

From Dawn to Twilight: The Byronic Hero

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Since Lord Byron's introduction of *Manfred* in his 1817 closet drama of the same name, the Byronic hero has been a relevant, admired, and compelling character in both classic literature and popular culture. The brooding Heathcliff, from the timeless novel *Wuthering Heights*, along with the aloof Batman, from the DC Comics, and Rochester from *Jane Eyre*, are all incontestable in their categorization as a Byronic hero. More recently, however, a character has come to light that is a little more difficult to allow or deny classification as a Byronic hero. Edward Cullen, protagonist of the widespread *Twilight* phenomenon, has an inescapable affinity for danger, a cursed, damned fate, and a bitter outlook on the world he has been forcefully thrust into and can never break away from, qualities often associated with the traditional Byronic hero. He is also, however, much softer and much less reckless than other confirmed Byronic heroes, and due to his abnormalities, it is unclear if his characterization as such would be fitting. This essay not only explores Edward in regards to already-established Byronic heroes, but also acknowledges the *evolution* of Byronic heroes while interpreting several characters in classic literature, and uses this knowledge to determine whether or not Edward is the culmination of the current understanding of a Byronic hero.

Lord George Gordon Byron, better known as Lord Byron, is both the creator and inspiration for the Byronic hero. Emerging from a purportedly abusive childhood, Byron's adult years were marked by numerous personal scandals, including failed marriages, quickly accumulating debt, and continued love affairs with both women and men. However, despite, or perhaps because of, the public detestation of his lifestyle,

Byron began his writing career “glorifying proud heroes who had overcome hardship”, and in 1812 his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* brought him widespread popularity. Although public scrutiny rose in response to his growing fame, Byron continued to live his own way, and when Lady Caroline Lamb, a former lover, mentions him in her journal, she writes that Byron is “mad - bad - and dangerous to know.” This description has become one of the most basic characteristics of the Byronic hero, and its ability to be attributed to both Byron and his eponymous hero is just one example of how thin the line between creator and creation became. In addition to this, Byron remained indifferent to the scorn he received, and this aspect of his own personality is also included in the description of the Byronic hero; that is, the complete disregard for moral standards, and creation of personal values that work outside of society. Unfortunately, Byron proved unable to live up to the level of perfection he conceived in creating the Byronic hero, and when rumors circulated of his incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta, Byron fled England, never to return.

As mentioned previously, Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was the first piece for which he received critical acclaim. However, it was also the piece which Byron liked least, as he felt the poem was far too personally revealing. In addition to Manfred, who will be examined later, Childe Harold is also credited as the first instance of the Byronic hero, and the many connections he and Byron share add to the belief that the Byronic character uses Byron as a paradigm. For example, in the first canto, Byron writes “few earthly things found favour in his sight save concubines and carnal companie” (I.16-18), which could be attributed to his love affairs. A few stanzas later, however, it is mentioned that Childe Harold “sigh'd to many though he lov'd but one, and that lov'd one, alas!

could ne'er be his..." (I.39-40, 48-50). Although it might not be clear whom this phrase can be attributed, there are several suspects, as it is said Byron fruitlessly longed for many former lovers, including "an impoverished choirboy named John Edleston", and his own half-sister Augusta Leigh (Liukkonen). The third Canto begins with a cry of "Is thy face like thy mother's, my fair child! Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart? When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled, and then we parted, --not now as we part, but with a hope" (III.1-5). Clearly, this acknowledges his daughter, Augusta Ada, whose mother he separated from soon after her birth. The "hope" Byron mentions is the hope for a reunion; however, Byron's hope is wasted, and he never sees Ada again. Of course, these are just a few examples of the unmistakable parallels between Byron and Harold, the latter of which begins the road that countless other heroes such as Heathcliff, Rochester, and, eventually, Edward, will shape and follow, beginning with the second of Lord Byron's tormented creations: Manfred.

