

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**LORD BYRON: THE ROMANTIC SATIRIST**

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*To My Beloved Parents  
Who First Inspired in Me  
The Love of Learning  
And of Romantic Idealism*

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **LORD BYRON: THE ROMANTIC SATIRIST**

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Lord Byron is a celebrated social critic. The understanding of his personality and poetry demands a thorough perception of his contemporary historical and literary context. His dual nature makes him a remarkable epitome of the union of the contrary. He is the meeting place of two literary periods: his devotion to Truth and his praise of Reason place him among the Eighteenth-century poets; but his inconsistency, his emotional and imaginative nature, his poetical subjectivity, his exploration of the unconscious, his idealism and his contempt for literary conventions make him the true child of the Romantic movement.

Byron's poetry reflects his love of man's liberty and freedom from oppression and illusions, and his detestation of hypocrisy. He depicts man and society not as they ought to be, but as they actually are. His witty and analytical criticism of man's flaws reveals a serious moralist who, without enmity and exaggeration, exposes social,

religious, moral, political and literary vices that have crippled the society.

This study depicts the conflict between Byron's observation of reality and his aspiration for the ideal. He dissolves the conflict through the medium of satire. Byron's masterpiece, *Don Juan*, reflects the social, religious and moral abuses in England, and presents a fantastic scope of experience and observation. It is an ironic survey of Western civilization in which satire finds its widest social scope. *Don Juan* is a Romantic poem which mirrors the doctrine of "Dynamic Organicism" and offers its own aesthetic laws.

*The Vision of Judgment* is a brilliant satire on political, literary and religious abuses. Its characters are universal, and it is a mirror that reflects a society that should undergo reconsideration and reconstruction.

Byron's profound perception, his contempt for oppression, his sincere devotion to truth, and the fantastic polarity of paradoxes place him beyond the borders of time and place.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **A. Byron's Paradoxical Nature and Poetry**

Byron is recognized as a celebrated social critic. The understanding of his highly complicated character demands a thorough perception of his contemporary historical and literary context. As a second-generation poet of the Romantic movement, Byron possesses both Romantic and anti-Romantic qualities. Any critical approach to Byron needs a satisfactory understanding of his world and mentality as well as an elaborate knowledge of the age he lived in; but what is of great significance is the analysis of his major literary concern; that is, his satiric poetry.

The unique impact of reading Byron is the contact with a singular personality. His complicated personality is both eccentric and inconsistent. According to Byron himself, he had no zest for "new pursuits," and the fact that nothing impressed him sufficiently was responsible for his changeable temperament (*Letters and Journals*, III. 86-87). Calvert regards Byron as a complicated personality who lived in a complicated era and drew his artistic aims from sources that were

both complex and contradictory (ix). Although he is a remarkable epitome of the union of the contrary, he is "constant" in his love for liberty and his detestation of tyranny and hypocrisy. He shows an unfailing appreciation of truth, and an extraordinary sincerity in writing.

Byron's greatness lies in his refusal to present a single attitude towards the questions of life. This quality makes him sound as a contemporary author, and that is why it is said that Byron is a poet belonging to posterity. His originality lies in the fact that he considers the existence of vices as real and tangible as that of virtues. His mind is torn between an everlasting quest for the ideal and the constant manifestation of reality. His depth of thought is as noticeable as his mastery in poetry.

Byron's poetry possesses many Romantic characteristics while it is not quite meaningful in terms of positive Romanticism. The root of this paradox is to be found in Byron's personal tendencies. According to Raysor, he could barely associate himself with the Romantics' depreciation of the Augustan period. At the same time, however, he wanted to adjust himself to the new fashions of thought and poetry of his own age (166).

Byron wrote both Romantic and satiric poems. His shift from the Romantic tendency to satiric poetry was parallel to his gradual intellectual maturity. According to Calvert, Byron is the child of two centuries, and a meeting place of two personalities: an emotional,



naïve, and spontaneous or Romantic personality, and a sophisticated and rational man of tradition belonging to the previous generation (21).

