

Lord Byron, George Gordon (1788-1823)

Lord Byron was the most famous and widely read poet during the Romantic period. In fact, during the 1810s and 1820s, Byron was among the most famous men in all of Europe, if not the entire Western world. Virtually everyone in Europe and America who was able to read English poetry—or who followed current English political events and celebrity scandals—was aware of Lord Byron’s work, life, and public persona. Referred to as “mad, bad and dangerous to know” by his own wife, Byron was as famous for his epic romantic poems as he was for his good looks, humor, and decidedly controversial life. Byron is best known for creating the literary figure of the Byronic hero. Unlike many of his Romantic contemporaries, who were largely concerned with depictions of common people and the natural world, Byron often chose exotic locals and extreme states of being as the subjects of his poetry. While many English Romantic poets drew upon their own lives and experiences for their poems, Byron used some of the more unflattering aspects of his life (including his broken marriage, exile from England, and sexual inclinations) in his poetry, without apology. While Byron was adored by much of the English reading public, many literary critics and members of the English ruling elite felt that Byron’s poems were too radical in terms of his leftist political beliefs, and that he was immoral and politically dangerous to English society, especially given his high social position.

Lord Byron was born George Gordon, Lord Byron in 1788. While he was born into an elite British family, Byron was destitute until he inherited a large fortune and estate from his uncle. During his later childhood, Byron became quite wealthy and was accepted into the English aristocracy. Byron’s early life was filled with adventure. He was charming, witty, intelligent, and famously brooding. Upon reaching adulthood, Byron lived a life similar to the stereotype of a contemporary rock star. His life was surrounded by rumor and innuendo, especially concerning his romantic and sexual escapades. He came upon fame early in his poetic career with the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in 1812. Each subsequent publication was met with a great deal of critical and popular attention and he found himself quickly becoming incredibly famous. He traveled throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, undertook incredible adventures, romanced countless women (and men), and inspired legions of followers while angering authority figures throughout the world. He carried on several long-term friendships, including a particularly meaningful relationship with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Over the course of his career, he wrote a novel fragment that inspired the genre of the romantic vampire novel, served as an inspiration for the character of Dr. Frankenstein, and composed some of the most moving and controversial poems in the English language. Byron died of fever in Greece while fighting in the Greek War of Independence in 1822.

During the course of his rather short life, Byron composed several dozen now canonical pieces of poetry, including such famous works as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Manfred*, *Darkness*, and *Don Juan*. While each of these poems were unique in terms of style and content, Byron's poetry always advocated on behalf of freedom, independence, self-awareness, romantic passion, political cynicism, and recognition and understanding of the world beyond the shores of England. His poems explored aspects of life that other widely-read writers of his time tended to shy away from, including sexuality and the brutal and senseless nature of violence and war. Poems like *Manfred*, which explores the topics of incest and suicide, and *Don Juan*, which reverses the myth of Don Juan and positions Don Juan, himself, as one who is helplessly sexually and romantically manipulated, offered insight into personal and political matters that no other writers explored—and with unmatched creativity, experimentation, and gusto at that.

While Byron fell out of critical favor in the second half of the 19th century, by the early 20th century, many writers, including James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, praised his poems for their originality, lyricism, depth of emotion and intellect, and brutal honesty. By the late 20th century, many literary critics and even philosophers came to celebrate Byron's decidedly progressive and humanitarian political and social beliefs. In fact, many critics argue that Byron's own life was but an extension of his poetry and that he, in essence, lived his life in accordance with the ideals of the spectacular characters about which he often wrote.