

Byronic characters an intimate study in a modern context

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Abstract

The archetype, or character type, of the Byronic hero was first developed by the famous 19th-century English Romantic poet Lord Byron. Most literary scholars and historians consider the first literary Byronic hero to be Byron's Childe Harold, the protagonist of Byron's epic poem Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. However, many literary scholars and historians also point to Lord Byron himself as the first truly Byronic hero, for he exemplified throughout his life the characteristics of the sort of literary hero he would make famous in his writing. A Byronic hero can be conceptualized as an extreme variation of the Romantic hero archetype. Traditional Romantic heroes tend to be defined by their rejection or questioning of standard social conventions and norms of behavior, their alienation from larger society, their focus on the self as the center of existence, and their ability to inspire others to commit acts of good and kindness. Romantic heroes are not idealized heroes, but imperfect and often flawed individuals who, despite their sometimes less than savory personalities, often behave in a heroic manner.

According to many literary critics and biographers, Lord Byron developed the archetype of the Byronic hero in response to his boredom with traditional and Romantic heroic literary characters. Byron, according to critics and biographers, wanted to introduce a heroic archetype that would be not only more appealing to readers but also more psychologically realistic. The archetype of the Byronic hero is similar in many respects to the figure of the traditional Romantic hero. Both Romantic and Byronic heroes tend to rebel against conventional modes of behavior and thought and possess personalities that are not traditionally heroic. However, Byronic heroes usually have a greater degree of psychological and emotional complexity than traditional Romantic heroes. Byronic heroes are marked not only by their outright rejection of traditional heroic virtues and values but also their remarkable intelligence and cunning, strong feelings of affection and hatred, impulsiveness, strong sensual desires, moodiness, cynicism, dark humor, and morbid sensibilities. Byronic heroes also tend to appear larger than life and dress and style themselves in elaborate costumes for the purpose of making themselves as different from others as possible. The Byronic Hero created in the works of Byron has dual attributes which reflect the Byron's inner contradictions. On the one hand he who was influenced by classical Greek heroes could not get rid of restriction of the traditional Pan Heroism, on the other hand, in his poems using monologues or dialogues as subtle clues, Byron created heroic figures to some extent opposed to the Pan Heroism. The Byronic hero has similar attributes of later Nietzsche's "Superman". This paper deals with the Byronic hero and the comparison with other heroes.

Key words: Byron; Byronic hero; Classical Greek hero; Nietzschean superman; Pan heroism

Introduction

Although the definition of the so-called “hero” varies with different times and cultural backgrounds, the common thing in its definition is that it is difficult to get rid of the influence of our values. Although humans are limited in the frameworks of the different languages, geographical locations, cultures, all walks of life tend to believe in the universal values out of human conscience and ration. Universal values of human give birth to remarkably similar versions of the Pan Heroism. Pan Heroism means common definition of a hero generally given by the society. And the hero who has super power acting as the people’s model icon is often described as a spiritual totem in specific times.

Based on the Pan Heroism, the ancient ritualized worship of the hero almost became an indispensable practice in the daily life, people drew figures on the wall of cave, built temples and sacrificed animals to worship and show respect to the hero. Especially after the birth of written language ancient rituals were gradually transformed into a variety of literary descriptions of heroes (such as Achilles and Agamemnon in Iliad). These writings are classified as Heroic Literature which can be read in works of Neo-Heroic literary trend emerging at the beginning of the contemporary Chinese literature. In the literature of China these people who were ordinary people at first, grew up to respectful hero after undergoing the various natural disasters, conflicts, fatal adversities even wars (Fang, 2003). In the literature of the world Byronic hero stands out. The Byronic hero finds his way in various forms of dramas, fictions, poetry.

Objective:

This paper seeks to understand the Byronic hero in a modern context. The paper explores the need to study Byronic characters to come to terms with human foibles

Depiction of a Byronic hero

Byron wrote prolifically. In 1832 his publisher, John Murray, released the complete works in 14 volumes. Until now Byron has been universally recognized as one of the greatest Romantic poets in the 19th century. The Romantic Movement originated from the Enlightenment reached its peak because of the Byron’s works. Similar reviews and evaluations are not only based on the poems created during the short life of Byron but also the Byronic hero depicted vividly in his poems. The figures of the Byronic hero pervade much of his works, and Byron himself is considered to epitomize many of the characteristics of this literary figures. Scholars have traced the literary history of the Byronic hero from John Milton, and many authors and artists of the Romantic Movement which show Byron’s influence during the 19th century and beyond, including.

