like a dog and got great pleasure from the terrified reactions. Byron even tried to get the bear enrolled as a student.

Early works

In 1807 Byron published his first book of poetry, *Hours of Idleness*. The book was harshly criticized by the Edinburgh Review. Byron counterattacked in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), the first manifestation of satire (making fun of human weaknesses) and a sarcastic wit (making fun of someone or something in a harsh way by saying the opposite of what is meant), which made him stand out among the major English romantics.

In 1809 a two-year trip to the Mediterranean countries provided material for the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. They were published in 1812, and Byron became famous overnight, earning instant glory. They combined the more popular features of the late-eighteenth-century romanticism: colourful 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, yet strongly impassioned.

Byron had a fascination for the supernatural — so the reputedly haunted house of the Byron family, Newstead Abbey, in Nottingham, became a favourite venue for Byron. His gothic flamboyance reinforced this sense of the spooky. A coffin stood at one end of the dining room, which Byron had turned into an indoor shooting gallery. Skulls of the monks who had been buried at the abbey and Byron's own ancestors from the family crypt were used as flowerpots that lined the walls. He also had a drinking mug made from one of these monkish skulls and served drinks in others. Byron and his friends even wore long, dark, hooded robes like medieval monks, for their soirees. When his close friend Percy Shelly was cremated, Byron asked if he could keep Shelley's skull but he was refused because of his fetish for using them as goblets.

Social life

In 1812, Byron embarked on an affair with the married Lady Caroline Lamb that shocked the British public. She caught the attention of the poet on their first meeting, and she famously described him, with the words that became his lasting epitaph, as "mad, bad and dangerous to know". However, this did not prevent her from pursuing him.

Byron eventually broke off the relationship, and moved swiftly on to others (such as that with Lady Oxford), but Lamb never got over him, pursuing him even after he tired of her. She was emotionally disturbed, and lost so much weight that Byron sarcastically commented to her mother-in-law, his friend Lady Melbourne, that he was "haunted by a skeleton". One day, during a visit, she wrote on a book at his desk, "Remember me!" As a reply, Byron wrote a poem entitled *Remember Thee! Remember Thee!*

While his fame was spreading, Byron was busy shocking London high society. He was rampantly bisexual and thought 'men were cleverer but women kissed better.' He had affairs with actresses, married society women and many young men, so that by the age of 21, he had raging cases of gonorrhoea and syphilis.

In 1814, after a long relationship with his married half sister Augusta Leigh, she had a daughter, almost certainly Byron's. His incestuous love for his half sister not only made him a person without morals, but also strengthened the sense of guilt and doom that he had always felt. From then on the theme of incest was to figure strongly 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*.

While thus seeking relief in imaginative exploration of his own tortured mind, Byron had been hoping to find peace and reconciliation in a more settled life. His marriage to Anna Isabella Milbanke (January 1, 1815) soon proved a complete failure. She left him after a year, and they had Byron's only legitimate daughter, Augusta Ada Byron, also known as Ada Lovelace. Ada's mother remained bitter towards Lord Byron and promoted Ada's interest in mathematics and logic in an effort to prevent her from developing what she saw as the insanity seen in her father. However, Ada remained interested in Byron

despite this (although he never had a relationship with her) and was, upon her eventual death, buried next to him at her request. Ada worked with mathematician Charles Babbage on the Difference Engine, a calculator, and the Analytical Engine, a mechanical computer for which she wrote the world's first algorithms. She showed amazing foresight concerning the abilities of computers to do more than deal with numbers. Ada was the world's first computer programmer and the programming language ADA was named in her honour. She died at 36, the same age as her father. In her final years she was like her father in other ways, including romantic scandals, problems with alcohol and opium, and gambling debts.

After Anna left Byron, and facing mounting pressure as a result of his failed marriage, scandalous affairs and huge debts, Byron left England in April 1816 and never returned.

His travels

In Switzerland Byron spent several months in the company of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Under Shelley's influence he read William Wordsworth, one of the most representative Romantic English poets, and immersed himself in the unpleasant spirituality that permeated the third canto of *Childe Harold*.

He spent the summer of 1816 at Lake Geneva with Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary and Mary's half sister Claire Clairmont, with whom Byron had another illegitimate daughter. During this summer with his friends the Shelleys at Lake Geneva, Byron suggested the group spend a rainy afternoon writing ghost stories. Mary Shelly wrote what became *Frankenstein* and Byron's doctor William Polidori wrote 'The Vampyre', the story that inspired future interpretations from *Dracula* to *Twilight*. This vampire story was read all over Europe and based on a literary idea by Byron himself (the story was first published under Byron's name originally explaining the great interest).

The type of vampire in the story was wholly new. Previously the vampires in European folklore were peasants and villager spectres, dirty with talon-like fingernails as seen in Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu*. By contrast, Polidori's vampire is rich, aristocratic and weighed depressed by boredom — much like Byron himself. The vampire is called Lord Ruthren, Lord Ruthren has cold grey eyes, it is impossible to know what he is thinking and he mixes with the cream of high society. He is liked, but is a secret predator eager to lead the virtuous astray with his charms — traits which are familiarly Byronic.

