

# A Study on Impact which Byron, Most Eurocentred of all the English Romantic Writers

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## Abstract

It is interesting to note in this context that Byron did not have a very high opinion about poetry. He did not share the exalted notions that the other Romantics had about poetry in general. The other poets of the age put poetry on a very high pedestal and wove a halo of glory around it. Thus, we find Wordsworth declaring that "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." Again, we find him saying that "poetry is the first and last of all knowledge; it is as immortal as the heart of man;" and that it is "the most philosophical of all writings." Shelley, in the same vein, is found declaring that a poem "is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth," that poetry is "the record of the best and happiest moments of happiest and best minds," and that it is "at once the centre and circumference of all knowledge." He goes so far as to say that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

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*"It is difficult, in considering Byron's poetry,  
not to be drawn into an analysis of the man."*

— T.S. Eliot

In order to understand the poetry of any poet, it is necessary to look into his life. For no literary artist can escape his personality. As the man, so the poetry. Sainte-Beuve, the great 19th century French critic, is not far from the truth when he says that "literary production is not for me distinct or at least separate from the rest of man and human organisation; I can taste a work, but it is difficult for me to judge it independently of my knowledge of the man himself." "Tele arbre, tel fruit," when we know the tree, we know the fruit, he says. The heredity, the environment and the circumstances of the life of a poet go a long way in shaping his sensibility and

character which ultimately find reflection through his poetry. Therefore, the poetry of Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats or any other poet cannot be properly understood without knowing something about their lives and personality. And this is more so in the case of Byron the imprint of whose life and personality is visible on each and every page of his poetry. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration

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to say that he is the most subjective, narcissistic and inward-looking of all the Romantic poets. He seldom gets beyond his own self in his poems, their genesis lies in the peculiar circumstances of his life, and they are but the reflections of his magnificent personality and the myriad experiences which he went through in his otherwise short-life.

Byron, however, did not like this idealization of poetry and poets. Poetic activity, in fact, rated very low in his estimation. "I by no means rank" he announced, "poetry and poets high in the scale of intellect. This may look like affectation, but this is my real opinion." How he held poets in contempt is clear from the mocking tone of the following lines :

*"If I have a wife, and that wife has a son—by anybody—I will bring up my heir in the most anti-poetical way—make him a lawyer, a pirate or anything, But if he writes too, I will be sure he is none of mine, and cut him off with a bank-token."*

Byron, in fact, attached so little importance to poetry that he considered any stir made by poets about it to be a sign of effeminacy, weakness and degeneration. He preferred a life of action. "Who would write" he asks, "who had anything better to do ? 'Action—action—action'—said Demosthenes : "Actions, actions' I say, and not writing, last of all rhyme."

## DISCUSSION

Now the question arises that if Byron rated poetry and poets so very low, then why did he himself write so much in the first place ? The answer to this is to be found in the circumstances of his life, which were, as Bertrand Russell points out, "very peculiar." He lived an intensely dramatic life—his life, though short, was full of episodes, events, happenings, strokes of fortune and buffets of misfortune which did not allow him even a moment of rest. As he himself says in one of his poems :

*"My years have been—no slumber, but the prey  
Of ceaseless vigils; for I had the share  
Of life which might have filled a century."*

His ever-vigilant fate kept on hurling him from one extreme situation to another, without any let-up in-between, so that he always lived in a state of emotional frenzy and excitement. This emotional

pressure built on him by the strange circumstances of his life needed an outlet, a route of escape, otherwise he would have suffered an emotional disorder. And poetry supplied him with the much-needed outlet, the channel through which he could release his pressure. It acted as a kind of safety-valve for him. As a volcanic eruption prevents an earthquake, so did poetry in Byron's case prevent an inner quake, an emotional disaster. Therefore, his definition of poetry as "the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earth quake" is quite significant in this context. For him the usefulness of poetry lay in its pathological value. It is for this reason that we find him declaring again and again through his letters and journals that he writes not for pleasure but to relieve himself of his emotional pressures. In a letter to Moore, dated January 2, 1821, he writes :

*"I feel exactly as you do about "art" like....., and then if I do not write to empty my mind, I go mad ..... I feel it as a torture, which I must get rid of, but never as a pleasure. On the contrary. I think composition a great pain."*

