

Lord George Gordon Byron: A Complex Personality



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A B S T R A C T

Byron was a true genius and a man full of life. Byron lived a faster life. Women were foolish after him and at the same time claimed to recognize the lurking deep sense of sin in him. His shy nature was thought to be aristocratic and satanic pride. But who knew Byron closely, loved him and admired him much. He was an ordinary person like you and me but with an uncertain temper, a baffling mixture of vanity, modesty, repentance, pride and democratic feelings. The aristocrat in Byron was but one facet of a many sided individual. His rank of a lord benefited him but little. He lacked the money, in his youth, to live up to his position. Despite his financial difficulties, he always forwarded his hands of help not only to his friends and associates but also to the unknown desolates.

In thirty-six years, he covered a prodigious amount of ground, and paper. He was the first modern celebrity. If there were famous writers before him, none was ever famous in quite the same infamous way as George Gordon, the sixth Lord Byron. Ladies of all class found not only the dark, mysterious Byron in Childe Harold, but also a handsome, morose, brilliant countenance, and with a deformed right foot, of which he was actually conscious. The beauty, the intelligence, the lameness, people saw in varying perspective and proportion; but all three they always saw and retained in memory as the realization of the poet. Byron was a true genius and a man full of life. His shy nature was thought to be aristocratic and satanic pride. But who knew Byron closely loved him and admired him much. He was not a perverted Apollo.

In the main, he was an ordinary person but with an uncertain temper, a baffling mixture of vanity, modesty, repentance, pride and democratic feelings. He was a noble nature, struggling against the minor weaknesses of human nature. The Byron familiar to his intimates was not the self-torturing hero as portrayed by European critics, but that other side, the wayward, charming person who captivated the English Regency for a time. Byron's light may have been dim or obscure due to most of the books written about him, but his live personality shines more clearly in his letters than his conscious art. The poet is not a hero; he is a man of flesh and desire as an ordinary human being and

to expect extra-ordinary heroism is utter foolishness. Many critics have passed their judgment on Byron as man and poet. But while doing so they emphasized the dark side of his personality, sinful and ambiguous; while the other side the purer, the serene was altogether overlooked. He was sensitive and hence highly affected by his environment. He very readily took on the stamp of his associates, accepted their opinions and aped their manners. He was too conscious of the world's gaze, too eager for the world's suffrage, too concerned with what others thought of him, too easily hurt and turned aside by the hostility of the mob.

He was obsessed, with the fear that the world, his beloved English world had turned against him. He knew his handicap in action. His indecisiveness was that of Hamlet's. His very rebellion was apt to be gesture of desperation. Despite these deficiencies of personality Byron was a sweet and lovable personality admired by all his intimates. He was like Swift, one of those people who are much popular with their valets their servants, and the poor, than with their peers. Supersensitive and affectionate, he gathered a menagerie about him because he could not be sure enough of the regard of his fellows.

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help not only to his friends and associates but also to the unknown desolates. He had that benevolent nature. When a posthumous child was born to Lady Falkland, the widow of his friend Lord Falkland, Byron stood godfather, and before he went abroad, putting himself still further into debt to do so, he inserted £ 500 in a breakfast cup at Lord Falkland's so that it would not be discovered until he had left. Byron had a great fondness for animals, most famously for a Newfoundland dog named Boatswain; when Boatswain contracted rabies, Byron nursed him without any fear.

Boatswain contracted rabies, Byron nursed him without any fear. Boatswain lies buried at Newstead Abbey and has a monument larger than his master's. His Epitaph to a Dog has become one of his best known works. No doubt, his flair for the aristocratic style, his penchant for swaggering as a lord, was the natural heritage from Newstead and from his student days at Harrow and at Cambridge. He saw life as an aristocrat is supposed to see it-looking at others always a little haughtily, a little aloofly. But when in mood he showed his real colours-a lively man, full of the mirth - an honest and sincere friend - a man of taste and manners.

But the world behaved in a cruel way. He was coldly received in the house. He was treated as an outsider, even in the days of his triumph. He had a life not of his own choice; he was openly ostracized by the people for his alleged incest. To his literary imagination, his family history made him a solitary, an outlaw. "Lara" was the projection of the youthful Byron grown aged in this world of woe and given his chance. Fate had granted him a name notorious rather than famous and Byron was enough of a fatalist to feel the obligation of living down to his family's reputation.

