

The Byronic Hero

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THE CHARACTER of the fascinating villain-hero has held a prominent place in the hearts of readers since the beginning of man's literate history. It was not, however, until the nineteenth century, when Lord Byron by his own life and works exemplified so much this character, that the villain-hero was given a standard motif. Thus, the long, evolving villain-hero became the Byronic hero with a fixed set of characteristics peculiar only to himself.

The Byronic hero is distinguished by the clearly defined existence of sensuousness and its antithesis, sensitiveness. Lord Byron himself demonstrated the presence of these two paradoxical elements. One finds Byron in Venice, living a life of debauchery, almost on an animal level of existence; yet during this Venetian period, Byron produced some of the finest and most sensitive poetry of the English language. Rhett Butler, Margaret Mitchell's Byronic hero, spends a great deal of time with the not so respectable Belle Watling; yet he has great respect for the virtuous Melanie. It is characteristic of the Byronic hero that he should awake with a terrific hangover and compose a beautiful lyric poem like "She Walks in Beauty." The Byronic hero is often dismissed as nothing more than a thoroughly imbued sensualist, but one finds him an idealist also and becomes confused. It does not seem unusual for Rhett to save Scarlet from burning Atlanta, but the reader is surprised when Rhett leaves the woman he loves to join the dying cause of the Confederacy. Most men possess an integration of the sensuous and the sensitive. We have seen in the Byronic hero that the two elements are not integrated, but each one represents a separate, completely isolated phase of the same man's nature. It is typical of the Byronic hero that he is a dichotomy of the sensuous and the sensitive.

The Byronic hero is almost always a man with a mysterious past. This past is usually surmised to be of wickedness and sin, and our hero is periodically haunted by feelings of remorse concerning it. Conrad, the Corsair in Byron's poem, is said to be a man of a thousand sins. The reader imagines that these sins must have been deeds of violence connected with piracy, but we never know for sure. As Childe Harold begins his pilgrimage, one is given hints of Harold's past of vice and ungodly acts. Manfred, a psychological projection of Byron himself, haunted by a great sin, the nature of which we are never positive, seeks oblivion. The past of Rhett Butler is never made exactly clear to the reader. It is shrouded in mystery like

the pasts of all Byronic heroes, but we are sure also, like his brother heroes, that Rhett has disobeyed at least a few of the Ten Commandments.

The mood of the Byronic hero is one of intense melancholy and pessimism; yet we feel underlying this apparently static exterior, the beat of throbbing life energy. Like the Corsair, the Byronic hero is "warp'd by the world of disappointment." He seems to loathe himself and all mankind, and is always one apart from his fellow creatures; yet the Corsair is a man of action and distinguishes himself by deeds of valor. One sees a brilliant study of the Byronic mood in Emily Bronte's creation of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff is as alone and melancholy as the moors themselves, but we find also in him the wild, rebellious energy of flesh and blood. The mood of the Byronic hero the reader sees is the end result of a man's running the gamut of human experience. Pessimism and melancholy are thus inevitable, and these are superimposed on the dynamic vitality of a man of action.

The Byronic hero's character is amoral rather than immoral. Byron's Don Juan is a classic example of the skeptical libertinism of most Byronic heroes. He is of aristocratic tendencies, haughty toward equals and superiors. He derives sadistic pleasure in the sufferings of the women who have surrendered to him. He knows himself to be a villain, but he believes the rest of the world no better than he. The Byronic hero is all that is characteristic of the somewhat jaded cosmopolitan man of the world.

In spite of any scruples one might have against the Byronic hero, the reader cannot help but be fascinated by him. One is always shocked by him, and this almost without fail leaves one to become enslaved in fascination. The reader is shocked when he reads of Don Juan's affair with the married Donna Julia, but having read this far he never fails to finish the canto. One is up in arms at the frank way Lord Byron discusses his incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, but the reader is sure to complete reading the biography. Another important factor of fascination is the great physical attractiveness of the Byronic hero, and this is enhanced by corresponding conversation and manners. He might be, in the words of Lady Caroline Lamb, "mad, bad and dangerous to know," but any normal woman would like to meet a Rhett Butler or a Lord Byron. She is not interested in the Byronic hero for a husband, but she is sure he would be a most engaging lover. Many twentieth century movie idols, like Rudolph Valentino and James Mason, are nothing more than manifestations of the Byronic hero.