

Characteristics of the Byronic Hero

The Byronic hero--so named because it evolved primarily due to Lord Byron's writing in the nineteenth century—is, according to Peter Thorslev, 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. (Thorslev 189)

A Byronic hero exhibits several characteristic 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. With regard to his intellectual capacity, self-respect, and hypersensitivity, the Byronic hero is "larger than life," and "with the loss of his titanic passions, his pride, and his certainty of self-identity, he loses also his status as [a traditional] hero" (Thorslev 187).

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. Byron's Manfred, a character who wandered desolate mountaintops, was physically isolated from society, whereas Childe Harold chose to "exile" himself and wander throughout 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, 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.

Harold Bloom notes that "[b]etween 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" (1). 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" (Bloom 2). 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" (4).

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'" (181; ch.17). Bronte's allusion to Byron's immensely popular work "The Corsair," which was published in 1814, suggests that Jane Eyre was set sometime after this date (Pirie 508). 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.