

Lord Byron's Manfred: The Revival of the Irrational Gothic over the Death of the Rational Norm

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ABSTRACT

Lord Byron is considered one of the most rebellious poets of all time. He successfully employed his revolutionary identity in his works through specific Gothic characteristics, chiefly of quest and dissatisfaction with his surroundings. His invention of the Byronic hero is also a site of interest. His revolt was against the current impositions of his society. This refusal in Byron's works needs a better understanding, which I suggested to be carried out in the light of Hegel's theory of bondsman and Lacan's theory of the Symbolic and the Real. This paper has also depended dramatically on Albert Camus' elaboration on the nature of the rebellion. Finally, these theories are applied to Byron's work, *Manfred*.

Keywords: Byronic hero, lord, Manfred, slave, the real, the symbolic, rebel.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Having considered all the Romantic poets, Lord Byron is the most rebellious one, successfully manifesting this rebel in a group of poems through certain Gothic features. He was a rebel who disposed of all his English norms and traditions. These traditions were a direct factor in chaining the poet's free spirit and innovative sublimity. Lord Byron molded his Gothic rebelliousness in the framework of the Byronic Hero, a pioneering figure in rejecting all the prisoning norms. A Byronic hero, or anti-hero, is "invariably represented as possessing a charisma and brooding sexual power that borders on the malevolent." The Byronic hero, in essence, "derives its association with Byron from Byron's checkered personal history; he had many affairs, including an incestuous liaison with his sister" (Chaplin, 2011, p. 69). Accordingly, this anti-hero is best known for his rebellious spirit.

The reality of a rebel has remained chaotic until Albert Camus proposed a relatively satisfying understanding of this character in his *The Rebel*:

What is a rebel? A man who says no but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command. (Camus, 1991, p. 13)

Camus here implies that all subjects are slaves in their lives since they are taking orders and following specific rules. The dominant ideologies marginalize the free-thinking factory of individuals and subdue them to track prescriptive regulations. Pertaining to this, Lord Byron liberated himself from social slavery to join the realm of the rebels who refused intellectual and social impositions. The epistemological entity of the slave, however, remains vague unless it is solved by Hegel's lordship and bondage theory.

In Hegel's theory, he believes that individuals are in an everlasting struggle over gaining a stable identity. In the battle, one is lord, and the other is bondsman. Hegel, paradoxically, claims that the lord needs his mother, or the slave, to prove his own identity by imposing orders upon him. On the other hand, the bondsman is busy creating an object and, consciously or unconsciously, needs his lord to steal his thing and labor to feel his existence. In other words, both are bound to each other, and no party is willing to liberate the other (Salih, 2002, p. 27). Judith Butler believes that this struggle continues to death and both sides are impossible to separate; otherwise, they will suffer epistemologically. In this respect, in the light of Camus' vision, death remains a final and ultimate liberation from this bond. Camus elaborates on the various shapes of death as the last station of the bond ship struggle: "In the age of negation, it was of some avail to examine one's position concerning suicide. In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder" (Camus, 1991, p. 4). Previously, when the social systems were relatively more straightforward, one could liberate himself through suicide. However, in the age of ideologies, or Byron's period, which witnessed the genesis of global doctrines, one can no longer think of the proper time of liberation: he is given it. Byron realized this bitter reality and the impossibility of living independent lives in the shade of

current ideologies. The problem is that, previously, when people realized the deceitfulness of the big Other, according to Lacan, be it God, society, the king, or the law, they denied themselves the right to live. However, in the age of ideologies, that of Byron's, people were concerned "only with the denial of other human beings, who alone bear the responsibility of deceit. It is then that we kill" (Camus, 1991, p. 4). It is the function of ideologies that blind people from seeing the reality and deceiving them to kill each other physically and intellectually. They are deprived of the Real employing the Symbolic, a society that victimized Byron and led him to revolt and refuse the blindness of the community.

According to Lacan, the Symbolic is the lens through which individuals see the world. It is a system according to which everything in the human world is structured in accordance with the symbols which have emerged (Homer, 2006, p. 43). It is a system that constitutes and structures the laws and beliefs of a society, or in other words, it is the ideology of the community. It functions to hinder the Real. The Real is the "existence without the filters and buffers of our signifying, or meaning-making, systems" (Tyson, 1991, p. 32). In other words, it is the reality beyond ideologies and interpretations. Byron arrived at the Real stage and destroyed all the blinding doctrines.

