

# Lord Byron

## Early Life and career

- Byron was the son of Captain John (“Mad Jack”) Byron and his second wife, Catherine Gordon, a Scots heiress. After her husband had squandered most of her fortune, Mrs. Byron took her infant son to Aberdeen, Scotland, where they lived in lodgings on a meagre income; the captain died in France in 1791.
- George Gordon Byron had been born with a clubfoot and early developed an extreme sensitivity to his lameness. In 1798, at age 10, he unexpectedly inherited the title and estates of his great-uncle William, the 5th Baron Byron.
- His mother proudly took him to England, where the boy fell in love with the ghostly halls and spacious ruins of Newstead Abbey, which had been presented to the Byrons by Henry VIII.
- After living at Newstead for a while, Byron was sent to school in London, and in 1801 he went to Harrow, one of England’s most prestigious schools.
- In 1803 he fell in love with his distant cousin, Mary Chaworth, who was older and already engaged, and when she rejected him she became the symbol for Byron of idealized and unattainable love.
- In 1805 Byron entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he piled up debts at an alarming rate and indulged in the conventional vices of undergraduates there. The signs of his sexual ambivalence became more pronounced in what he later described as “a violent, though *pure*, love and passion” for a young chorister, John Edleston.
- Alongside Byron’s strong attachment to boys, often idealized as in the case of Edleston, his attachment to women throughout his life is an indication of the strength of his heterosexual drive.

- In 1806 Byron had his early poems privately printed in a volume entitled *Fugitive Pieces*, and that same year he formed at Trinity what was to be a close, lifelong friendship with John Cam Hobhouse, who stirred his interest in liberal Whiggism.
- Byron's first published volume of poetry, *Hours of Idleness*, appeared in 1807. A sarcastic critique of the book in *The Edinburgh Review* provoked his retaliation in 1809 with a couplet satire, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, in which he attacked the contemporary literary scene. This work gained him his first recognition.
- On reaching his majority in 1809, Byron took his seat in the House of Lords, and then embarked with Hobhouse on a grand tour. They sailed to Lisbon, crossed Spain, and proceeded by Gibraltar and Malta to Greece, where they ventured inland to Ioánnina and to Tepelene in Albania.
- In Greece Byron began *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which he continued in Athens. In March 1810 he sailed with Hobhouse for Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), visited the site of Troy, and swam the Hellespont (present-day Dardanelles) in imitation of Leander.
- Byron's sojourn in Greece made a lasting impression on him. The Greeks' free and open frankness contrasted strongly with English reserve and hypocrisy and served to broaden his views of men and manners. He delighted in the sunshine and the moral tolerance of the people.
- Byron arrived back in London in July 1811, and his mother died before he could reach her at Newstead. In February 1812 he made his first speech in the House of Lords, a humanitarian plea opposing harsh Tory measures against riotous Nottingham weavers.
- At the beginning of March, the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* were published by John Murray, and Byron "woke to find himself famous." The poem describes the travels and reflections of a young man who, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, looks for distraction in foreign lands.

- Besides furnishing a travelogue of Byron's own wanderings through the Mediterranean, the first two cantos express the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the wars of the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras.
- In the poem Byron reflects upon the vanity of ambition, the transitory nature of pleasure, and the futility of the search for perfection in the course of a "pilgrimage" through Portugal, Spain, Albania, and Greece.
- In the wake of *Childe Harold's* enormous popularity, Byron was lionized in Whig society. The handsome poet was swept into a liaison with the passionate and eccentric Lady Caroline Lamb, and the scandal of an elopement was barely prevented by his friend Hobhouse. She was succeeded as his lover by Lady Oxford, who encouraged Byron's radicalism.
- During the summer of 1813, Byron apparently entered into intimate relations with his half sister Augusta, now married to Colonel George Leigh.
- He then carried on a flirtation with Lady Frances Webster as a diversion from this dangerous liaison. The agitations of these two love affairs and the sense of mingled guilt and exultation they aroused in Byron are reflected in the series of gloomy and remorseful Oriental verse tales he wrote at this time: *The Giaour* (1813); *The Bride of Abydos* (1813); *The Corsair* (1814), which sold 10,000 copies on the day of publication; and *Lara* (1814).
- Seeking to escape his love affairs in marriage, Byron proposed in September 1814 to Anne Isabella (Annabella) Milbanke. The marriage took place in January 1815, and Lady Byron gave birth to a daughter, Augusta Ada, in December 1815.
- From the start the marriage was doomed by the gulf between Byron and his unimaginative and humorless wife; and in January 1816 Annabella left Byron to live with her parents, amid swirling rumours centring on his relations with Augusta Leigh and his bisexuality.

