

CHAPTER ONE

The Byronic Hero in the Romantic Period: Overview and Context

The nineteenth century, one of the most prolific and renowned periods in the history of English literature, saw the emergence of numerous poets, novelists, essayists and critics of great importance and individuality. It was 'posthumously' known as the Romantic period. The term "romantic" was first applied to art by Friedrich von Schlegel in 1798 but only became known during the nineteenth-century European artistic movement. It was a revolt against the aesthetic that changed art, poetry and literature. Its values of emotion, intuition, imagination and individualism contrasted with the ideals of restraint, reason and harmony that were promoted by classicism.¹ The term was later used as a label for works that emphasized the subjective and spiritual as well as everything that seemed fundamentally modern rather than classical. It was not until the 1860s, however, that "the Romantics" became an accepted collective term for the poets Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats. During the later part of the nineteenth century, the historical phenomenon known as the English Romantic Movement became an accepted term in English literature.

Elizabeth Wasserman states that Byron was the most dominant figure among the Romantic poets, the Romantic movement's most flamboyant figure, and a "revolutionary spirit"² who stumbled into writing or rather discovered his literary gift by accident (20). However, his lack of temperament for politics forced Byron to abandon his desire for a potential career in politics. This was just as well, for as a poet, Byron inscribed a radical vein in poetry. Byron's impact during his lifetime was such that

his poems served as a major source of inspiration for generations of Romantics from Alfred de Musset in France to Alexander Pushkin in Russia as well as fellow English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.³ It is in view of Byron's important contribution to the history of nineteenth-century English literature that this research is carried out. This study examines Byron's conception of the Byronic Hero in his various literary works in order to explain the significance of this figure in Romantic literary culture and to identify the various reasons for its enduring popularity as a cultural icon. It explores the reasons for the significant impact Byron had on the English reading public during his time, specifically during the early 1800s. Through this discussion, I hope to show the various ways in which the Byronic hero served as a powerful cultural icon in the nineteenth century.

In the second chapter, I discuss the influence of Byron's biographical background to the conception of the Byronic hero as seen in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Cantos 1 and 2 (1812) and *Manfred* (1817). I have selected these poems because of the autobiographical content found in them. Besides, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was Byron's first literary claim to fame and the poem that introduced the concept of the Byronic hero. I will analyse how the events in Byron's own life had influenced the conception of the Byronic hero. Ever since he was a boy, Byron had to deal with feelings of insecurity not only because of his deformed foot but also as a result of his strained relationship with his mother. He did not experience the joys of growing up in a secure and loving family environment. Later on, Byron would compensate for this by indulging in numerous affairs with women including wealthy and titled married women as well as a rumoured incestuous affair with his half-sister. His public scandals were a source of ridicule and made him a social outcast in his own country, and forced him to leave England in exile. These personal

conflicts in addition to several traumatic incidents namely the death of close friends as well as his own mother left deep emotional scars on Byron. Byron felt like a condemned man and this led to feelings of frustration, loneliness and rejection. Having no other outlet to vent his frustrations, Byron transferred his inner turmoil into his poems. The Byronic hero was a rebel who did not possess heroic virtues in the usual sense but instead had to struggle with many inner conflicts within him just like any other ordinary man. Despite his “bigger than life”⁴ persona, his appeal partly lay in the fact that he was not perfect. He was a flawed figure who was not afraid to expose human weaknesses. Readers sympathised with the hero’s misery, feelings of rejection, guilt, melancholy and remorse as he endured personal turmoil and suffering.

In the third chapter, I examine the development of the literary culture of the nineteenth century, which resulted in the growth of the reading public. I will look at the growth of the literary market during the nineteenth century in the form of newspapers, magazines, reviews, and other periodicals and how they cultivated the reading habit among the middle classes, who later came to be perceived as the most dominant section of the reading public. The rapid growth of newspapers allowed the middle-class reading public a means of achieving social status since reading newspapers was a way by which an individual could affirm his place in society. The emergence of periodicals also helped to inform middle class society, who was considered the opinion-making group on all things social. The educational limitations of the middle-classes forced them to regard the reviews as an assured basis for their reading as the reviews not only told them what to read, but what to think as well (Martin, 32). In addition, I will explain how the growth of the reading public also included the working class. The public’s disillusionment with the ideals of the

French Revolution brought about the need for a sense of relief and escapism from the reality of political instability and widespread unemployment and poverty that had stricken the masses. Byron's tales of fantasy provided this escapism for the reading public. The exciting and highly entertaining narratives of the Turkish Tales gave pleasure to the reading public and helped lift their spirits at a time of confusion and uncertainty in the post-war period. The huge success of the tales affirmed the Byronic Hero's popularity among the masses. They indicated society's fascination for romantic, courageous, swashbuckling heroes. Readers were also drawn to the exotic Eastern setting featuring foreign characters such as Turks and Moslems.