II. DISCUSSION

Byron succeeded in liberating himself from the bond ship relationship between a slave and his master without necessarily undergoing suicide. However, he was about to get murdered due to the current ideologies of his age. Moreover, he never needed to experience a specific system of knowledge or doctrine, and he liberated himself from the Symbolic order imposed by society. He left his community and resorted to a foreign one in faraway lands to construct an independent Symbolic order for himself without the need to experience the slavery of his society. He was a rebel, one fundamental feature of Gothic characters. He was a concrete manifestation of the Byronic hero.

Byron revolted against his original society and resorted to Greece, fighting there until his death, becoming a nationalist figure. His death as a Gothic, rebellious figure has a variety of connotations. According to Slavoj Žižek, there were two deaths. In other words, one might die twice. The first death is when our physical bodies stop functioning and perish. It is death in the Real. There is a second death which is the symbolic. "This does not involve the annihilation of our actual bodies; rather, it entails the destruction of our Symbolic universe and the extermination of our subject positions" (Myers, 2003, pp. 73–74). One might also survive after his death in the Real and remain eternal in the symbolic, which is what Byron succeeded in achieving through his Gothic features. He is immortal in the Symbolic and gained everlasting life.

Byron's rebellious tendency pushed him to create an untraditional form of fame. He not only broke with the dominant social slavery system but also sought to introduce a new set of principles that define an individual as a hero. In the past, society described the moral system as the only. With his debut, society came to recognize that breaking with the superego of society can also make him unique and memorable. "The Byronic transition from an older, heroic of fame to a new mode of fame that survives contamination by scandal but turns that contamination into a charm" (Tuite, 2015, p. 139).

Lord Byron was one of the most successful Gothic writers since he experienced it in his personal life and reflected it in his works. However, "Byron's attitude towards Gothic, then, is complex." Punter and Byron argue. "On some occasions he uses it for purposes similar to Shelley's, to indict political and religious repression; but Byron's attitude to the past is less certain... than Shelly's" (Punter & Byron, 2004, p. 18). Depending on the prior theories, this uncertainty is justifiable. Byron rejected the current social and political ideologies to avoid being the victim of a bondsman relationship. He needed to liberate himself the way he deemed proper. He also gained access to the Real, transgressing the Symbolic that constructed the norms of the faltering society. These rebellious Gothic characteristics are crystal clear in his *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*.

Childe Harold is drawn upon the personal life of Byron, published in 1812. His travels across Europe, reflected in his works, gave him global fame and a multicultural identity. Gothic constitutes two significant aspects of this work. "The name of Byron's hero, comprising both a medieval word for a knight (child) and that of the fallen Saxon king, Harold, suggests that he is both a questioner (knight-errant) and a fated soul" (Gilroy, 2010, p. 194). Medievalism and quest, two fundamental elements of the work, ranked Byron among the top Gothic writers of his age. These two traits imply his dissatisfaction with society's slavery system. According to Lacan, he broke all the social chains to overcome death in the Symbolic.

Another representation of the Byronic Gothic is *Manfred*, considered the most Gothic work by the writer, according to critics. Published in 1817, "Byron presents the poem in dramatic form to externalize the conflicts within the protagonist as he *struggles* with various supernatural entities in an attempt to contact the spirit of his sister, Astarte" (Chaplin, 2011, p. 71). This mixture of the physical world with the supernatural world reveals the fact that Byron himself did not find his quest, freedom from all social norms

that function as blinding ideologies. He strives to escape into another Gothic world where he can access the Real without the binding symbols and traditions of the Lacanian Symbolic world. He employs the Gothic in his world to set free and break the big Other, society in this case, and acquire liberation from the Hegelian slavery imposed by the society.

Byron was conscious of the writing of *Manfred*. He sought a way to propose his agonies, presented as a heroic act. Unlike previous literary works, which attempted to show a loyal figure to the social system, *Manfred* reversed the concept of heroism by breaking the chains of slavery and refusing to undergo the traditional moral procedure. He was after punishing society that afflicted many agonies upon Byron himself. He stole the secret of the universe without being willing to expose it to anyone, bringing it to his grave.

The traditional sense of the hero is the one who kneels to the defining features of the tragic hero of Aristotle. In this play, the protagonist is more Nietzschean than an Aristotelian. As for *Manfred*, “he experiences no exterior sources of oppression at all. He has no social superiors; he refuses to kneel to Arimanes” (Cochran, 2). He sees himself beyond the dominating power of social morality.