What gives Byron the quality of a Romantic poet is his tendency towards a constant change. He is best distinguished with his practice of instability and diversity, the roots of which are to be found in his Romantic enthusiasm for the ideal. Another feature, which makes him a Romantic poet, is his rebellion and the quest of liberty. He seeks a kind of freedom that liberates him from all social, religious, and literary restrictions. He is against all organizations, believing that they must be doubted and questioned because they are responsible for all human suffering and misery.

The difference between Byron and other Romantic poets is that he rejects the false sentimentalism of his contemporary poets who, Byron suspects, suffered a “mental sickness”. According to Raysor, Byron believed that “he and they alike were on a wrong road”(166). They were all attacked in his satirical poems and occasional comments. As Joseph states,

. . . he made plain his lack of sympathy for nearly all his contemporaries—for Scott’s Mediaeval and Southey’s oriental romances, Wordsworth’s “Christmas stories tortured into rhyme,” and Coleridge’s obscurities. . . . Like other traditionalists . . . he was much surer in what he

admired to the dead than of the living: Tasso, . . . Milton,  
Dryden, Pope. (132)

As a Romantic satirist Byron is innovative. Unlike the satirists of Augustan tradition, Byron's satire is not based upon personal bias. He is the only satirist who includes himself in his criticism. In his realistic approach to life he is conscious of man's fallibility. He regards himself as capable of erring as any other human being. In style and technique Byron offers a novel approach to satire, and is not a perfect follower of his literary master, Pope. According to Leavis, Byron can command none of the features of an Augustan mode, because he lacks "an easy sureness of diction and tone, a neat precision and poise of movement and gesture, an elegant constancy of point and an even decorum." His success in some of his satirical poems is based on his innovative way of composition that dispenses with all Augustan virtues (83).

Because of Byron's particular temperament and workmanship, different critics of various times and places have introduced him in the way most suitable to their own mentality. The continental critics call him a "Satanist-Romantic," a view that cannot be justified. There were Byron's opponents, like Southey, that first tried to see in his works a satanic quality. The remorse-torn, unrepentant Byronic hero is an emblem of man's situation, and his guilty conscience is by no means a celebration of ill deeds. If the Europeans had read Byron's poetry in its original language, they could have noticed the fact that the Byronic

hero is not triumphant in the realm of vices; he is a failure in the field of virtues. Although he has undeniable virtues, Byron, like his hero, always laments what he calls his "one virtue and a thousand crimes." The English-speaking critics, however, have a different opinion of Byron: since his language is ironic and his style satiric, they have called him a satirist. They believe that Byron means the correction of vices and follies.

The Byronic hero, like Byron himself, goes to sea voyages. The journey motif is an opportunity to study the inner self, where the unconscious is explored, and perfection is sought. It makes him condemn social, religious, and political abuses. Byron's self-exile is not a self-chosen isolation as that of most Romantic poets. Unlike them, he never withdraws from social scenes.

Byron always cares for the society and is involved in its problems. Unlike other Romantic poets, Byron refuses to build castles in the air. His major concern is revealing the truth. He deals with what it is, and not with what it ought to be. As a dissatisfied soul, he pays no attention to the false delicacy of English readers and writes comedies of imperfection. In them, presenting "too much truth" proves too threatening to the self-defensive ego. Byron's sharp tongue and frankness are responsible for the hostile attitude of his society towards him, but he finds a more sympathetic audience and a fairer estimate in the twentieth century. An examination of his letters and journals

signifies that his ironic language is but a comment on contemporary life and manners, not a "eulogy of vices."

Being a melodramatic exploiter of his own emotions, Byron undergoes an infinite strife to solve the question of life. He is a sensitive wanderer who dislikes any fixed system or philosophy. Marchand believes that although Byron had no philosophy, his contribution to philosophy is enormous because a skeptical and doubtful mind expands philosophy better than an affirmative one (3).

Byron cannot help meditating, and he sometimes finds himself among the broken borders of sin and pleasure. As Marchand states, Byron "was a Deist and free-thinker haunted by a Calvinistic sense of the original sin" (5). The sense of guilt is very strong in him. In his doubts and uncertainties, Byron is simultaneously sinful and unrepentant. Marchand talks about the "polarities of his life, opinions and poetic productions," which make a "Romantic paradox" out of him (5).