I will also discuss the appeal of the Byronic hero to women readers in particular. The Byronic hero was described as striking and good-looking. The combination of dashing good looks and courageous disposition captured the hearts of women who hero-worshipped and fantasized about him as their own romantic, swash-buckling knight in shining armour. His gentle and chivalrous nature towards the women in his poems further fuelled his popularity and endeared him to women readers. This is especially important in a patriarchal society where women were confined to a subservient role in society and frequently not accorded much respect and dignity by their male counterparts. Byron's portrayal of his heroes' sensitivity towards women in his poems gave solace to women readers.

In addition, as a result of a division of classes in society brought about by political and economic changes, women of the elite and upper middle classes could afford leisurely pursuits and frequently indulged in reading as a fashionable pastime, as well as to stimulate the mind. The emergence of women writers who dominated the literary scene

also influenced the predominantly female reading public's perception of women's role in society. They became increasingly aware of their inferior status in the male dominated society. Thus, reading became a means of securing a place among the well educated and literate upper middle class society at the time.⁵ In this chapter, I will focus on two of Byron's Turkish Tales namely *The Giaour* (1813) and *The Corsair* (1814) by virtue of them being the most famous and best-selling poems among his Eastern tales.

In the fourth chapter, I examine the political setting of the Romantic period, specifically the role of the French Revolution and the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, and demonstrate how they influenced Byron's conception of the Byronic hero. It is a well-known fact that Byron held great esteem for Napoleon and followed the French Emperor's progress enthusiastically. Ever since his boyhood, Byron had idolized Napoleon for his role as liberator, his revolutionary spirit, and military prowess (Clubbe, 44). Napoleon's influence on Byron's writings is evident especially between the period 1814 – 1816 in poems such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Ode to Napoleon* and other shorter poems dedicated to Napoleon and the Turkish Tales. While initially favouring him, Byron later refers to him as a "despot" and a "tyrant" in his poems. Byron's admiration for Napoleon gradually turned to disillusionment as a result of the latter's subsequent failures and his final defeat at the battle of Waterloo. Byron's respect for him as a great revolutionary was deeply shaken. The defeat of Napoleon had brought no improvement in the condition of the masses. After 1815 there was a deep slump, which paralysed trade and brought widespread unemployment and poverty (Carter & Mc Rae, 218). I will argue that the various characteristics of the Byronic hero demonstrate how he served as a symbol of hope for the people who were suffering from the after effects of the French Revolution. The

Byronic hero gave strength to the people to face their own frustrations and deal with these political and social changes in their lives. The discussion in this chapter will be based on political events and the figure of Napoleon in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Cantos 1 – 2 (1812) and Cantos 3 - 4 (1816 - 1818), the Turkish Tales namely *The Giaour* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814) *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) and *Lara* (1814) as well as the dramatic poem *Manfred* (1817). In addition to analysing these various texts in this study, I will also examine Byron's letters and journals to further illuminate his thoughts and actions in relation to his poems.

The concept of culture in the Romantic period

According to Alan Woods, the concept of "culture" in England began in the late eighteenth century and developed in the nineteenth century.⁶ The French Revolution was a fundamental turning point in world history. New ideas that sprang from the Revolution were a source of inspiration for all that was alive and vibrant in European society. They attracted the best of the intellectuals, artists, writers, philosophers and composers such as Kant, Hegel, Beethoven, Goethe, Shelley and Byron.

Huge social and political changes were taking place at the time. The structure of European society was altered from a society of birth to a society of status, that is from a society in which power and prestige depended upon noble descent to one in which power and prestige depended upon wealth. Power was seized by the wealthy, property-holding middle class known as the bourgeoisie. Simultaneously, the Industrial Revolution improved the position of the middle class by increasing their numbers and multiplying their wealth.⁷ There was, however, a growing conflict between creative and productive social forces formulated for materialism by Karl Marx as "alienation," and for

the Romantic idealist tradition by Thomas Carlyle. The overall aesthetic quality of life, compared with the previously supposed rural idyll, was threatened by the machine-like excesses of industrial society. The machine was seen as a replacement to man, and culture was no longer a mediatory force between man and nature but between man and machine (Jenks, 7).