Charlotte and Emily Brontë. And it is due to the portrayal of the Byronic hero that these poems are called-- “Epic of Rebels” (Jiang, 2010, pp.55-56). Byronic hero is generally referred to heroic figures in his poems especially in longer poetry, such as The Corsair, the most famous and one of the most widely liked tales in verse in Oriental tales. The Corsair narrates a story of Conrad as a tough and fearless figure of rebellious spirits (Byron, 1988). As a poet, Byron successfully composed in rhythm his unique cultural ideas and thinking into narration of Byronic hero with typical and rebellious characters (Ma, 1996). By summarizing the attributes of kinds of figures of the Byronic hero pervading in much of his work, we can find that the Byronic hero presents an idealized, but flawed character whose external attributes include: rebellion, great passion, great talent, lacking

of respect for rank and privilege, an unsavory secret past, arrogance, overconfidence or lack of foresight and ultimately a selfdestructive manner. Under the influence of such external attributes, the Byronic hero often exhibits strong love for life, the pursuit for romance, the courage to challenge the royal, the contempt to the unfair social justice, the desire for freedom and the revenge to the evil party that deprived the people of their liberty.

These attributes seem to be the characteristics as the totem in Pan Heroism, and these attributes get high recognition in various cultures. So in 1958, Ballet (La Corsaire) performed by dancers from Opéra de Paris, received great welcome and applaus in China and the opera is adapted on Byron's The Corsair. But only from the external attributes and cross cultural identity it is rather hasty to conclude that the Byronic hero is built on the framework of Pan Heroism. The external attributes are easy to be found and understood by judging from the words and action of figures depicted by Byron. However the internal or the hidden and subtle internal attributes are hard to get their clues. The internal attributes lie inside the spiritual personality. In other words we can tell the external characteristics through narration but inherent characteristics require repeated scrutiny of the words to understand subtle clues from Byron left his readers. For example, the dialogues and monologues seeming to be isolated from the main part of the poem actually present the inherent characteristics intensively. This way of narration is vague and most of time the hidden and real emotion of Byronic hero is ignored. Such as the thirteenth stanza of the first chapter in The Corsair Conrad told his inner thought to his men after the declaration of the departure –

Yet so my heart forebodes, but must not fear
Nor shall my followers find me falter here.
'Tis rash to meet, but surer death to wait
Till here they hunt us to undoubted fate;
And, if my plan but hold, and Fortune smile,
We'll furnish mourners for our funeral pile.

With the careful analysis of the his poem we can find Byronic hero's personality reflects other internal attributes, almost solitary independence even out of touch with the world, tendency to go to extreme as far as to the liberalism, aimless fight with his own judgment and refusing the advices from others. Clearly, these attributes do not exist in the traditional framework of the Pan Heroism. The external attributes and the internal attributes seem to be contradictory, but it is difficult to completely separate the two. It is still necessary to distinguish them, considering the era when Byron lived in, in the Byronic hero we can trace the influence from the classical values about heroes.

The Byronic hero and the classical Greek heroes

Current discussion of the Pan Heroism mainly involves the classical Greek heroes and posts Classical Greek heroes. On both combined heroes the system of Pan heroism with the distinctive feature of times is established. And Byron hero's attributes are actually influenced by the classical Greek heroes. The classical heroes refer to the figures for majesty and moral norms. When inflicted and poor people need them, they are ready and committed to seemingly impossible mission and tough social demand. Classical Greek heroes have extraordinary handsome appearance, superior wisdom and amazing strength. This kind of hero embodies the human's pursuit of the perfection. Picturing this kind of hero, man of letters often piles up their virtues and merits which are impossible to find in a real person but this also indirectly reflects the human's yearning for it. When the real person has no chance to reach perfection, the illusion often that people are immersed in can help mankind escape from the cage of reality. So the great embodiment of classical Greek heroes in Greek mythology who often have the ties of kinship with

the gods and thus have certain superpower, may eventually become supernatural heroes superior to humans. The most famous was undoubtedly the Hercules. He is the son of the great god Zeus and a beautiful human woman Alcmene. Born with the Zeus' blood and gene, Hercules is destined to be extraordinary and become a hero. In the classical literary works, a hero though not a god, has various relations with gods, even if some relations are connected with absurd kinships.

