Romantic Poetry Lecture

Lord Byron

**Background**

**Also known as:** Lord George Gordon Noel Byron (full name); Esq. Horace Hornem, (pseudonym)
**Nationality:** English
**Career:** Poet, playwright, and satirist

Byron was born in 1788 in London to John Byron and Catherine Gordon, a descendant of a Scottish noble family. He was born with a clubbed foot, with which he suffered throughout his life. Byron's father had married his mother for her money, which he soon squandered. He fled to France, where he died in 1791. When Byron was a year old, he and his mother moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, and Byron spent his childhood there. Upon the death of his great uncle in 1798, Byron became the sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale and inherited the ancestral home, Newstead Abbey in Nottingham. He attended Harrow School from 1801 to 1805 and then Trinity College at Cambridge University until 1808, when he received a master's degree. Byron's first publication was a collection of poems, Fugitive Pieces (1807), which he himself paid to have printed, and which he revised and expanded twice within a year.

When he turned twenty-one in 1809, Byron was entitled to a seat in the House of Lords, and he attended several sessions of Parliament that year. In July, however, he left England on a journey through Greece and Turkey. He recorded his experiences in poetic form in several works, most importantly in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-18). He returned to England in 1811 and once again took his seat in Parliament. The publication of the first two cantos of Childe Harold in 1812 met with great acclaim, and Byron was hailed in literary circles.

Around this time he engaged in a tempestuous affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, who characterized Byron as "mad — bad— and dangerous to know." Throughout his life Byron conducted numerous affairs and fathered several illegitimate children. One of his most notorious liaisons was with his half-sister Augusta. Byron married Annabella Millbank in 1815, with whom he had a daughter, Augusta Ada. He was periodically abusive toward Annabella, and she left him in 1816. He never saw his wife and daughter again. Following his separation, which had caused something of a scandal, Byron left England for Europe.

 In Geneva, Switzerland, he met [Percy Bysshe Shelley](http://www.galeschools.com/poets/bio/shelley_p.htm) and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, with whom he became close friends. The three stayed in a villa rented by Byron. During this time Mary Shelley wrote her famous novel Frankenstein, and Byron worked on Canto III of Childe Harold (1816). In 1817 Byron moved on to Italy, where he worked on Canto IV, which was published the next year. For several years Byron lived in a variety of Italian cities, engaging in a series of affairs and composing large portions of his masterpiece Don Juan (1819-24) as well as other poems. In 1823 he left Italy for Greece to join a group of insurgents fighting for independence from the Turks. On April 9, 1824, after being soaked in the rain, Byron contracted a fever from which he died ten days later.

Close Reading: “She Walks in Beauty”

**Lines 1-2**

Readers of poetry often get confused because they stop when they reach the end of a line, even if there is no mark of punctuation there. This could be the case with this poem, which opens with an enjambed line, a line that does not end with a mark of punctuation. The word enjambment comes from the French word for leg, "jamb"; a line is enjambed when it runs over (using its "legs") to the next line without a pause. If read by itself, the first line becomes confusing, because the reader can only see a dark image, almost a blank image. If "she walks in beauty, like the night," a reader might wonder how she can be seen. But the line continues: the night is a cloudless one and the stars are bright. So immediately the poem brings together its two opposing forces that will be at work, darkness and light.

**Lines 3-4**

These lines work well because they employ an enjambed line as well as a metrical substitution – a momentary change in the regular meter of the poem. When poets enjamb a line and use a metrical substitution at the beginning of the next line, they are calling attention to something that is a key to a poem. Here Byron substitutes a trochaic foot (an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one) for the iambic foot at the start of the fourth line. Why? Because he is putting particular emphasis on that word "meet." He is emphasizing that the unique feature of this woman is her ability to contain opposites within her; "the best of dark and bright / meet" in her. In the same way that enjambment forces lines together, and a metrical substitution jars the reader somewhat, this woman joins together darkness and light, an unlikely pair. They "meet" in her, and perhaps nowhere else besides a starry night. It's also important to note that the joining together can be seen in her "aspect," or appearance, but also in her "eyes." A reader might think of the eyes simply as a feature of beauty, but the eyes also have been associated in literature with the soul, or the internal aspect of the person: the eyes reveal the heart.