By contrast, literary culture has been and continues to be viewed as a collective body of arts and intellectual work within any society. The term “culture” here invokes a state of intellectual and moral development in society. Culture is generally defined as the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity including music, literature and painting. Samuel T. Coleridge believed that culture formed the basis of organization and development of human worth, self-expression and authenticity. He regarded the “imagination” as the essential “driving force which dissolves, diffuses, dissipates the very world that threatens to engulf it. Culture becomes the counterforce in the face of the destructive tendencies of industrialization and mass society.”⁸

Likewise, Rene Wellek, defines the romantic poets’ cultural viewpoint in the following terms:

They all [Romantic poets] see the implication of imagination, symbol, myth and organic nature, and see it as part of the great endeavour to overcome the split between subject and object, the self and the world, the conscious and the unconscious. This is the central creed of the great Romantic poets in England, Germany and France. It is a closely coherent body of thought and feeling. Indeed, Romanticism in literature is a tendency to seek an ideal aesthetic world in fancy and imagination and to express it in an individualized and sentimental form, appealing more to the needs of the emotions than to reason. It is a tendency toward *inspiration* and away from *discipline* in the writer’s approach to his materials. It is also a rebellion against whatever is orthodox and regulated or a rebellion against the past.⁹

In 1820, the French writer Charles Nodier summed up the artist's plight as one where, "Romantic poetry springs from our agony and our despair. This is not a fault in our art, but a necessary consequence of the advances made in our progressive society."¹⁰ M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and The Lamp* (1953) argues that the romantic writer is distinguished from the eighteenth-century writer by a changed perception of what a poem is and what it does. According to him, for the classicist, "the work of art resembles a mirror, which is passively mimetic or reproductive of existing 'reality'; for the Romantic, it resembles a lamp, which throws out images originating not in the world but in the poet. Art becomes subjective rather than objective, and intuitive rather than rationally planned" (97).

The Romantics developed ways of writing which tried to incorporate the individual experience in forms and language that were intended to represent everyday speech, and that were more accessible to the general reader. The most notable in this effort is Wordsworth. In his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he expresses his desire to write poetry in the language of common men. Wordsworth opposed the rationalist content of the Augustan poets in favour of a return to imagination and emotion. He also conceived poetry as "more than the mere correct versification of philosophical truths but the initiator of truth itself."¹¹ Thus, to be a poet meant a tremendous responsibility as one who gave life its meaning. To the Romantic poets, poetry became a vocation in life. As Shelley claimed in his famous *Defense of Poetry*, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."¹²

The Byronic Hero as a Cultural Icon

As discussed earlier, the term “culture” invokes a state of intellectual and moral development in society. The theory of culture also incorporates the idea of perfection, a goal or aspiration of individual human achievement (Jenks, 16). Thus, a person who resembles this idea of perfection is naturally elevated to iconic status, hence the term “cultural icon.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines cultural icon as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or movement that is considered worthy of admiration or respect.”¹³ Frequently, the individuals are eclipsed by the fame and they become something bigger than themselves as well as a symbol of a belief or cultural movement. Some important individuals in history who have become cultural icons of the twentieth century include Albert Einstein - a scientific genius; Adolf Hitler – a personification of evil; Marilyn Monroe – the symbol of movie star glamour; and Princess Diana – a beautiful and elegant royal figure. Martin Hansen states that heroes tend to exemplify desirable traits, actions, ideals and values (Massick, 109). Hansen also says that the hero serves as a cultural icon that can be a unifying force whom people share a common identity and interest with.¹⁴

Similarly, the Byronic hero – so named because it evolved primarily due to Lord Byron’s writings in the nineteenth century - is a cultural icon. According to Thorslev, the Byronic hero is one of the most prominent literary character types of the Romantic period:

Romantic heroes represent an important tradition in our literature....In England we have a reinterpreted *Paradise Lost*, a number of Gothic novels and dramas...the heroic romances of the younger Scott, some of the poetry of Shelley, and the works of Byron. In all of these works the Byronic Hero is the one protagonist who in stature and in temperament best represents the [heroic] tradition in England. (189)

The birth of the “Byronic Hero” was indeed a significant aspect of the new generation Romantic poets. The rise of Napoleon, the subsequent French Revolution and the repression that followed it, were the scenes in Europe during Byron’s time in the early 1800s. In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, many changes in social, economic and human relationships were taking place. A sense of disillusionment, hopelessness and frustration was felt by the younger generation of Romantic poets, including Byron and Shelley, as they came to terms with the failure of the revolutionary movement.¹⁵ As Shelley wrote in the Preface to *The Revolt of Islam* :