In Act I of *Manfred*, we find the title character yearning for "'self-oblivion' (I.i.144), and escape from the tortures of memory" (Rawes 126). He calls upon supernatural elements to aid his quest, and when denied, resorts to suicide, only to be denied once more as a passing hunter appears just in time to stop him. As they talk, Manfred reveals the incestuous relationship he attempts with his sister, Astarte, whose "blood... ran in the veins of my fathers, and in ours" (II.i.28-29). He continues, saying they "loved each other as we should not love" (II.i.31), and, feeling guilty for Manfred's sinful emotions, she kills herself. The hunter offers Manfred his sympathy and prayers, but Manfred repudiates them, saying, "I need them not" (II.i.99). Manfred exits, and bargains with a spirit to see Astarte once more, hoping her forgiveness will grant him

absolution. Upon their meeting, however, she merely tells him he will die the following day, and when asked if she has forgiven him, she responds only with, "Farewell" (II.iv.175, 177)! Manfred has failed for the final time, and he accepts his death with the deepest calm yet. In the final scene, Manfred rejects the help of a priest, shouting "Away! I'll die as I have lived-- alone" (III.iv.106). As the priest begs him to pray with him, Manfred expires, saying "Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die" (III.iv.173).

Through Manfred's characterization, the standard of a Byronic hero is set. In this character, the influence of the Gothic villain on Byron's hero is apparent. Like the Gothic villain, he is a man "capable of great evil who maintains a certain majesty of demeanor... with dark hair and [a] pale complexion. He is a physically compelling, virile man, terrifying yet strangely attractive" (Fry and Craig 2). Manfred himself incorporates several traits that appear in later Byronic characters, like "the same appearance of gloomy magnificence... an intimidating man with a glittering eye, a man alone, alienated from his fellows by his passionate nature"(Fry and Craig 3). Byron also adds several "redeeming qualities", such as the "great love [that] lives in his heart... [And], unlike the Gothic villain, the Byronic hero is a man of feeling, [with] a passion-- expressed in undying love for a woman-- that excuses other faults" (Fry and Craig 3). If we accept these standards, now the comparisons between the original and current embodiment of the Byronic hero can begin.

Both Edward and Manfred have been involved in relationships labeled as taboo by society; Manfred, in an incestuous relationship with his sister, and Edward, as a vampire, in an "interspecies" relationship with a human. The main difference, in fact, lies not within themselves, but within their heroines. When Bella, Edward's love interest,

discovers his true nature, she calmly responds, “It doesn’t matter to me what you are” (Meyer 184). Astarte, however, is so racked with guilt over Manfred’s love that she commits suicide, unable to return his affections. Due to the reactions of their significant others, Edward is spared from the dark path on which Manfred finds himself.

Further comparisons can be drawn by how Manfred handles the death of his lover, and how Edward grieves when he believes Bella to be dead. In the second novel, *New Moon*, Edward fears his vampiric lifestyle will eventually cause Bella harm and leaves her, hoping she can forget him. During this time, Edward recants his humanity, reverting to animal instincts in an effort to forget Bella, much like Manfred’s quest for “self-oblivion” (I.i.144). Later, when he mistakenly believes Bella has died, he calmly plans his own suicide, determining that he cannot continue to live in a world in which Bella does not exist. He would have succeeded in his pursuit if not for Bella, who appears just before he casts himself into the sunlight, revealing his vampirism to a human crowd, an action punishable by death in the vampire community. She assures him that he is still alive (and they have not simply met in the afterlife), and comforts him, saying she understands why he left, and that she forgives him. When Manfred is in need of this same type of forgiveness, he is rejected by Astarte, and it is this rejection that ultimately leads to his demise.

