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The Romantic Period : Topics

The Satanic and Byronic Hero: Overview

Not until the age of the American and French Revolutions, more than a century after Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, did readers begin to sympathize with Satan in the war between Heaven and Hell, admiring him as the archrebel who had taken on no less an antagonist than Omnipotence itself, and even declaring him the true hero of the poem. In his ironic *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (NAEL 8, 2.111–20), Blake claimed that Milton had unconsciously, but justly, sided with the Devil (representing rebellious energy) against Jehovah (representing oppressive limitation). Lecturing in 1818 on the history of English poetry, Hazlitt named Satan as “the most heroic subject that ever was chosen for a poem” and implied that the rebel angel’s Heaven-defying resistance was the mirror image of Milton’s own rebellion against political tyranny. A year later, Percy Shelley maintained that Satan is the moral superior to Milton’s tyrannical God, but he admitted that Satan’s greatness of character is flawed by vengefulness and pride.

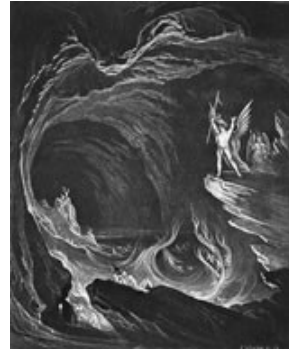


It was precisely this aspect of flawed grandeur, however, that made Satan so attractive a model for Shelley’s friend Byron in his projects of personal myth-making. The more immediate precedents of the Byronic hero—a figure that Byron uses for purposes both of self-revelation and of self-concealment—were the protagonists of some of the Gothic novels of the later eighteenth century. Examples are Manfred, the ominous hero-villain of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (NAEL 8, 2.579–82) and the brooding, guilt-haunted monk Schedoni of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), who each embody traits of Milton’s Satan. Byron identified another alter ego in the towering historical figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, who to the contemporary

imagination combined, in Satan’s manner, moral culpability with awe-inspiring power and grandeur. Between 1795, when Napoleon took command of the armies of France, and 1815, when defeat at Waterloo banished him from Europe to his final exile, patriotic supporters of Britain’s war effort represented Napoleon as an infernal, blood-thirsty monster. These demonizing representations frequently alluded to the example of Milton’s “enemy of mankind,” as William Wordsworth did in an 1809 sonnet, “Look now on that Adventurer,” and George Cruikshank did in an 1815 cartoon depicting the colossus in exile on the tiny island of St. Helena. Satanizing Napoleon made for effective wartime propaganda because it invoked an already established plot, a narrative of inevitable downfall. Yet Byron’s complex response to the man, worked out over the entire body of his work, yields a contrasting account of history—and also, and in particular in the “Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte” he wrote following Napoleon’s abdication, a contrasting account of Milton’s fallen angel. To Byron, Napoleon represents both a figure of heroic aspiration and someone who has been shamefully mastered by his own passions—both a conqueror and, after Waterloo, a captive: Napoleon thus becomes as much the occasion for psychological analysis as for moral condemnation. There was more than a touch of self-projection in this account. (At a tongue-in-cheek moment in canto 11 of *Don Juan*, Byron dubs himself “the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme.”) The characteristic doubleness of the Byronic hero

is dramatized in the story of Napoleon's venturesome rise and inglorious fall.

Byron first sketched out this hero with his Satanic-Gothic-Napoleonic lineage in 1812, in the opening stanzas of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto 1 (NAEL 8, 2.617–19). At this stage, he is rather crudely depicted as a young man, prematurely sated by sin, who wanders about in an attempt to escape society and his own memories. Conrad, the hero of *The Corsair* (1814), has become more isolated, darker, more complex in his history and inner conflict, and therefore more frightening and more compelling to the reader. The hero of *Lara* (also 1814) is a finished product; he reappears two years later, with variations in canto 3 of *Childe Harold* (see NAEL 8, 2.619–22, stanzas 2–16, and 2.627–28, stanzas 52–55) and again the following year as the hero of Byron's poetic drama *Manfred* (NAEL 8, 2.636–69).



Early on, Coleridge recognized the disquieting elements in the appeal of this hero of dark mystery, and in the *Statesman's Manual* (1816) warned against it, but in vain. Immediately affecting the life, art, and even philosophy of the nineteenth century, the Byronic hero took on a life of his own. He became the model for the behavior of avant-garde young men and gave focus to the yearnings of emancipated young women. And Byron was fated to discover that the literary alter egos he had created could in turn exert power over him: his social disgrace following the breakup of his marriage in 1816 was declared by Walter Scott to be a consequence of how the poet had “Childe Harolded himself, and outlawed himself, into too great a resemblance with the pictures of his imagination.”

Literary history demonstrates, similarly, that Byron

could at best participate in but not control the myth-making processes of Byronicism. Upstaging him, many others were determined to have a hand in the myth-making. Byron had borrowed from late-eighteenth-century Gothic novels to create his persona but, in the nineteenth century, the Byronic hero would be absorbed back into the Gothic tradition. The process began in 1816 with *Glenarvon*, a roman à clef whose author, Lady Caroline Lamb, mischievously recycled elements of Byron's own poems—in particular *The Giaour*—to tell the story of her failed love affair with the poet and to portray him as a monstrous, supernaturally powerful seducer. It continued three years later with a novella published by the poet's physician and traveling companion John Polidori that would clinch the association of Byron and the evil undead. These works and the novels, plays, and even operas they spawned granted Byron an eerie afterlife, as the Gothic tradition's vampire in chief.