

Lord Byron's Eastern Byronic Hero

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After his first Eastern tour, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* brought Byron overnight fame; and its major character, Harold, became a template of the Byronic Hero. This remarkable protagonist, who later emerged in Byron's major works, such as *Manfred* and *Don Juan* besides others, also branded Byron's Oriental Tales, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, and *The Siege of Corinth*. But, though most of Byron's works are extremely fictive, they are also observative of the various cultures he had participated in, the reason why his Byronic Heroes change with the change of cultures. In this work, I argue that although Byron maintains the basic features of the Harold template in most of his major works, he gives his Eastern Byronic Heroes, such as Selim, Giaour, Conrad, and Seyd features unobserved in his Western heroes. To limit the scope of my work I will discuss the cultural features of the Eastern Byronic protagonists in only two works *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*.

The understanding of the Byronic hero is not only key to understanding major poetic works of Byron himself, but also of many of his contemporaries and predecessors from Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* to Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* besides many more. Not only do the characteristics of the Byronic hero reflect on the characters alone but also on many of the gothic Romantic poets of the time. This character has become a guideline for the formation of many leading mysterious protagonists.

Probably one of the most extensive works on the Byronic hero and his origins is Peter Thorslev's *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*. 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. (Thorslev 189)

As conscious rebel, the Byronic hero rejects the morals and traditional standards of society. Instead of possessing heroic virtue, he has dark qualities, perhaps not all admirable which is due to the loss of his titanic passions, his pride, and his certainty of self-identity (Thorslev 187). His intelligence is larger than life and he is hypersensitivity, and self-conscious. He is usually isolated from society; a wanderer of some kind, seeking personal fulfillment. And like the Romantics of the time, he is sometimes brooding over some dark secret associated with the feeling of guilt, often of a sexual nature. His life ends tragically, contributing less to humanity or society and more to an individual trauma engendering both the admiration and the disgust of the reader.

By giving a clear and definitive set of characteristics for readers and analyzers to follow, Thorslev falls into the trap of overgeneralization and even simplification. Though the different heroes in Byron's tales do possess many of these qualities, they are in no way interchangeable. Thorslev also rejects the influence of Byron's personal life and experiences on the formation of the Byronic hero, but Byron did not project life into literature nearly as much as he projected literature into life (Thorslev 12) putting him up for criticism for even though Byron was certainly influenced by the literature of the time and by his personal experiences, which had a lot to do with the iconic character he developed. J.D. Jump exposes the uncertainties in Thorslev's wide generalizations about the Byronic hero. The very phrase "the Byronic hero" implies that there exists a single character-

type to which it can refer. But the hero of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Jump notes, is distinct from the hero of the Turkish Tales, who is quite unlike the hero of the last two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, who in his turn differs appreciably from the hero of the dramas. (Jump 101) This indeed supports my claim that the Byronic hero changes with the change of cultures.

Discussing some of his unique Oriental Byronic heroes, such as the Giaour and Selim, one can note what differentiates them from the Western heroes. To begin with *The Giaour*, the hero is the title character who is known as Giaour, which is by definition, one outside the Islamic faith. Immediately, the clash of two different cultures is observed, the Christian and the Islamic ones. The term was used by the Ottomans to refer to infidels or Christians. But, just because the Giaour is Christian, one must not assume that he is a Westerner. According to Naji Oueijan in his book, *A Compendium of Eastern Elements in Byron's Oriental Tales*, the Giaour frequently mentions Allah instead of God; he does not take "the sacred bread and wine"; and he believes in the Eastern superstition that man's fate is written on his brow: "But look," he says, "'tis written on my brow!" (*Giaour*, ll. 1082, 1133, 815, and 1057 respectively). Furthermore, he looks and talks like an Easterner. He has dark hair and a pale brow, and he describes Leila using Eastern images as "a form of life and light" and as his "life's unerring light" (*Giaour*, ll. 894-95; ll. 112, 1145). Not only it is the custom of Eastern lovers to associate their loved ones with bright colors and light (Oueijan 108), but it is a historical and religious fact that the first Christians were Easterners and that they inhabited the East and still do up to the present times. The Giaour who possesses the physical features of an Easterner has the mental qualities of a Byronic hero when it comes to guilt and redemption. The Giaour is not oblivious about his sins but still chooses to confess to the monk. He tells the story of his lost love and of the murder of Hassan seeking no redemption but trying to apply his own laws of the world in his own way. To tell his story to the friar will grant