It can be found that the heroes created in this frame mean the continuation of human ritual worship of the totem. The root cause of totem worship lies in the underdevelopment of the productive forces and the primitive people's psychological fear of the nature. The primitive people could not figure out the scary and disastrous natural phenomenon and they often desired for the shelter and protection of the gods who could bless them and can give them so called self-liberation and psychological calmness. At this stage they needed a human hero, that is to say, mankind tried to get away from the domination by various gods, but the fear of the unknown caused the human to introspect, so the classical Greek heroes with supernatural power were born. This kind of human heroes ultimately ended up with becoming a superpower for people to worship. For example, after completion of the twelve heroic feats Heracles (the constellation of Hercules is named after Heracles) died and went to live on Mount Olympus, but he still can't be one of the twelve major Olympians.

This also shows that in the view of the classical values of heroes, human hero cannot completely replace the gods in the people's belief. Such concept of classical Greek heroes deeply rooted in people's belief also affected Byron and his description of the external attributes of Byronic hero. Unwilling to be trapped in the concept of the classical Greek heroes, Byron hoped readers in the Byronic hero could notice the essence of religion, the freedom of religious belief, the contradictions between tolerance of different ideas and freedom to pursuit individual development (Li, 2011). So the Byronic heroes have some common internal attributes.

The Byronic hero and the Nietzschean superman

By depicting the internal attributes of figures in his poems Byron built a poetic barrier between general classical "mythic hero" in Greek Myth and Byronic hero who has a tendency of opposing to the moral norms. It shows that Byron doubted to some extent and opposed to the existing values at his time and the western traditional outlooks of civilization. The moral norms are the core of corresponding cultures and human civilizations. The Byron or the Byronic hero's rebellion is out of the limits of the moral definition, So Byronic hero no longer simply acts as the spokesman of gods. Instead Byronic hero tends to represent a kind of anti-traditional values and always reminds the readers of the great philosopher Nietzsche and "Superman" in his theory (Jiang, 2010, pp.60-61).

"Great minds likely to disdain are great minds tend to admire" — the philosophy of individualism emerged in contradiction, Nietzschean "Superman" was born as a contradictory mixture similar with external attributes and internal attributes of Byronic hero. Based on the two sides, Nietzsche emphasized Superman's transcendence of human physical ability.

This transcendence is often misunderstood as admire for the gods or as the expansion of one's own power so as to achieve the complete control of destiny. In the era of industrial age, when the gods were no longer as prevailing as before the emergence of Nietzschean "Superman" seemed to indirectly verify the psychological demands of human beings' attempt to conquer the nature and the gods. But a fact that Nietzsche, the creator of the "Superman" theory, is a philosopher is ignored. Nietzsche originally intended to encourage and appeal to people not to worship the gods, moreover to free human as an individual with high self-recognition from the old civilization, cultural background and traditional morals. Compared with the Byronic hero,

some interesting common attributes such as self-destructive liberalism, being isolated from the public, contempt of the criticism etc. can be found in Nietzsche's narration. Nietzsche inspired the solitary individuals to struggle in maintaining independent personality and dignity. In the process of bitter struggle, the individual heroes develop themselves fully and display their personality clearly. Through their seemingly fearless fight, the heroes succeed in proving their value and significance of living in this mortal and carnal world. Their independent personality and dignity make them holy and sacred in the dark and hierarchical society. Yet their intentional or unintentional mistakes and trivial or mortal sins as well as the correspondingly caused suffering and despair prove that freedom of individuality and liberty is relative not definite and also improve that the indulgence in the absolute freedom can make a person go to the destruction or even hell.

So in fact Nietzschean "Superman" is actually the continuation of the Byron hero. To put it in another way, Byron is the spiritual mentor of Nietzsche. Based on similar internal attributes with those of Nietzsche, Byronic hero is equipped with the superman's attributes but different from the classic Greek heroes who are worshipped as the gods in Greek Myth. Byronic hero is a man of flesh or mould who is not immortal and not equipped with superpower. Byronic hero is stronger and tougher individual who outshines the mediocre royals like hesitating and weak Hamlet or confused Faust. The Byronic hero braves unpleasant or dangerous conditions and marches forward with burdens, but Byron and Byronic hero are nurtured and influenced by the traditional and classical western culture. Some figures in his poems to great extent admire the spirits and doctrines of god of wine in ancient Greek and some figures eager to be in a world without the sense and identity of guilt in the ancient Greek mythology, so the external attributes of Byronic hero still partly adhere to classical Greek heroism. This is perhaps the eternal contradiction that poets and the human have to be faced with.