The question is: does Manfred deserve the happy ending he yearns for? His crime, the taboo of incest, is a universal crime, while Edward’s “crime” is only within the vampire community. Not only that, but Edward’s crime is less significant in severity: humans are only viewed as a food source to vampires, and considered far less intelligent. Edward and Bella overcome these social stigmas, and despite their differences, they are

able to flourish as a couple. With Manfred and Astarte, their relationship has *no* redeeming quality, and Astarte is arguably upholding the moral standard by refusing to succumb to Manfred's desires. Though deserving of sympathy, Manfred is clearly undeserving of a happy ending, while Edward's "crimes" are tame enough to be forgiven. Indeed, one of the distinctions between the Byronic hero of today and yesterday is that the severity of their crimes has significantly lessened, and their capacity for absolution has grown.

Nonetheless, the Byronic hero, as defined by Atara Stein in *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, "is an outlaw and an outsider who defines his own moral code, often defying oppressive institutional authority, and is able to do so because of his superhuman or super-egotistical sense of his own superiority... He is a loner who often displays a quick temper or a brooding angst, or both, and he lacks the ability to relate to others" (8). Although this might seem like the opposite of a traditional hero, a Byronic hero is not to be confused with an anti-hero, who boasts a complete lack of traditional heroic qualities, little to no sense of ethics or morals, and is just as likely to murder someone as they are to save them. Anti-heroes have no strong perception of self-identity, and often choose not to rely on anyone besides themselves, but do possess a willingness to do anything to achieve their goals, and it is this lack of boundaries that separates them from a Byronic hero, who by contrast, "essentially defines and creates himself... embodying the ultimate development of the individual" (Stein 8). However, despite their clear sense of self-awareness and pursuit of personal aspirations, Byronic heroes often have outside forces contributing not only to their development, but also to the ambitions he aspires to achieve and how he reaches those aims. True, they are ultimately defined by

themselves, but as they “lack the ability to relate to others,” when they are able to find someone whom they connect with, the Byronic hero can be shaped by the expectations that person may have of them (Stein 8). Edward, for example, having spent most of his vampire life questioning his own self worth, begins to see himself in a new light with Bella’s gentle encouragement, which will be further examined in later paragraphs.

As noted above, one of the strongest and most popular traits of a Byronic hero is his “resistance [of] authority... and seeking vigilante justice on his own terms” (Stein, “Immortals,” 8). A perfect paradigm and more modern example for this attribute is the infamous Bruce Wayne, better known as Batman, whose reckless disregard for authority has led to his popularity in text, film, and television. In retaliation for his parents’ murder in his hometown of Gotham, Bruce takes up the alias of Batman, and begins fighting criminals in the dead of night, much to the chagrin of authorities, who view him as just another delinquent breaking the law. Nonetheless, Batman remains a rebel, choosing to execute his own sense of judgment when he finds the “right” way is not working. Similarly, Edward embraces his own form of rebellion against the vampire civilization of which he unwillingly became a part.¹ While most vampires indulge in their bloodlust as often as necessary with no thoughts of sympathy or remorse for their victims, Edward not only refuses to drink (innocent) human blood, settling for the substitution of animals but also takes it upon himself to restrain any vampire who attempts to take a human life on

¹ Edwards’ mother, while on her deathbed, recognizes her doctor Carlisle as something more than human. She begs him to save Edwards’ life, as he is dying of the same disease killing her, no matter the cost, and because of her desperation, Carlisle concedes, turning Edward into a vampire when Edward is on the brink of death. He does not willingly become a vampire, and, under the careful teachings of Carlisle, does not embrace the vampire lifestyle, a choice that further enhances the moral ambiguity of Edwards’ character.

the land the Cullens' (Edward's "family") claim as their own. Although his labors might not be as revolutionary as Batman's struggle, the fact remains that Edward disregards what is defined as normal in his social circle, and he takes it upon himself to define his own morality, regardless of how he is viewed. In turn, Edward's morality is sharply influenced by his belief that he is no longer in possession of a soul, and thus his condemnation to hell. For this reason, Edward refutes his thirst for blood, and tries to detach himself from anything that might bring joy into his life, because he feels a beast such as himself is undeserving of such things. It is this self-inflicted rejection of pleasure that introduces the next quality of a traditional Byronic hero: the anguish of unrequited love.