him a kind of self-chosen absolution so that his restless soul will finally find peace in his reunion with his lost love. This we see in the concluding part of the poem:

β□□Such is my name, and such my tale.
Confessor β□□ to thy secret ear
I breathe the sorrows I bewail,
And thank thee for the generous tear
This glazing eye could never shed.
Then lay me with the humblest dead,
And, save the cross above my head,
Be neither name nor emblem spread β□□
By prying stranger to be read,
Or stay the passing pilgrims tread.β□□
He passed β□□ nor of his name and race
Hath left a token or a trace,
Save what the Father must not say
Who shrived him on his dying day:
This broken tale was all we knew
Of her he loved, or him he slew.(1319-1334)

Mentally, the Giaour, like a Byronic hero is a complex and a tortured soul, failing miserably in life and losing whatever he treasures the most. The Giaour possesses certain qualities that are unfamiliar to the common Byronic hero,; for instance Manfred, who is a model of the Western Byronic hero though some even argue that Manfred *is* Byron. (Cochran, 3).

Manfred is by far one of Byron's deepest philosopher protagonists; Childe Harold makes no pretence to being a philosopher, or a theologian of dualism, still less a sun-worshipper. The Giaour, Conrad, Selim appear not to bother with the questions which have obsessed Manfred; though his indifference and hostility to Christianity is shared by Giaour.(Cochran,2) Manfred is regarded more as an intellectual villain than a hero sharing traits with a sinner, and this puts him in the category of a Western

Byronic hero. The Giaour, on the other hand, is labeled differently; he becomes more of an Eastern hero possessing more emotional and revolutionary qualities than intellectual ones. Like a true Easterner, the Giaour is overcome by his emotion, thus committing a crime of passion rather than intellect when killing Hassan. Though the fisherman considers him a villain for his actions, he does not fall under this category. A villain can be seen as someone who has not overcome his evil deed for he has a problem within himself. He is not free in mind. Though the Giaour does not confess his sins to a priest, he still tells his story in full detail to the audience, not keeping anything to himself, and projecting his love, sins, and life on a wide screen. Manfred, on the other hand, remains secretive and a slave to his inner intellectual struggle and guilt; this we see in Act III, Scene iv of *Manfred*:

What I have done is done; I bear within
 A torture which could nothing gain from thine.
 The mind which is immortal makes itself
 Requit for its good or evil thoughts,
 Is its own origin of ill and end,
 And its own place and time; its innate sense,
 When stripped of this mortality, derives
 No colour from the fleeting things without,
 But is absorbed in sufferance or in joy,
 Born from the knowledge of its own desert. (148- 157, ll)

Both the Giaour and Manfred have loved, yet each has had a different experience with love in a different culture. In the Eastern land of the Giaour, love does not have a place for the intellect, for it is the land of excess emotionality and passion; whereas in the intellectual world of Manfred, love is conserved and detached. Here again we see a dichotomy between emotionalism and conservatism: whereby in the East emotions and passions are freer, and in the West emotions are reserved and controlled by intellect. Thus the Western Byronic hero deviates from the Eastern one in thought and action.

