

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824): The Byronic Hero

I. Background and Biography

- A. Lord Byron was a celebrity who offered transgressive thrills. (Lady Caroline Lamb called him “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.”)
- B. Probably the most popular of the Romantics and had most book sales
- C. Byron achieved early fame with his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*
- D. Parents were Captain “Mad Jack” Byron and a Scottish heiress
- E. Born with a club foot
- F. Inherited Baron's title unexpectedly at age 10 when great-uncle Baron Byron died
- G. First speech in House of Lords denounced a bill for capital punishment for “frame-breakers”
- H. Had many affairs with women (and probably with some men)
- I. Marriage lasted only a year (ugly breakup) and had one daughter, Ada
- J. Byron's real love was most likely his half-sister, Augusta, though some argument about whether relationship was incestuous
- K. Rumors of affair with Augusta and stormy relationship with Lady Byron prompted self-imposed exile from England
- L. Connected with the Shelleys
 - 1. Had affair with Mary Shelley's half-sister, Clair Clairmont, who bore a daughter, Allegra
 - 2. Spent summer 1816 with Shelleys on shore of Lake Geneva
 - 3. Ghost story contest produced *Frankenstein*, a vampire tale by Byron, and a vampire tale by John Polidori, Byron's personal physician.
- M. Byron died in Greece, of fever, supporting Greek independence from Ottoman Turks

II. The Byronic Hero

- A. A charismatic figure who inspires both fear and desire
- B. Defiant of rules and authority
- C. Has some dark chapter in the past
- D. Brooding, world-weary, and self-tortured
- E. Has much appeal for us today
- F. Examples
 - 1. Othello
 - 2. Macbeth
 - 3. Milton's Satan
 - 4. Prometheus
 - 5. Melville's Captain Ahab
 - 6. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray
 - 7. Charles Robert Maturin's Melmoth
 - 8. Wilkie Collins's Count Fosco, from *The Woman in White*
 - 9. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*
 - 10. Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*
 - 11. Robert Lewis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll
- G. Contemporary examples
 - 1. Anne Rice's Lestat
 - 2. Jim Morrison
 - 3. Kurt Cobain
 - 4. The *film noir* detective
 - 5. Don Draper (*Mad Men*)
 - 6. Angel and Faith (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)