In October 1816 Byron left for Italy and settled in Venice. In his palazzo in Venice, he kept a menagerie, a whole collection of wild animals. His close friend Percy Shelley described this arrangement: 'Lord B's establishment consists of ten horses, eight enormous dogs, three monkeys, five cats, an eagle, a crow, and a falcon...just met on the grand staircase five peacocks, two guinea hens and an Egyptian Crane.'

His compositions of 1817, however, show signs of a new outlook. Spontaneous maturation had thus paved the way for the healing influence of Teresa Guiccioli, Byron's last love. In 1819, while staying in Venice, he began an affair with Teresa, the wife of an Italian nobleman. It was in this last period that Byron wrote some of his most famous works, including 'Don Juan'. The poet had at last begun to come to terms with his desperate idea of life.

In 1819, he began to publish his work “Don Juan”, which begins with the birth of the child of Donna Inez and Don Jose of Seville, Don Juan. He is sexually precocious, having an affair with his mother’s best friend, Donna Julia, who’s much older than him. Don Alfonso, Donna Julia’s husband, discovers the affair and Don Juan and tries to kill him before he is sent to Cadiz. The rest of the poem is the telling of his love stories and adventures. The tone of the poem is comic, which Byron accentuates with playful rhymes and using homonyms.

It is characteristic of Byron's strength of character that he increasingly sought to translate his ideas into action, repeatedly voicing the more radical Whig (a political party in England that supported reform in government and society) viewpoint in the House of Lords in 1812–1813. He also ran real risks to help the Italian Carbonari, a secret group in Italy that worked for a representative government based on a constitution, in 1820–1821.

His early poetry had contributed to sensitizing the European mind to the struggle of Greece under Turkish rule. In July 1823, Byron left Italy to join the Greek insurgents who were fighting a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. On 19 April 1824 he died from fever at Missolonghi, in modern day Greece. His death was mourned throughout Britain. His body was brought back to England and buried at his ancestral home in Nottinghamshire.

“...quotes...”

“Friendship is love without wings.”

“They never fail who die in a great cause.”

“A drop of ink may make a million think.”

“The heart will break, but broken live on.”

“If I do not write to empty my mind, I go mad.”

“I only go out to get me a fresh appetite for being alone.”

“It’s strange - but true; for Truth is always strange, Stranger than Fiction”

“Love will find a way through paths where wolves fear to prey.”

“I slept and dreamt that life was beauty; I woke and found that life was duty.”

“Always laugh when you can, it is cheap medicine.”

“You gave me the key to your heart, my love, then why did you make me knock?”

“Sorrow is knowledge, those that know the most must mourn the deepest, the tree of knowledge is not the tree of life. ”

“Friendship may, and often does, grow into love, but love never subsides into friendship.”

“The great art of life is sensation, to feel that we exist, even in pain.”

“Those who will not reason, are bigots, those who cannot, are fools, and those who dare not, are slaves.”

POEMS

She Walks in Beauty

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

When We Two Parted

When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.

The dew of the morning
Sunk chill on my brow--
It felt like the warning
Of what I feel now.
Thy vows are all broken,
And light is thy fame;
I hear thy name spoken,
And share in its shame.

They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;
A shudder comes o'er me--
Why wert thou so dear?
They know not I knew thee,

Who knew thee too well--
Long, long shall I rue thee,
Too deeply to tell.

In secret we met--
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.
If I should meet thee
After long years,
How should I greet thee?--
With silence and tears.

So We'll Go No More a Roving

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon.

There be none of Beauty's daughters

There be none of Beauty's daughters
With a magic like Thee;
And like music on the waters
Is thy sweet voice to me:
When, as if its sound were causing
The charmed ocean's pausing,
The waves lie still and gleaming,
And the lull'd winds seem dreaming:
And the midnight moon is weaving
Her bright chain o'er the deep,
Whose breast is gently heaving
As an infant's asleep:
So the spirit bows before thee
To listen and adore thee;
With a full but soft emotion,
Like the swell of Summer's ocean.

And Wilt Thou Weep When I Am Low ?

And wilt thou weep when I am low?
 Sweet lady! speak those words again:
 Yet if they grieve thee, say not so---
 I would not give that bosom pain.

My heart is sad, my hopes are gone,
 My blood runs coldly through my breast;
 And when I perish, thou alone
 Wilt sigh above my place of rest.

And yet, methinks, a gleam of peace
 Doth through my cloud of anguish shine:
 And for a while my sorrows cease,
 To know thy heart hath felt for mine.

Oh lady! blessed be that tear---
 It falls for one who cannot weep;
 Such precious drops are doubly dear
 To those whose eyes no tear may steep.

Sweet lady! once my heart was warm
 With every feeling soft as thine;
 But Beauty's self hath ceased to charm
 A wretch created to repine.

Yet wilt thou weep when I am low?
 Sweet lady! speak those words again:
 Yet if they grieve thee, say not so---
 I would not give that bosom pain.

It is the hour

It is the hour when from the boughs
 The nightingale's high note is heard;
 It is the hour -- when lover's vows
 Seem sweet in every whisper'd word;

And gentle winds and waters near,
 Make music to the lonely ear.

Each flower the dews have lightly wet,
 And in the sky the stars are met,
 And on the wave is deeper blue,
 And on the leaf a browner hue,

And in the Heaven that clear obscure
 So softly dark, and darkly pure,
 That follows the decline of day
 As twilight melts beneath the moon away.