In *Bride of Abydos*, Byron exposes a tale with an all-Islamic cast of characters with the exception of Selim who is only half Turkish and Muslim and half Greek and Christian, for his mother is a Christian Greek slave. This identity blend is origin of Eastern Byronic hero. He is regarded as a self-destructive renegade, a conflicted man, torn between obedience and rebellion. He is simultaneously an insider and an outsider. The Greek in him confronts the Turk, and the Turk opposes the Greek. By obeying Giaffir and loving his daughter and by swearing vengeance for his father and joining the pirates against the Pasha, Selim tries alternately to reconcile and then to separate these two natures, but he precipitates his inevitable death. (Oueijan, 52) Physically, Byron provides little description of Selim, except to stress that Giaffir ridicules Selim's short beard. This can symbolize Selim's scarcity of creed, possessing a feature of the Turkish culture yet not fully to stabilize him as Turk. As for his personality, he appears to have both Turkish and Grecian traits. As a Turk he reveres and obeys his supposed father, "For son of Moslem must expire, / Ere dare to sit before his sire!" (*Bride of Abydos* I, 11. 51-52). As part of the Muslim faith he swears by the "Prophet's Shrine" and calls on Muhammad; and like any cultured Easterner he is well aware of "Mejnoun's tale, or Sadi's song." On the other hand, as "Son of a slave," he has the soul of a Grecian, and he has strayed from the faith of Islam by drinking wine, a fact which Byron emphasizes quite frequently in the tale (*Bride of Abydos*, I, 11. 87, 362; 3 17-20; see also Oueijan, 52). Selim is a conflicted soul, an outsider in his own land. Like Giaour, he is overcome by excess emotion and passion; he is guided by his thirst for vengeance and constricted by his sense of patriotism. These qualities again belong more to the Eastern hero rather than the Western Byronic hero. Here, I would like to compare him with Byron's most notorious Byronic hero, Childe Harold.

In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage Canto I and II*, the personage of the Byronic hero is sketched for the first time. Like a typical Byronic Hero, Childe Harold is an anti-social being who is troubled by his past. The following quotation lists a few of the flaws of Harold's character:

But spent his days in riot most uncouth,
and vex'd with mirth the drowsy ear of Night
Ah, me! In sooth he was a shameless wight,
Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;
Few earthly things found favour in his sight
Save concubines and carnal companie,
And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree (Byron 12-18)

This quotation describes Harold's character as an undesirable, pathetic, shameless, and self-loathing character. Harold appeals to the reader's sympathy more than to his interest and adoration as we see in the following lines:

And now Childe Harold was sore sick at heart,
And from his fellow bacchanals would flee;
Tis said, at times the sullen tear would start,
But Pride congeal'd the drop within his ee. (46-49)

Childe Harold possesses few truly heroic qualities; in fact he is an imperfect hero. In this quote we also find the reservation of emotion which separates the Byronic hero from the Eastern hero. When Childe would start to tear up but his pride prevents him from succumbing to his tears. Also, Harold is a wealthy young man, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, through his voyages he looks for distraction. Wealth and disillusionment is a typical Western trait of the Byronic hero, yet it is not a trait found in his Eastern heroes. Selim is not disillusioned with constant joy and festivity but is torn between loyalty to either his country or his family. Where Harold is easily willing to part with his lands, Selim is haunted by patriotism as much as vengefulness. In the East, Byron was loyal to his principles of revolting against oppression. His Eastern Byronic heroes are as devoted to revolt against oppression, their love is overtaken by their powerful passions, and their inner conflicts are generated by their hybrid identity.

No one can argue that the Byronic hero helped shape the intellectual and the cultural history of the later centuries, to forever be imitated in life as well as in art.

But, one must not forget Byron's versatility and talent in writing; his tales are as diverse as his journeys. Byron could not limit all his protagonists to the same set of characteristics; rather, he created new ones framed by their settings and cultures. In this sense, one cannot impose a fixed overgeneralization of the Byronic hero. Byron cleverly depicted different persons in different sets of heroes. The Giaour and Selim are to be remembered as great Eastern Byronic heroes exposing Byron's talent and craftsmanship in creating authentic heroes. There is fixed scenario in Byron's life, and the same applies to his fictitious characters.

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