The same idea has been expressed while writing about the composition of his verse-tale, "The Bride of Abydos" :

*"It was written in four nights to distract my dreams. .... were it not that, it had never been composed; and had I not done something at the time, I must have gone mad, by eating my own heart,..... a bitter diet ....."*

Publication, too, was for him but a continuation of the same creative necessity :

*"To withdraw myself from myself (oh that cruel selfishness) has been my sole, my entire, my sincere motive, in scribbling at all; and publishing is also the continuation of the same object, by the action it affords to the mind, which else recoils upon itself."*

Poetry, thus, was an emotional necessity for Lord Byron. It was for him the means to ease himself of his emotional burden, of the pressure built upon him by the peculiar circumstances of his life. There is, then, a constant pouring of his own personal

dilemmas, of his own troubled self, in the poetry of Lord Byron. As Paul West remarks :

*“To try excluding the man is eventually to discover that little of the poetry can stand alone and, if it is made to, seems like fragments from the hands of various pasticheurs..... our main pleasure in reading Byron is the contact with a singular personality..... it is Byron and Byron’s ideas of himself which hold his work together, just as that idea enthralled Europe and summed up under the heading of Byronism a variety of European obsessions. ....whatever ventriloquism he adopts, he is always in the first person..... the poems, whatever their quality, are the main items in a shrewdly personal performance; and to try shutting Byron out is only to admit him by the back door and fabricate a work of pseudo-criticism on the basis of deliberate misunderstanding.”*

As his poetry is so much personal, as it hinges so much on the circumstances of his life and the different traits of his personality, it would then be quite relevant to go into them before switching over to a discussion of the main issue.

George Gordon Noel Byron, the sixth Lord in the line of the Byrons, was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1788, in London. His mother, Catherine Gordon of Gight, was a rich Scottish heiress, while his father, Captain John Byron, was a dashing officer and one of the most good-looking men of the period. His grandfather was an admiral known for his adventures on sea while his granduncle was the Lord and owner of Newstead Estate. His lineage, thus, was great, but, unfortunately, his father was a man of reckless and imprudent nature, given to gambling and extravagance, for which he was disowned in early manhood by his own father. He had at first eloped with, and then, after her divorce, married Lady Carmarthen, from whom a daughter named Augusta was born to him. However, due to his extravagant nature he soon found himself reduced to very straitened circumstances. The situation became worse when Lady Carmarthen died in 1784. To recoup his tottering fortunes, he went out to hunt another woman rich enough to maintain him. And thus he happened to come across Miss Catherine Gordon at Bath who had an inheritance of about 2400 pounds with her. They got married soon,

but the economic condition failed to improve, as much of Lady Catherine’s inheritance was spent in paying off his debts and meeting his extravagances. The couple then decided to leave England and go to France to try some suitable means of existence. They lived in France for three years, before Lady Byron returned alone to England to give birth to her child. His father, however, died in France when he was just three years old. His relatives, after some attempts at reconciliation with his mother, decided to dissociate themselves completely from her. The responsibility of bringing him up, therefore, fell solely on the shoulders of his mother. His early years were spent in poverty and extreme misery, with the mother moving to and fro from London to Scotland to eke out a living. Moreover, she was a woman of violent and uncertain temperament, given to wide swings of moods, and Byron had to pass a tough time trying to cope with the tyranny of her unpredictable temperament. His Harrow days, however, were, on the whole satisfactory, and his last years there, when he had overcome his natural shyness and collected around him a group of attractive and distinguished friends, were, as he afterwards remembered, probably the happiest of his entire existence.

## CONCLUSION

However, despite penury, his mother tried to give him a suitable education. At first he attended classes at a Grammar School in Aberdeen, but after sometime he was put into a boarding school at Dulwich. In 1801, he entered Harrow Public school at the age of 13, and remained there for four years, till the summer of 1805. Meanwhile, a very important thing happened to him. He was blessed with a sudden stroke of fortune. His granduncle, the notorious, savage and eccentric Lord of Newstead, died in the year 1797, leaving behind the title and the estate for him. Happy and proud, he succeeded to the title and the estate in 1798, and though this did not remove his poverty, as the property was heavily encumbered, yet it gave him a position in life, initiated him into aristocracy, and gave him a sense of dignity which but made the squalor of his immediate surroundings even more oppressive.

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