"The Byronic philosophy," says Deborah Lutz in *The Gothic Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*, "sees love as the ultimate, and only, essential truth and final resting place for the one in this life. Love is the only force that still holds meaning" (52). To examine this desperate and powerful relationship, one must turn to the greatest example of a disastrous love affair in literary history: the despicable Heathcliff and Cathy of *Wuthering Heights*. Even as a child, Heathcliff is described as "an imp of Satan," and "as dark as if [he] came from the devil" (Bronte 31, 29). Cathy is characterized as "mischievous and wayward," and "bold and saucy," a wild girl who delighted in aggravating caretakers with her quick tongue and feisty spirit (30, 33). However, despite both of their flaws, in light of them, even, the two become inseparable, uniting against Hindley, Cathy's brother, who takes it upon himself to break Heathcliff's unruly nature. Their affection for one another is obvious even in their young age, but soon after entering womanhood, Cathy becomes acquainted with

Edgar Linton, a young man born into a rich family. She agrees to marry him for his wealth, saying “It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now” (62). Heathcliff overhears, and although always precariously close, this abandonment finally pushes him over the edge. He flees Wuthering Heights, never to hear her true love for him: “If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be, and, if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the Universe would turn to a mighty stranger” (64).

Had Heathcliff only waited seconds longer, he would have learned of Cathy’s devotion to him, and that she only chose to marry Linton to “aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother’s power” (63). Instead, Heathcliff spends the next three years away from Cathy, returning only to destroy Linton, never succeeding in winning her back, and learning of their mutual love only as she is on her deathbed. After her death, he spends the rest of his life mourning and longing for her, making those around him as miserable as himself in his unquenchable lust for power. In doing this, Heathcliff fulfills another Byronic attribute described by Lutz: “The definition of the Byronic hero is the tormented melancholy failure who nears success and then fails and experiences the eternal loss, the repetition of the impossibility of bliss” (52).

Some Byronic heroes, however, are luckier than the infamous Heathcliff. Instead of fruitlessly longing for a lost love, they somehow achieve the love they desperately yearn for, and are shaped by their heroine. To view one such relationship, one might examine Edward Rochester of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Upon his first encounter with Jane, Rochester falls off his horse, and as she stoops to help him up, he attempts to push her away, calling her a witch in the process. From then on, Rochester is described as “‘moody,’ ‘proud,’ ‘superior,’ and ‘deeply sarcastic’” (Brontë qtd. in Wootton 9), prone

to abrupt and unpredictable “changes of mood” (*Jane Eyre* 143). Sarah Wootton, in “Picturing In Me A Hero of Romance,” states “[Rochester] alternates between joviality and coldness in the space of a scene change” (7). He is sarcastic, cruel, and unfriendly, yet, Jane is drawn to him, and he is enticed by her. When they proclaim their love, Rochester immediately proposes, but just before their wedding, it is discovered that he is still married to his first wife, an insane woman he married purely for her looks, whom he now keeps locked in the attic with a private caregiver. The wedding is cancelled, and, the novel culminates with Rochester’s mad wife setting fire to the mansion and committing suicide by jumping off the flaming building. Although Rochester is maimed and struck blind in the blaze, he and Jane finally marry, and Rochester regains sight in one eye just in time to see their son born.

In *Jane Eyre*, two transformations occur in the Byronic hero Rochester. The first is his shift in attraction from his first wife, a wealthy woman of tremendous beauty, to a lady with plain, ordinary features, and very little money to her name. Although Rochester is often described as ugly, with “broad and jetty eyebrows” (*Jane Eyre* 133), and an “acrid and desolate smile” (326), he is also very sexually appealing and manipulative. His past is dotted with sexual conquests, but when he meets Jane, he sees past her average looks, and focuses on the extraordinary strength of heart Jane possesses. In this way, Rochester changes from a superficial man to someone more genuine; he has been permanently altered from his encounter with Jane.