On the first reverses of hope in the progress of French liberty, the sanguine eagerness for good overleapt the solution of these questions, and for a time extinguished itself in the unexpectedness of their result. Thus many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored, appeared to shew as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes. Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows.¹⁶

Gloom and melancholy are also some of the characteristics found in the Byronic hero. The Byronic hero appealed to the ordinary people who felt disillusioned and dejected by the political turmoil which they could see around them. Readers identified with the heroes’ political struggle to fight for justice and liberty that were described in the poems. The defeat of Napoleon affected the economy in England which led to poverty and hardships. Unemployment rose as a result of discharged soldiers and sailors. The living standards of the masses suffered and affected the textile workers especially. Desperation and frustration drove the people to despair and lead to widespread violence in the streets.¹⁷

At the same time, the Industrial Revolution brought about the rise of capitalism which forced the rich to rob the peasants of their land and reduced them to starvation and beggary (Everest, 10). The Byronic hero gave a sense of hope to these people who felt oppressed and powerless in improving their social and economic status at that time. He was a passionate and courageous figure who fought for what he believed in a fearless manner and this idealization of the hero appealed to the disillusioned public. The Byronic hero's disregard for socially acceptable behaviour coupled with his unfailing willingness to fight for the freedom of the downtrodden contributed to his popularity. He was a larger than life hero and regarded as a nineteenth-century cultural icon or celebrity. Christopher Hitchens observes that if modern celebrity has a nineteenth-century ancestor, it is certainly Byron's combination of the role of the poet with that of man of action. In terms of his intellectual powers and humanitarian qualities, the Byronic hero was far more virtuous than any average person in society.¹⁸

Byron, together with Walter Scott, who rose to fame with *Marmion* (1808), were the most popular writers at the time. Eventually, Byron succeeded Scott as the most fashionable author then because his heroes were seen to be a representation of himself. Just like his heroes, Byron was also a rebel and a social outcast whose deep compassion for the oppressed and the downtrodden explained his continued fame. In 1812, Byron delivered his maiden speech in the House of Lords. Instead of a traditional non-controversial speech, he gave a fiery one denouncing the evils of capitalism and defending the working class, astounding the assembled aristocrats into silence.¹⁹ Byron's innate rebelliousness and love for liberty and glory also led to his involvement in the Greek war of independence against the Turks. We can conclude that Byron's interest in Greece stems from his attitude

towards revolutionary idealism. Byron was drawn to noble and idealistic causes such as fighting against oppression and injustice and his heart went out to the Greeks suffering in their own homeland.

Although Byron mainly championed the cause of the lower classes, his heroes also appealed to the middle class or bourgeoisie who possessed economic power as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Byron's poetry allowed them an escape from the crude reality of the market economy. By immersing themselves in the adventures of Manfred, roaming solitary like Childe Harold in the Alps, or dashing from one adventure to another in the high seas as the heroes in the Turkish Tales, they could escape into a fantasy world and forget temporarily the serious business of money and trade.²⁰

One of Byron's chief defenders in the late nineteenth century was Paul Elmer More, an eminent scholar and a founder of the school of literary criticism known as New Humanism. More had viewed Byron's genius as an extraordinary mixture of revolutionary spirit and classical art. By "classical" he meant a certain predominance of intellect over emotiveness. As More explains, Byron was an intellectual, not in the manner of a philosopher, but in the impulsive way of a child. It is this approach that gave Byron's poetry the simplicity and tangibility that made it timeless.²¹

As argued earlier, the Byronic hero does not possess "heroic virtue" in the usual sense but instead has to deal with many inner conflicts or "dark qualities" in him. That is to say, the hero portrayed in all the poems was not perfect: he had flaws and he frequently lost control of his emotions and often acted impulsively and irrationally for the sake of love and honour. This is where his appeal is enhanced. Byron was not afraid to expose his shortcomings through his heroes – his feelings of unrequited love, rejection, the

theme of incest and homosexuality and the agony of guilt and remorse, as well as his rebellious nature are some of these “dark qualities” portrayed in the heroes. These traits made them as human as everyone else and enabled readers to empathize and identify themselves with the sadness and melancholy in their own lives.