Byronic hero today

There are also suggestions of the potential of a Byronic heroine in Byron's works. Charles J. Clancy argues that Aurora Raby in *Don Juan* possesses many of the characteristics typical of a Byronic hero. Described as "silent, lone" in the poem, her life has indeed been spent in isolation – she has been orphaned from birth. She validates Thorslev's assertion that Byronic heroes are "invariably solitaires" (Clancy, 29). Yet, like her male counterpart, she evokes an interest from those around her, "There was awe in the homage which she drew" (XV, 47). Again, this is not dissimilar to the description of the fascination that Byron himself encountered wherever he went (McCarthy, 161). Her apparent mournful nature is also reminiscent of the regretful mien of the Byronic hero. She is described as having deeply sad eyes, "Eyes which sadly shone, as Seraphs' shine" (XV, 45). This was a specific characteristic of the Byronic hero (Clancy, 30). This seems to express a despair with humanity, not unlike the despair present in Byron's *Cain*, as Thorslev notes. She herself admits to despairing at "man's decline" (XV, 45), therefore this brings her into direct comparison with Cain's horror at the destruction of humanity (Clancy, 31).

The Byronic hero is so pervasive in contemporary popular texts that once one begins to establish, in class, the parameters of his type, the examples seem endless.

From the Western hero to the science fiction hero to the action-adventure hero, we can find any number of heroes who seem to be descendents of Byron's *Manfred*. I believe that two of the primary factors that resonate with both nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century audiences are a voyeuristic interest in the criminal and a conviction of individual powerlessness in the face of wealth and institutional power. In fact, these factors are related, for the criminal (temporarily, at least) escapes the

restrictions of law and society to pursue his own desires. We see this fascination in eighteenth-century crime and trial narratives and folk ballads about outlaw heroes, in the figure of the Gothic villain, and in the fictional exploration of the psychology of such villains as Maturin's Melmoth and Collins's Count Fosco, two characters who inspire both fear and desire. The Byronic hero has the same defiance of society's rules and institutions and the same bad-boy appeal of the charismatic villain, combined with an aspiration after generally more admirable goals than those of the typical villain character. In both nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century texts, the Byronic hero is given superhuman abilities. Given his superior capabilities, the Byronic hero, whether in his nineteenth-century or contemporary incarnation, provides his audience with a satisfying vicarious experience of power (and empowerment, for that matter), autonomy, mastery, and defiance of oppressive authority. At the same time, however, in his superhuman mode, he cannot establish a meaningful connection with his audience.

Almost inevitably, however, the hero's creators do not allow him to remain in his superhuman condition; they "rehumanize" him, in effect, and/or have him voice approbation and admiration of ordinary human values. In his superhuman condition he cannot be reintegrated into society, even if he has benefited that society with his heroic actions. He must be rehumanized, exiled, and/or destroyed, all of which serve to leave the audience with a more comfortable identification with the hero. In his superhuman condition, he is an unattainable ideal, a hero who inspires awe but cannot be emulated. At the same time, he lacks social skills and an ability to relate to other people; he is a loner and an outcast, and he can be arrogant, contemptuous of human beings, bad-tempered, overbearing, cold, ruthless, and emotionless. As such, admirable as he is for his abilities and his willingness to take on the powers that be, he is alien to his audience. They find no shared basis for sympathetic identification. If, however, despite his superhuman abilities, he ultimately reaffirms his humanity, he leaves the audience content with their own condition and able to identify with the hero. They cannot be like him, and they are flattered that he wishes to be like them.

Conclusion

So, *We'll Go No More A Roving* is one of Byron's short poems, in which the poet farewells with his beloved in the sorrowful tone. The last stanza reads –

Though the night was made for loving,

And the day returns too soon,

Yet we'll go no more a-roving

By the light of the moon.

(Byron, 1982)

These lines which are the sorrows uttered from deep inside of Byron are enough to express the internal attributes of the Byronic hero. Times need Byronic hero who is different from totemic hero in the classical Greek heroes even if Byronic hero bears some of original sins in religious sense. Byronic hero is human being and loves human beings. This love from Byronic hero is more intense and real than that from Promethean. Because of this, the Byron hero with the dual attributes is more close to the human nature.

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