**Lines 5-6**

The emphasized word "meet" is here again echoed with the initial "m" sound in "mellowed." This woman joins together what is normally kept separate, but there is no violent yoking going on here; instead, the opposites meld together to form a mellowed, or softened, whole. By joining together the two opposing forces, she creates a "tender light," not the gaudiness of daytime, but a gentler light that even "heaven" does not bestow on the day. If a reader were to think of night in terms of irrationality and day in terms of reason – as is implied by the term enlightenment – that would not be apt for this poem. Neither night nor day seem pleasing to the speaker; only the meeting of those two extremes in this woman pleases him. She is a composite, neither wholly held by rationality or by irrationality.

**Lines 7-10**

Once again the opposites are combined here. "Shade" or darkness is combined with "day" or light, and "raven tress" or dark hair is linked with a lightened face. The speaker suggests that if the woman contained within her and in her appearance either a little bit more of darkness or a little bit more of light, she would be "half impaired." A reader might expect the speaker to say she would be totally ruined or impaired, but if things were not just in the right proportion, she'd be half impaired, but still half magnificent. A key word in this section is "grace." Although the poet is seemingly talking about appearances, in actuality he is referring to the "nameless grace" that is in her hair and face. Once again, it is something internal as well as external that is so attractive about this woman.

**Lines 11-12**

Although this poem begins with the image of a woman walking, the reader should notice by now that no images are given of her legs or arms or feet; this is a head poem, confined to hair and eyes and face and cheeks and brows. The conclusion to the second stanza emphasizes this. The reader is given an insight into the "dwelling place" of the woman's thoughts, an insight into her mind. The repetition of the "s" sounds is soothing in the phrase "serenely sweet express"; because the poet is referring to her thoughts, and her thoughts are nothing but serene, readers may infer how pure her mind is.

**Lines 13-18**

Byron concludes the poem with three lines of physical description that lead to the final three lines of moral characterization. The soft cheeks, the winning smile, the tints in the skin eloquently express not only physical beauty, but they attest to her morality. The physical beauty, the speaker concludes, reflects days spent doing good, a mind at peace, and "a heart whose love is innocent." Whether Byron would have preferred a less innocent cousin, someone with whom he could enjoy Byronic passions, is left unspoken for the reader to decipher.

**Source:** *Exploring Poetry*, Gale, 1997.

**Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto IV**

**Background**

Read the letter on the website by Byron and list out his motivations for the long poem and for this canto in particular.

The fourth canto of *Childe* *Harold’s Pilgrimage* continues the poet’s journey into Italy: Venice, Arqua, Ferrara, Florence, and finally Rome. Again the narrator laments the fall of older civilizations—this time the subject is Venice. The city is depicted as a cultural ghost town, peopled by the “mighty shadows” of literary giants such as William Shakespeare (who placed scenes in Venice). Literature is noted as being more enduring than even the cultures which produce it; similarly, sculpture endures after civilizations fall.

The poet visits Arqua, home of the famous poet Petrarch. Here, at least, the people of the city maintain Petrarch’s tomb and even his home (stanza 31). In Ferrara, beloved town of the poet Tasso, Byron pays homage to the mind of his fellow poet. After considering Italy’s own checkered history of carnage, Byron turns to Florence, where he pays homage to the great men buried in the Basilica of Santa Croce. The poet expresses outrage that Dante, who was exiled, was therefore not buried in “ungrateful Florence” (stanza 57). Nor is the great poet Boccaccio to be found there.