- The couple obtained a legal separation. Wounded by the general moral indignation directed at him, Byron went abroad in April 1816, never to return to England.
- Byron sailed up the Rhine River into Switzerland and settled at Geneva, near Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Godwin (soon to be Mary Shelley), who had eloped and were living with Claire Clairmont, Godwin's half sister. (Byron had begun an affair with Clairmont in England.)
- In Geneva he wrote the third canto of *Childe Harold* (1816), which follows Harold from Belgium up the Rhine River to Switzerland. It memorably evokes the historical associations of each place Harold visits, giving pictures of the Battle of Waterloo (whose site Byron visited), of Napoleon and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and of the Swiss mountains and lakes, in verse that expresses both the most aspiring and most melancholy moods.
- A visit to the Bernese Oberland provided the scenery for the Faustian poetic drama *Manfred* (1817), whose protagonist reflects Byron's own brooding sense of guilt and the wider frustrations of the Romantic spirit doomed by the reflection that man is "half dust, half deity, alike unfit to sink or soar."
- At the end of the summer the Shelley party left for England, where Clairmont gave birth to Byron's daughter Allegra in January 1817. In October Byron and Hobhouse departed for Italy. They stopped in Venice, where Byron enjoyed the relaxed customs and morals of the Italians and carried on a love affair with Marianna Segati, his landlord's wife.
- In May he joined Hobhouse in Rome, gathering impressions that he recorded in a fourth canto of *Childe Harold* (1818).
- He also wrote *Beppo*, a poem in ottava rima that satirically contrasts Italian with English manners in the story of a Venetian menage-à-trois. Back in Venice, Margarita Cogni, a baker's wife, replaced Segati as his mistress, and his descriptions of the vagaries of this "gentle tigress" are among the most entertaining passages in his letters describing life in Italy.

- In the light, mock-heroic style of *Beppo* Byron found the form in which he would write his greatest poem, *Don Juan*, a satire in the form of a picaresque verse tale. The first two cantos of *Don Juan* were begun in 1818 and published in July 1819.
- Byron transformed the legendary libertine Don Juan into an unsophisticated, innocent young man who, though he delightedly succumbs to the beautiful women who pursue him, remains a rational norm against which to view the absurdities and irrationalities of the world.
- Upon being sent abroad by his mother from his native Sevilla (Seville), Juan survives a shipwreck en route and is cast up on a Greek island, whence he is sold into slavery in Constantinople.
- He escapes to the Russian army, participates gallantly in the Russians' siege of Ismail, and is sent to St. Petersburg, where he wins the favour of the empress Catherine the Great and is sent by her on a diplomatic mission to England.
- The poem's story, however, remains merely a peg on which Byron could hang a witty and satirical social commentary. His most consistent targets are, first, the hypocrisy and cant underlying various social and sexual conventions, and, second, the vain ambitions and pretenses of poets, lovers, generals, rulers, and humanity in general.
- *Don Juan* remains unfinished; Byron completed 16 cantos and had begun the 17th before his own illness and death. In *Don Juan* he was able to free himself from the excessive melancholy of *Childe Harold* and reveal other sides of his character and personality—his satiric wit and his unique view of the comic rather than the tragic discrepancy between reality and appearance.
- In Ravenna Byron wrote *The Prophecy of Dante*; cantos III, IV, and V of *Don Juan*; the poetic dramas *Marino Faliero*, *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Cain* (all published in 1821); and a satire on the poet Robert Southey, *The Vision of*

*Judgment*, which contains a devastating parody of that poet laureate's fulsome eulogy of King George III.