This brings to light the second transformation of Rochester, which occurs within the very nature of this Byronic hero. In the beginning of the novel, Rochester is portrayed as a “worldly, dissipated, restless man” (*Jane Eyre* 243), seeing his as a “life of

agony” (352) and describing himself as “a trite and commonplace sinner; hackneyed in all the poor petty dissipations with which the rich and worthless try to put on life” (150-151). At the conclusion, however, one of the final images of Rochester is with “smiles played over his face, joy dawned on his forehead: his lineaments softened and warmed” (458). Through the drastic changes that occur in Rochester, one witnesses the power a lover might have over a Byronic hero, eliciting aspects of him never imagined to exist.

Similarly, Edward of *Twilight* is shaped by Bella, who, like Jane, is described as clumsy, average-looking, painfully shy, and relatively uninteresting. Upon their first encounter, Bella sees “the strangest expression on his face-- it was hostile, furious” (Meyer 23). Edward spends the next several weeks “pretending [Bella] doesn’t exist,” and acting “cold and indifferent,” believing that “[he] isn’t worth” her affections (82, 89, 497). He soon surrenders, however, saying “I’m tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella” (84). After this milestone, Edward and Bella become inseparable, and Bella constantly says that “[he doesn’t] see [him]self very clearly,” and that she will always love him (497). Although Edward constantly reiterates his previous statement, he allows himself to be with her, enjoying the undying love they have for one another. In meeting Bella, Edward is able to permit himself some of the joys he so long denied, and begins to see the qualities she insists he has.

Although Edward possesses many of the qualities that make a hero Byronic, there are some aspects of his personality that simply do not fit within Byronic tendencies; namely, the salvation he achieves through Bella. “The Byronic hero *in his purity* can, by definition, never be redeemed by becoming a couple,” remarks Lutz, “he is interminably thrown back upon black despair; he is unremittingly cast adrift into absence and dark

nights” (52; emphasis mine). However, “when his mythic potency denies uniformity and completion” (Wootton 1), how can his classification as a Byronic hero be refuted simply because he clashes with one of the attributes? “This essay does not presuppose that there is a definitive Byronic hero, one character, or even a set of characteristics that typifies the Byronic,” Wootton explains early on in her own essay, “but acknowledges and explores various Byronic traits... reflecting Byron’s chameleonic regard of the self” (1). In the same sense, this essay is not meant to challenge the traditional Byronic hero, but to expand on him, accepting that each new generation adds their own interpretation to a Byronic hero, and that although some of his tendencies might be changed or altered, at the core, he is still Lord Byron’s Byronic hero.

Indeed, the lack of a definitive Byronic hero has allowed for the emergence of a modernized version of him. Within the last few years, vampires have been presented, with increasing frequency, as romantic figures, not at all like their repulsive, lumbering ancestors. With Anne Rice’s Lestat and Bram Stoker’s Dracula as the most recent characterizations of Byronic heroes, vampires are arguably the modern day understanding of what a Byronic hero could be. To give a brief example, let us look at a short chronology of past portrayals of Dracula, leading up to his most recent representation; in doing so, it becomes obvious there is a subtle shift in Dracula’s interpretation, culminating in his embodiment as a Byronic character. In Bela Lugosi’s 1931 portrayal of Dracula, for example, he is a pale, yet handsome man, with dark, slicked hair, and a refined, elegant poise. He plans to make Mina² into a vampire such as himself, but he is

² In the novel, Mina is the fiancée, later bride, of Jonathan Harker, who is held captive by Dracula in his until he is able to make his escape. When Dracula discovers Jonathan has escaped, and that he has alerted others of his (Dracula’s) existence and their plan to destroy, he attempts to get revenge by turning Mina

