

# George Gordon Noel Byron



An anti-romantic  
Romantic

[http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic\\_5/illustrations/imwestall.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic_5/illustrations/imwestall.htm)

# An anti-romantic Romantic

- Like Jane Austen, Byron's attitude toward Wordsworthian Romanticism was largely parodic.
- Byron's romantic themes: revolutionary, democratic impulses, the observation of the divine in nature, and metaphysical questions on mortality and the individual's place in the universe, but he treats them irreverently.

# Dominant Qualities of Byron's Works

- Youthful energy and manhood
- Byronic hero: titans wrestling with a cruel world, also torn by an unnamed inner taint
- Heroic couplet satire: Pope and Dryden the true poetic geniuses
- Urbane sophisticate
- 18th-century poetic forms, contain little description of nature, and rarely refer to common folk or rural life



# “Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos” (1810)

- neoclassic

<http://www.olemiss.edu/courses/engl309/swimming.html>

# “She Walks in Beauty” (1814)

- A Romantic lyric
- Ababab
- Cdcddc
- Efefef
- Iambic tetrameter
- Alliteration/ metonymy/  
metaphor/personification
- Romantic nature imagery

# “She Walks in Beauty”

- Physical beauty –physical and intellectual beauty
- Contrast brightness and shadow

# Question

- Was Byron declaring his love for the young woman or simply celebrating her beauty?

# Question

- What specific aspect of the woman is praised in each of the three stanzas?



# “When we Two Parted”

- **dactylic foot** : one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables

# Question

- If the speaker should ever see the woman again, what would be the reason for his greeting her with “silence and tears”?

# “So we’ll no More go a Roving”

- What is the poet’s attitude toward life?

# Question

- What is the speaker's attitude toward life?  
Why does he feel this way?

# *Don Juan*

- Parody of epic
- Satire on most things Romantic
- Irreverence for morals, religion, and authority
- The longest satire in English

# Summaries of Cantos 1 & 2

- Canto 1: Juan's parents, youth, and education, affair with the married Donna Julia; her husband catches them; he is sent away; she writes an Ovidian style letter.
- Canto 2: Juan travels to Cadiz; his ship sinks and he and sailors are cast away; they cannibalize his instructor; he swims to shore; saved by Haidee; their love affair.

# Question

- Byron opens his “epic” with the statement: “I want a hero.” What does this opening suggest about heroic poetry in the Romantic period? Why does he opt for Don Juan? What kind of hero is he?

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Summary,  
[http://www-  
personal.umich.edu/~lahtid/literature/vi  
cenglish/byron/chldharold.htm](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lahtid/literature/vicenglish/byron/chldharold.htm)

- Canto 1: A wayward, wild, immoral youth grows weary of his ways and seeks to gain a surer foothold on life by traveling.



- A rambling account follows in which Harold goes to Spain and Portugal, with momentary lapses where other areas of Europe are recalled. Familiarity with the area in the reader might make the descriptions more meaningful, but they are romantic nevertheless.

- Canto 2: Harold then journeys to the Baltics, where he is impressed by the fierce culture of the Albanians, and the past glory of Greece. A reminiscence and some extensive notes on the state of Greece and its bondage to foreign powers are included. The descriptions are often picturesque, but the canto as a whole lacks coherence. We see no growth in Harold-- in fact, it is not a story about him at all, but rather a poetic chronicle of travels and thoughts. As such, though, it is passable.



- Canto 3: This is a far superior piece of work to the last two cantos. Harold develops, affected by and reflecting deeply and interestingly on Waterloo and Napoleon in Belgium, on the Alps, the Rhine and the battles fought there. His cynicism begins to soften, and he begins to yearn for his beloved.

- With the place-descriptions are woven (really woven this time, rather than simply interspersed as before) meditations on people, such as the Aventian princess Julia whose love for her father affected Byron so deeply; and Rousseau, of whom Byron is critical but admiring (see also his long thoughtful note on this subject); and Voltaire and Gibbon, who are acknowledged but claimed to be wrongheaded.



- Also, he thinks about nature as a respite from the "madding crowd" (fortified with a prose argument in a note), entertains what we would now call some "environmentalist" thoughts, and finally comments on his shunning of the world's trends and his sorrow as an estranged father to his girl. This canto is very like the meandering thoughts of a traveler or a wanderer. But here they are fruitful and bubble forth to a greater extent than in the first two.

- Canto 4: In keeping with the progression of this poem, this canto is the best of the four. In Italy, we see the places and hear reminiscences of the people, but these in this canto seem oddly secondary. Harold's journey is now admitted to be Byron's journey, and the meditations that the sites and scenes inspire are deep and thoughtful as never before. We get much more of an idea that this is Byron speaking to us rather than an imagined character; indeed, Byron in the prefatory letter calls the work his most thoughtful composition (as of 1818).

- He reaches highs of contemplation more than once-- on imagination and the eternal glimpses it brings; on suffering and painful memory; on solitude and its virtues and vices; on education; on man's humility and state of political and spiritual slavery; on freedom; on our poor souls and the illusory nature of love; on thought and truth; on the joys of the wilderness and the power of the ocean; and an excellent conclusion which humbly and thoughtfully closes the mind's eye of the reader in rest.

- Meanwhile, of course, we are shown Venice, several ancient sites, and (for the bulk of the canto) Rome, about whose history Byron muses, talking of the rise and fall of civilizations. We see the Pantheon, Circus, Coliseum, Vatican... and all inspire thought and reflection.



- No real conclusions are reached-- Harold/Byron does not have a sustained and rejuvenating epiphany-- but still we get the idea that he is better for having superficiality wrung from him on this trip. For one will not quickly descend to the level of a desensitized profligate again, after tasting the worldly greatness man has attained, and being inspired by that to think deeply.

# Question

- What are the traits of a “Byronic hero”?