

Byronic Heroism

Byronic heroism refers to a radical and revolutionary brand of heroics explored throughout a number of later English Romantic and Victorian works of literature, particularly in the epic narrative poems of the English Romantic poet Lord Byron, including *Manfred*, *Don Juan*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *the Giaour*, and *The Corsair*.

The figure of the Byronic hero was among the most potent and popular character archetypes developed during the late English Romantic period. While traditional literary heroes are usually marked by their valor, intrinsic goodness, commitment to righteous political and social causes, honesty, courage, propriety, and utter selflessness, Byronic heroes are defined by rather different character traits, many of which are partially or even entirely opposed to standard definitions of heroism. Unlike most traditional heroic figures, Byronic heroes are often deeply psychologically tortured and reluctant to identify themselves, in any sense, as heroic. Byronic heroes tend to exhibit many of the following personality traits: cynicism, arrogance, absolute disrespect for authority, psychological depth, emotional moodiness, past trauma, intelligence, nihilism, dark humor, self-destructive impulses, mysteriousness, sexual attractiveness, world-weariness, hyper-sensitivity, social and intellectual sophistication, and a sense of being exiled or outcast both physically and emotionally from the larger social world. Byronic heroes can be understood as being rather akin, then, to anti-heroes (unlike Byronic heroes, though, anti-heroes tend to be rather reluctant or helpless heroes). Byronic heroes are often committed not to action on behalf of typically noble causes of “good,” but, instead, to the cause of their own self-interest, or to combating prevailing and oppressive social and political establishments, or to particular problems or injustices in which they take a particular and often personal interest. However, while the figure of the Byronic hero is often portrayed as being super-human and larger than life, Byronic heroes rarely succeed, at least in full, in winning their battles or fully attaining their desires or needs. Byronic heroes tend, especially in Byron's poetic work, to be consumed and finally destroyed by their passions and egos despite their intrinsic heroic and intellectual abilities. Byronic heroes are often capable of incredible acts of heroism and boldness, but are also drawn to violence, self-doubt, impulsive action, and ultimate self-annihilation or defeat.

The figure of the Byronic hero, though, did not entirely originate with Lord Byron. During the Romantic age, a number of Romantic writers began to reinterpret John Milton's 17th century epic poem *Paradise Lost* in and celebrate the figure of Satan – who, in the poem, rebels against God and is exiled from Heaven – as being heroic due to his bold rebellion against authority and tyranny. Byron himself was struck by the power and pathos of the figure of Satan in Milton's poem. Byron was also fascinated by the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, who he conceptualized as a man of true heroic capability who had been destroyed by his own ego and relentless desire. Byron developed his own

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl404/>

complicated heroic figures as extensions of – and, to some measure, as responses to – the figures of Napoleon and Milton’s Satan. Byron, however, did not simply celebrate or idealize these sorts of complicated heroic figures. Instead, he humanized and closely examined the psychology of his tortured heroes, particularly in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, *Manfred*, and *Don Juan*. In fact, the lasting appeal of the Byronic hero is owed to the depth and often complicated psychology of the archetype.

The figure of the Byronic hero was certainly Byron’s greatest and most lasting contribution to world literature and art. Throughout the later Romantic and early Victorian periods, a number of Byron’s contemporaries adopted the archetype of the Byronic hero for their own poems, plays, and novels, as did Mary Shelley in novel *Frankenstein*, Emily Bronte in her novel *Wuthering Heights*, Victor Hugo in his novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and Charles Dickens in his novel *David Copperfield*. Even to this day, the archetype of the Byronic hero can be found throughout much of popular Western culture. For example, the character of House from the television series *House* embodies many of the traits of the Byronic hero, as do such comic book and popular film characters as Batman, Wolverine, and both Han Solo and Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* films.