Modern scholarship's attempt has centered on the justification of Byron's polarities. Critics have tried to explain his inconsistencies, his remorse-torn conscience and his hostile attitudes towards some phenomena. Calvert believes that Byron's oversensitive soul was responsible for his notoriety. Though more violent, he was not wickeder than others. His particularity, however, was to talk too much about the probable sins he perhaps never committed. If he has been regarded as an admirer of Satanic inclinations, it is only because of his

frequent confessions "to relieve his conscience." His fault was to boast openly of those things "it is prudent not to admit." (9)

The other possible justification of Byron's contradictions is his consciousness of the existence of an audience. His compositions are sometimes reactions to the suspicious disapproval of the public. For example, the presentation of too many of his deepest feelings in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* brought him the threat of public contempt. Therefore, his social-personal defense mechanism made him humiliate what he formerly celebrated. As Rutherford states, not the absurdity of those emotions, but the embarrassment of revealing his truest feelings caused Byron discredit values that he himself had established (165). There are many other poems in which Byron's honest sincerity becomes problematic and is ridiculed as too much sentimentalism. Such cases have sometimes confused Byron's critics, and such moods are often attributed to his discursiveness, inconsistency, contradiction and digression.

Byron is a champion of liberty and his love of freedom makes him an enemy of oppression. He is by no means a misanthrope; he actually treats his characters with nostalgic sympathy. He symbolizes the expectations of his age in the person of a rebel incarnate who, being dissatisfied with dull conventions, rejects predecessors' false social and moral codes. The roots of his rebellion are also to be found in his Calvinistic education in which a "bitter fate" is inevitable. It nourished in Byron a sense of guilt that contradicted his devotion to

liberty. This conflict between the internal and external forces leads to the creation of a rebel hero. Calvert believes that Calvinism denies all life's happiness by "ascribing man's natural instincts" to a devilish malevolence. However, it has been constructive, as it makes "frustrated emotions" find relief in "ceaseless activity," and makes man devote himself to serious thinking and action. (8) The result can be easily seen in the Byronic hero who, being a genuine rebel, has no notion of passivity. He is active and cannot necessarily remain virtuous. He comes to believe that evil is a reality.

Regarding Byron's special personality, it is easy to establish a balance between the contradictory features of his mind and work. West declares that a satisfactory reading of Byron includes the reconciliation of his "egoism with his internationalism," and his "careless ease with his careful assumptions of impersonality" (3). Byron's appreciation demands a well-oriented insight into his particularities, his era and his literary innovations.

## **B. The Statement of the Problem**

This study's objective is the elaboration of Byron's poetical creation in the light of his personality and the criticism of his times. Byron's intellectual questioning of social, religious and political norms of his age is expressed in his ironic language and satiric poems. He manages to fulfill his aim of correcting the vices and follies by shaking the foundations of old conventions. Byron's influence in

changing the conventional standards has surpassed borders of both place and time. His genius is praised all over Europe and proves him to be a man for all generations.

For the English-speaking world, Byron is acknowledged primarily as a satirist. Although he flourished in the Romantic period, he obviously has some affinity with the Neo-classical satirists. Undoubtedly Byron is successful in the satirical mood in *Don Juan* (1819-24) and *The Vision of Judgment*. Without a practical application of Pope's literary restrictions, Byron recognized him as his literary master.

In the Neo-classical age, satire is defined as a poem that censures wickedness or folly. As Dr. Abjadian states, "wherever wit is employed to expose something foolish or vicious, there satire exists" (15). Satire's aim is not merely laughing at human folly; it is also a weapon serving intellectual ends. To Defoe satire is "Reformation". In the "Dialogue II" of "Epilogue to Satires," Pope apostrophizes satire:

O sacred Weapon! Left for truth's defence,  
Sole dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!  
To all but heav'n-directed hands deny'd,  
The Muse may give thee, but the Gods must guide.  
Rev'rent I touch thee! (212-16)

Such a definition of satire is not quite applicable to Pope's own satires, but it is true of the satirical poems of Byron who gives satire a much wider social scope. While Pope attacks victims, Byron considers