Byron along with Shelley and Keats comprised the latter half of the Romantic Movement, largely continuing in the same tradition of their predecessors. But these second generation slightly deviated into more metaphysical matters. Byron's juvenile poems appeared in 1806 under the title *Fugitive Pieces* - which contains nice lyrical poetry but it was attacked in the *Edinburgh Review* for its affectations. Byron counter attacked his critics in his satire *English Bards and Scotch Re-*

viewers. But it was with the publication of the *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* canto I and II; a travelogue in Spenserian stanzas, that Byron was made a celebrity overnight. After its grand success Byron came with a series of *Oriental Tales: Glaur, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair, Lara* etc.

which strengthened his reputation as a popular poet of the day. While at Venice he finished the later cantos of the "*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*" Cantos III and IV along with *Manfred, The Prisoner of Chillon, Lament of Tasso, Beppo, Mazeppa* etc. During the same period Byron composed his famous lyrics, *So We Will Go No More A-Roving, She Walks in Beauty, When We Two Parted* etc. *Don Juan*, Byron's masterpiece is considered to be the greatest satire and mock epic in the English language. Byron lived the life he painted in his writings and that honesty, and fearless republicanism made him immensely popular and influential on the continent, where his portrayal of the troubled Romantic hero still accords him a place among the greatest of English poets.

When we see Byron as a poet we see that he was not as much dedicated to the art of poetry as were Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. But poetry was one of his chief interests throughout his life. But this did not mean that Byron rated poetry very highly among human activities. He did not like to be called as a mere poet or man of letters: always conscious of his peerage, he prided himself more on being a man of fashion, while he also liked to think of himself as a leader, politician, and a man of action. This type of ambition gave birth to his complex personality.

Byron, with a comparable range of interests, found it very difficult to bring his various ambitions and ideas of personality into a single whole. His earliest dreams, he told, "had been martial." As a boy he longed to raise a troop of horses to be called Byron's Blacks to perform prodigies of valour. Following the foot steps of his grandfather, it was Byron's dream to opt for a career in the Army or the Navy but his lameness forbade. Yet he spent a lot of time on fencing, boxing, swimming, and pistol practice. His heroes present a mighty and forceful man always in action. He also exerted his oratorical ability to the full when he was still at school: and in February 1812,

with his speech on the Frame Breakers Bill, he embarked on the parliamentary career to which he had looked forward before leaving England in 1809. Nevertheless, he still professed to regard such activities as more important than mere literary works. Byron did not rate poetry very high in comparison with a life of action. Poetry for Byron was a natural activity and he wrote without bothering to justify it or to think about his final purpose. But while defending Pope he asserted that "the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth." And he praised Pope as the "greatest moral poet of the age." This revised opinion is reflected in his own poetic practice.

His Don Juan had a didactic and moral purpose. However, Byron was not wholly consistent in his theory or practice. When the Greek expedition was in progress he put "Don Juan" aside and came for a life of action. According to lady Blessington, "He asserts that he who is only a poet has done little for mankind, and he will endeavour to prove in his own person that a poet may be a soldier." He showed, from his active participation in the war for Greek liberation, that at times a poet can be a soldier. In this mood Byron tended to despise not only poetry-writing but the idle useless life of men of fashion. On going to Greece he felt at last that he had dedicated himself to a great heroic enterprise of liberating Greece from Turkish yoke which would justify of redeem his wasted

years.

Gloom and gaiety were both recurrent moods throughout Byron's life. Almost every one of Byron's intimates witnessed these changing moods of Byron. He continued to have fits of melancholy and depression, which he exploited in his poetry, but for most of the time he was gay, sociable and loquacious; and this side of his character, which dominates his letters and conversations, was for years excluded from his published works, so that there was a sharp division between his normal and his poetic personalities.

While it is always dangerous to seek neat formulations in the case of man so complex (or confused) as Byron, he might be regarded as achieving in some of these works the synthesis he aimed at less successfully in his own life - the union of the poet with the man of diverse interests. And certainly many of the strength and limitations of his greatest poetry are the result of his being primarily no mere man of letters and romantic poet, but a sophisticated man of the world. His ample variety of characters has supplied biographers and critics with sustaining images and extravagant postures. His satirical poems have received a nod of exemption, for they give least scope to imaginative biographers who, confronted with Lara, Manfred, the Childe, the Corsair and the other personae, can always justify their re-creations by adducing his inconsistency of character.

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