- Byron arrived in Pisa in November 1821, having followed Teresa and the Counts Gamba there after the latter had been expelled from Ravenna for taking part in an abortive uprising.
- He left his daughter Allegra, who had been sent to him by her mother, to be educated in a convent near Ravenna, where she died the following April.
- In Pisa Byron again became associated with Shelley, and in early summer of 1822 Byron went to Leghorn (Livorno), where he rented a villa not far from the sea.
- There in July the poet and essayist Leigh Hunt arrived from England to help Shelley and Byron edit a radical journal, *The Liberal*.
- Byron returned to Pisa and housed Hunt and his family in his villa. Despite the drowning of Shelley on July 8, the periodical went forward, and its first number contained *The Vision of Judgment*.
- At the end of September Byron moved to Genoa, where Teresa's family had found asylum.
- Byron's interest in the periodical gradually waned, but he continued to support Hunt and to give manuscripts to *The Liberal*. After a quarrel with his publisher, John Murray, Byron gave all his later work, including cantos VI to XVI of *Don Juan* (1823–24), to Leigh Hunt's brother John, publisher of *The Liberal*.
- By this time Byron was in search of new adventure. In April 1823 he agreed to act as agent of the London Committee, which had been formed to aid the Greeks in their struggle for independence from Turkish rule.
- In July 1823 Byron left Genoa for Cephalonia. He sent £4,000 of his own money to prepare the Greek fleet for sea service and then sailed for Missolonghi on December 29 to join Prince Aléxandros Mavrokordátos, leader of the forces in western Greece.

- Byron made efforts to unite the various Greek factions and took personal command of a brigade of Souliot soldiers, reputedly the bravest of the Greeks.
- But a serious illness in February 1824 weakened him, and in April he contracted the fever from which he died at Missolonghi on April 19. Deeply mourned, he became a symbol of disinterested patriotism and a Greek national hero.
- His body was brought back to England and, refused burial in Westminster Abbey, was placed in the family vault near Newstead. Ironically, 145 years after his death, a memorial to Byron was finally placed on the floor of the Abbey.

### **Chronology of his works-**

- *Hours of Idleness* (1807)- severely criticized by Henry Brougham in the Edinburgh Review. Byron replied to him in his satirical work- *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809)
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- *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Cantos I & II* (1812)
- *The Giaour* (1813)
- *The Bride of Abydos* (1813)
- *The Corsair* (1814)
- *Lara, A Tale* (1814)
- *Hebrew Melodies* (1815)- 30 poems
- *The Siege of Corinth* (1816)
- *Parisina* (1816)
- *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1816)
- *The Dream* (1816)
- *Prometheus* (1816)

- *Darkness* (1816)
- *Manfred* (1817)- dramatic verse; closet drama
- *The Lament of Tasso* (1817)
- *Beppo* (1818)
- *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818)
- *Don Juan* (1819–1824; incomplete on Byron's death in 1824)
- *Mazeppa* (1819)
- *The Prophecy of Dante* (1819)
- *The Two Foscari* (1821)- verse play in 5 acts
- *The Vision of Judgment* (1821)-satirical poem
- *Heaven and Earth* (1821)
- *Werner* (1822)
- *The Age of Bronze* (1823)
- *The Island* (1823)
- *The Deformed Transformed* (1824)

### **Byronic Hero**

- Byron himself is considered to be the model for the Byronic Hero.
- He is a man who is greatly idealized, however simultaneously flawed.
- He is a great man with taste, passion, talent and a charming aura- bordering to arrogance and overconfidence.
- He has disillusionment with society and social institutions and social norms.



- Although he himself belongs to the upper section of the society, he rather finds it detestable and abominable.
- He carries a secret hidden past with unsavory incidents and an unfulfilled love story.
- His lack of respect for rules and order often leads to a rather self-destructive future or ending.