not delicate or careful with his handling of her, merely possessive and greedy, with none of the deep, salvaging love which is crucial to the Byronic hero. In Christopher Lee's 1958 performance, however, we see a subtle shift in Dracula's depiction. He is still pale and elegant, with the same dark, slicked hair, but, there is a passionate intensity in the way he holds and hovers over Mina with dark, desperate eyes just before he sinks his teeth into her neck. Of course, there are no emotions connected with his misleading actions, but this is the first time Dracula is imbued with human qualities, and it is these startlingly human traits that lead to his next embodiment: Frank Langella, in John Badham's 1979 production of *Dracula*. Langella's portrayal of Dracula is quite a deviation from the past two representations, namely due to the undeniable human emotions Dracula exhibits throughout the film. Dracula's physical appearance is altered as well; his hair is no longer slicked, but kept more naturally combed, full and wavy. He is now not only handsome, but breathtaking, with a charming manner that immediately entices Lucy, Mina's friend. In the span of just a few days, Lucy leaves her fiancé, proclaiming her undying love for Dracula, and he reciprocates, making her his vampire bride with plans to escape to Transylvania together. In this version of Dracula, the saving grace of a Byronic hero, love, finally makes an appearance, and this groundwork becomes the foundation for the next and most riveting Dracula film.

In the 1992 version of *Dracula* (entitled *Bram Stoker's Dracula*) starring Gary Oldman, there are immediate differences from its predecessors, beginning with a prologue to Dracula's story set in the 1400's. In it, Dracula returns home from war, only to find his bride has committed suicide after being led to believe her beloved was killed

into a vampire. She has appeared in near all film versions of Dracula, always with a slightly different role.

in battle. Furious and heartbroken, Dracula renounces God and the church, vowing to return from the grave to avenge his darling with the might of the underworld. Over four hundred years, later, we encounter Dracula once again, when he captures a young Jonathan Harker, and, upon seeing a picture of Harker's fiancée Mina, who bears a striking resemblance to his long dead love, locks Jonathan away and heads immediately to England, determined to reunite with his long lost bride. Once there, he slowly enchants Mina with his captivating appearance and mannerisms, eventually reawakening her former memories. In the final scenes, a climactic battle between Dracula and those trying to save Mina from eternal damnation ensues. Dracula is injured, and retreats to a church with Mina, where they share one final kiss, just before Dracula asks her to give him peace, once and for all. She complies, but only with the hope that one day they will be reunited once again, and that this time, their encounter will be everlasting.

This portrayal of Dracula clearly shows him as a Byronic character, filled with brooding angst, bitter sorrow for his lost love, and anger at a world that allowed such a thing to happen to his beloved. In this version, there are several parallels between Count Dracula and Edward Cullen, outside of their obvious vampire connection. Both share an undying love with their significant others, and though both meet tribulations, they face them with unwavering strength and resolve. Count Dracula wades through "oceans of time" for his darling, while Edward constantly protects Bella from vampires that want her blood. In addition to this, although lonely and longing, both Byronic characters have reservations about imposing their own irreversible fate on their love ones. In one scene, Dracula and Mina share an intensely fervent kiss, and although Mina wishes to share in all aspects of his life, he declines, pulling her into a passionate embrace and whispering,

“I love you too much to condemn you.” In the same way, Bella makes it clear in the very first novel that she wishes to become a vampire so that she and Edward can share immortality together, but Edward is hesitant, wanting her to have the chance at life he never did. Though the abstinent Edward might be a completely different character than the blood-lusting Dracula, their powerful relationships make them strangely similar, and it becomes apparent that Edwards’s characterization fits perfectly with the evolution of vampires in popular culture *and* with the evolution of the Byronic hero.

Although, Edward’s gentle nature might be unfit when compared to more classic Byronic heroes, simply put, the Byronic hero of today is no longer dark. He is softer, less harsh, and more susceptible to change. With this new understanding of the Byronic tendencies, it becomes clear that Edward is not defined *by* the Byronic hero, rather, he is another character *by which* a Byronic hero might be defined. Edward is an addition to an already lengthy list of Byronic characters, each supplying their own twist on the nature of this complex character. He “contributes to the fashioning of the figure, interacting with, revising and determining the future path of [the] ‘unprecedented cultural phenomenon’ (Elfbein qtd. in Wootton 1) that is the Byronic hero.

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