The description of the gothic hero’s mysterious past, his guilt and secret sins heightened the mysterious aura surrounding him. Readers were drawn to this brooding, moody and remorseful hero. Often, the Byronic hero is moody by nature or passionate about a particular issue. He also has deep emotional and intellectual capacities. These heightened abilities force the Byronic hero to be arrogant, confident, abnormally sensitive, and extremely conscious of himself. Sometimes, this is to the point of nihilism resulting in his rebellion against life itself (Thorslev 197). In one form or another, he rejects the values and 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 unnamed sexual crime. Due to these characteristics, the Byronic hero is often a figure of repulsion, as well as fascination. In Thorslev’s words, “the Byronic Hero was the most popular phenomenon of the English Romantic Movement and the figure with the most far-reaching consequences for nineteenth-century Western Literature.”²² He was indifferent to moral laws and had a mysterious past which inspired him with deep melancholy, great personal beauty, strength and bravery.

The important influence of the Byronic Hero in nineteenth-century literature is also echoed by Herbert Read who states that the Byronic Hero is the “super-realist personality” who, by the absolute courage of his defiance of moral and social taboos, becomes “the unconfessed hero of humanity.”²³ According to Read, he exists in one form

or another in our dreams, whether we like it or not, and as the embodiment of those impulses cramped or inhibited by society. "He is the expression of the social insecurity of mankind, their distrust of one another, their dissatisfaction with authority, and disillusionment with social achievement" (128).

Despite Byron's refusal to be identified with the heroes in his poems, the Byronic Hero epitomizes the spirit, courage, integrity and principles of Lord Byron. In short, the Byronic Hero represented the very essence of everything Lord Byron stood and fought for. Edward Bostetter sums up the powerful impact of the Byronic Hero by declaring that Byron "made the Byronic Hero not only the symbol of a lost generation but also the prophetic voice of a revolutionary future; and above all, he made him the expression of the eternally defiant mind of man, unconquerable in its will to freedom"(13).

The conception of the Byronic Hero is indeed Byron's greatest achievement as a poet. Although Byron's genius has been acknowledged by a number of scholars, it cannot be denied that his own notoriety as well as the works of other Romantic poets of the nineteenth century have largely overshadowed his works. However, the popularity of the Byronic hero continues to inspire generations of writers and even many composers throughout the world. This study hopes that through the examination of Byron's poems, journals, and letters, readers would gain a better understanding of the significance of the Byronic Hero and the reasons for its popularity as a cultural icon in the Romantic period.

Notes

¹Micheal D. Harkavy, ed., *The New Webster's International Encyclopedia* (Naples: Trident Press International, 1996) 932.

²Elizabeth Wasserman, "The Byron Complex," *Atlantic Unbound*, 12 Sep. 2002. 22 Feb. 2003 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/byron.htm>>.

³Ronald Carter & John Mc Rae, *The History of Literature in English, Britain and Ireland* (London: TJ International Ltd. Padstow, Cornwall, 1997) 216.

⁴Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types & Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 186.

⁵Philip W. Martin, *Byron – A Poet Before his Public* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 33.

⁶Alan Woods, *British Poets and the French Revolution* (Part One: England and France at the close of the 18th century) <<http://www.Marxist.com/ArtAndLiterature/british-poets3.html>>.

⁷Carter & Mc Rae, 217.

⁸Chris Jenks, *Culture* (London: Clays Ltd., 1993) 16.

⁹Rene Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750 – 1950 - The Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1955) 53.

¹⁰Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (London: Oxford University Press, 198) 3.

¹¹Anthony Burgess, *English Literature: A Survey for Students* (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1958) 166.

¹² Burgess, 166.

¹³ "Cultural Icon." *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. CD – Rom. Oxford: University Press, 1992.

¹⁴ Stephanie Massick, "Defining a Hero is difficult to do," *Quest* August 2002. April 2003. <<http://www.qconline.com/quest2002/heroes/HEROshtm>>.

¹⁵ Jerome McGann, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works* vol. 2 (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1980) 300.

¹⁶ James Lynn Ruff, *Shelley's The Revolt of Islam – Salzburg Studies in Romantic Reassessment* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1972) 33-34.

¹⁷ Carter & Mc Rae, 218.

¹⁸ Christopher Hitchens, "The Misfortune of Poetry," *The Atlantic Monthly* October 2002: 149 – 56.

¹⁹ Lord Blake, "The politics of Byron's time," *Byron Journal* 17 (1989): 40.

²⁰ Kelvin Everest, *English Romantic Poetry* (London: Open University Press, 1990) 10.

²¹ Paul Elmer More, "The Wholesome Revival of Byron," *The Atlantic Monthly* Dec. 1998: 301-03.

²² Thorslev, 186.

²³ Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling - Studies in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953) 128.