## **Most Important works**

### ***Childe Harold's Pilgrimage***

- Published between 1812-1818.
- Semi-Autobiographical; about a gentleman disillusioned with the material pursuits and sensory pleasures of the world.
- He embarks upon a journey of truth and revelation- Pilgrimage
- Written in 4 cantos.
- Written in Spenserian Stanza.
- (Note: The "Childe" in the title is a medieval term for a young lad eligible for knighthood)
- Childe Harold is a young, Byronic man- the concept of Byronic hero began from him.
- He is dark, quiet, brooding and often mysterious in disposition.
- He is an outcast- been ostracized from the society for his waywardly ways.
- The poem has direct imagery from Byron's own trip to such countries as Greece, Portugal, Spain, Albania and Malta in 1809.
- When he returned to England in 1811, the opening cantos of the poem were already complete.

- He took this trip with his friend John Cam Hobhouse.
- In the poem, Childe Harold makes certain observations regarding the national and geo-political issues of his contemporary times.
- E.g. he expresses his take on Greece's independence from the Turk and his disapproval of the Convention of Cintra in which English leaders let the French soldiers return back to France with all their loots.

### ***Don Juan***

- Written between 1819 and 1824.
- Unfinished poem- Written in 16 cantos.
- A satirical, mock-epic poem.
- Written in ottava rima.
- The work begins with a dedication to Robert Southey and William Wordsworth.
- Like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, even this work is majorly believed to be a work of autobiographical significance.
- The protagonist is a young Spaniard- Don Juan.
- Originally, the character of Don Juan is taken from the European legend of a libertine who seduces young women and is promiscuous in his character.
- In this work, Byron reverses the legend and creates his protagonist as a man who is innocent and naïve and is himself seduced by women.
- Unlike mainstream representation of female characters as naïve and shy, women in Juan's encounters are women of strong and bold personality.

- It is believed that Byron tried to recreate experiences and incidents from his own life to create incidents in the life of Don Juan.
- In the dedication, Byron confesses that his muse is not as divine as Wordsworth's or Southey's.
- Hence his verse shall not be as great as theirs.
- The poem begins with the lines- "I want a hero: an uncommon want".

### ***English Bards and Scotch Reviewers***

- Published anonymously.
- Written in heroic couplets
- It's satirical form is greatly inspired by Alexander Pope's.
- Originally, Byron had written a poem called "*British Bards*" in 1807.
- However, after the raging review in the *Edinburgh Review*, he revised the original poem into English Bards and Scotch Reviewers- a direct attack on critics and contemporary criticism.
- Byron expresses his discontent with the contemporary attitudes in the intellectual circle which is undervaluing wit, reason and intellectual fervor.
- He believes that the habit of creating excesses in writing is rotting the fabric of contemporary art and literature.
- The heritage of such eminent literary figures as Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Dryden is being undermined by such contemporary literary giants as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, etc.

### ***Beppo: A Venetian Story***

- Written in Venice in 1817. *Beppo* marks Byron's first attempt at writing using the Italian *ottava rima* metre, which emphasized satiric digression.
- It is the precursor to Byron's most famous and generally considered best poem, *Don Juan*.
- The poem contains 760 verses, divided into 95 stanzas.
- The poem tells the story of a Venetian lady, Laura, whose husband, Giuseppe (or "Beppo" for short), has been lost at sea for the past three years.
- According to Venetian customs she takes on a *Cavalier Servente*, simply called "the Count". When the two of them attend the Venetian Carnival, she is closely observed by a Turk who turns out to be her missing husband.
- Beppo explains that he has been captured and enslaved, and was freed by a band of pirates that he subsequently joined.
- Having accumulated enough money he left piracy and returned to reclaim his wife and be re-baptized.
- Laura rejoins Beppo and befriends the Count.
- The poem's main merit lies in its comparison of English and Italian morals, arguing that the English aversion to adultery is mere hypocrisy in light of the probably shocking, but more honest, custom of the *Cavalier Servente* in Italy.
- In comparison to Byron's *Oriental Tales* of 1813, it suggests that a looser attitude towards morals may be more pragmatic.