We must remember that the historical context in which *Manfred* was written was on the side of the working masses, who thought themselves legitimized to act in any form of disruption they deemed proper. They sought to replace the aristocratic system with a public one based on no prominent center and power. Lord Byron, a Byronic hero, was dissatisfied with this desedimentation. He showed his reluctant support for the aristocrats. At the rise of the proletariat, “penniless” people disrupted all the social class boundaries, which disturbed Byron. *Manfred* was a safe path for English people to understand the chaos of the French post-revolutionary era. Therefore, Manfred distanced himself from the chaotic society which polluted all hearts and minds. He tried to propose his moral system as an opposition to the mainstream one.

Manfred is a Byronic Hero who best represents Byron himself. Most Gothic protagonists are Byronic heroes. “The Byronic hero has been linked to Byron himself and is a melancholy man, often with a dark past, who eschews societal and religious strictures and seeks truth and happiness in an apparently meaningless universe” (Bomarito & Hogle, 2006, p. 241). This outcast character always hides a past secret that disturbs the stability of social order. He seeks a solution to his long-hidden guilt, yet in vain. Manfred drowned in the sense of guilt for his incestuous relationship with his sister Astarte (a reference to Byron’s past forbidden adventures). He cannot find any ending to his sins but death. This Gothic character best represents the distanced settings in time and place. Manfred is isolated in his castle in the Alps.

The Victorian era was fully loaded with moral demands. Social and ethical requirements were the supreme power that caged people’s intellectual and freedom tendencies. The Byronic hero was an escape path to a realm of freedom. Within that locked society, people aspired to find a way to emancipate themselves from the superego factors that were shutting their liberty. Reading Byron gave them a sense of release from the surrounding society.

The rebelliousness of Manfred puts readers into moral and psychological dilemmas. Because people are chained to society’s pressing superego and ethical system, such a Gothic figure presented the unconscious freedom they were looking for. They cannot admittedly claim their Byronic tendency toward life. Thus, they resorted to such Byronic heroes to emancipate themselves from all these chains. According to Maurice Morgann, “moral ambiguity in such characters forces the reader to mediate between a rational understanding of overt actions and an intuitive sympathy for covert motivations” (Snodgrass, 2005, p. 368).

Manfred is also a representative figure of the Wandering Jew. Being an outcast, he cannot belong to any specific place. The figure of the Wandering Jew is a symbol of rebellion against society. He shows his discontent with all the prevailing social norms. This loss shows his dissatisfaction with the dominant prevalent ideologies. Manfred is a representative of the Wandering Jew figure “who has lost the traditional sense of a bond to a solid homeland in a specific geographical place. This Wandering Jew can create an ideal homeland through his imagination with a solid independent identity without necessarily being attached to a place. It could be anywhere at any time” (Al-Hilo, 2020, p. 15).

Manfred is a multi-dimensional rebellion. His Gothicism reveals his bias towards feminist rights. This play shows the sufferings that females experienced in that patriarchal society. The death of Astarte is a reference to the anti-feminist culture of society. Despite the overt reason, her death shows society’s guilt that leaves no place for women. Byron resorted to Gothic writing because it is the genre of oppressed females. It is the rebellious genre that defies mainstream patriarchal norms. “Because feminism as an ideology opposing religion and social norms was not formally shaped, these signifiers remained floating in the background until the Gothic novel quilted them.” In other words, Gothicism is the best form in which Byron could announce his opposition to the dominant cultural norms because “Gothic ... denoted the formation of a new antagonistic ideology, that of feminism” (Al-Hilo, 2020, p. 279).

III. CONCLUSION

Gothicism dominated the minds and writing attitudes of many great writers in the 18th and 19th centuries. Lord Byron was among these great writers who mastered this genre. He was not only a writer who

illuminated in this field, but also a contributor to its ideas, themes, and concepts. He invented the figure of the Byronic hero, who is distinguished with certain Gothic features, becoming an inspiring figure to all later writers. This figure represents a revolutionary stance towards all the social norms that binds one's psychological and individual liberty. The concept of the Byronic hero is best represented in his masterpiece *Manfred*. This paper studied the concept of the Byronic hero from various philosophical and psychological standpoints, depending on various thinkers and theorists, mainly Albert Camus, Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Žižek.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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