The poet pauses to decry his education, whose Latin drills gave him a distaste for certain poets, not because of their inherent failings but because of the way he had to learn them.

Finally, the poet’s visit to Rome makes up about half the canto. Once the narrator reaches Rome, he spends time listing and describing the various dictators from ancient times until the recent past. In this context he compares Napoleon to “a kind / Of bastard Caesar,” once again returning to his theme of liberty’s struggle against tyrants. He also considers the long march of men and suffering and time, of heroes, pain, ruin, redemption, and how this march has shaped his own wandering spirit.

The canto ends at the ocean, harking once again to Nature as an image of freedom and sublimity in its “eloquent proportions.” Yet, Byron encourages us not to surrender to the overwhelming power of the great and sublime but instead to visit great places and try to understand them. The ocean also serves as a contrast to the lost civilizations Byron has visited: “Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee— / Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?”

[Childe Harold](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38699) is long gone, transcended, and in this sense the pilgrimage is complete. Byron bids us farewell, encouraging us to leave Harold’s pain behind and move forward with the lessons gleaned from his travels.

## Analysis

Canto IV continues Byron’s autobiographical journey, this time throughout Italy. By now, Byron has completely given up the conceit that Childe Harold is anyone but the author himself; in his introductory notes (dedicated to this longtime friend [John Hobhouse](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=38715)), Byron states that he “had become weary of drawing a line which every one seemed determined not to perceive.” While he once vociferously defended Childe Harold as a creation of the imagination, Byron now concedes that his best work is truly autobiographical in nature and sees no reason to keep up the pretense of any narrator but himself.

Canto IV follows the earlier Cantos in its description of fallen civilizations, but here instead of merely bemoaning the loss of the past, Byron seeks to draw a lesson from their destruction. Even the mightiest of empires eventually falls—a fact brought home to Byron particularly during his time spent in Rome—so military and political greatness are not necessarily the measure of permanence or virtue. The work of human hands and that of human political institutions are ephemeral, and therefore even the suffering one might undergo at the hands of a tyrant is impermanent as well.

Byron finds permanence and stability elsewhere, particularly in Nature and in Art. Stanzas 47 through 61 of this canto extol the virtues and lasting qualities of art, be it sculpture, painting, or literature. By way of contrast, Byron mentions the fates of those who have added so much to human art and knowledge—Dante, Boccaccio, Galileo, and others—whose reputations or remains have been sullied by jealous men even as their contributions carry on long beyond their mortal lives. Great architectural achievements, such as the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and St. Peters’ Basilica, still hold wonder for the world-weary Byron.

Stanzas 61 and 62 redirect the reader away from Art, which imitates, to its subject, Nature, with which the poem concludes. Manmade beauty is a great and everlasting thing, but it is Nature which holds the highest place in Byron’s admiring heart. His visits to Nature on his travels have been interrupted by visits to pay homage to the long roll of heroes, poets, and dictators’ energetic passions who represent the strong minds and personalities of mankind.

The litany of tyrants in the section on Rome points to the persistence of tyranny even as it accentuates the brevity of any single tyrant’s reign. Byron concludes his study of despotism with a comparison: Napoleon was “a fool / of false dominion,” and the French Revolution failed through “vile Ambition,” whereas the contemporary American Revolution sprang from “undefiled” beginnings and thus will continue to thrive. This is just one of many lessons that Byron seems to hope his readers absorb by contemplating the pilgrimage. Childe Harold has been transcended and subsumed into Byron, and his travels have brought him into contact with the sublime in things both human and natural, but when faced with overwhelming concepts or just the overwhelming power of life itself, Byron’s answer has been to keep his mind active in appreciation of all that is great.

**Literary Focus: Is It Romantic?**

From the stanzas indicated in *Childe Harold*, select, first, the passages which best illustrate the spirit of revolt, and, second, the passages of most poetic beauty.  What natural phenomena appeal most to Byron?