

**Eric Hsu**

陳福仁教授

**19 Jan. 2011**

**A Loss Unbearable:**

**Byronic Heroes in Victorian Fiction**

The Byronic Hero is perhaps one of the most popular Romantic heroes. Coined by Lady Caroline Lamb, this term generally refers to the main characters in Lord Byron's works, like Manfred in *Manfred*, or characters who have similar characteristics as Byron. According to Peter L. Thorslev, with the fame of Byron's writings and Romanticism, the Byronic Hero has inspired many writers in different continents, becoming the prototype of numerous fiction characters around the world (3). However, during the Victorian era, Byronic characters have shown two separate developments in English fiction. Some of the Byronics are converted during their stories, and in the end give up their Byronic features, such as most of the Byronic characters in Charles Dickens' fictions (Harvey 315) or Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; others inherit the image of the "Gothic villain" (Poole 9) throughout the stories, like Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Few researches cast attention onto this problem. William R. Harvey has observed that Dickensian Byronic characters are converted, yet he discusses only why Dickens used the Byronics in fictions; Thorslev states that Byronic heroes in the Victorian period have lost their "state as hero" (187), but he still fails to explain why there is such a division in Byronic characters. The solution to this problem thus remains unclear. This paper will apply Lacanian psychoanalytical concept of "sexuation" to treat this problem. The transformed Victorian Byronic heroes can be related to masculine structure, and the untransformed Byronic heroes are to be associated with feminine structure. Yet while the two structures are two modes to treat a loss, and the Byronic Hero represents the Romantics in literature, the divided developments of the Victorian Byronic characters are to re-present

the loss of Romantic revolutionary passion in Victorian society.

Though it is common knowledge that the Byronic Hero is named after Lord Byron, characters who possess similar personalities as Byronic heroes can be traced back to John Milton (Thorslev 4), and Lord Byron have inherited and developed these characters. The Byronic Hero appears in many of Lord Byron's works, such as *The Corsair*, *Manfred*, and *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, exhibiting passionate, alien, mysterious, and gloomy spirits who refuses to yield to morals or social rules yet suffers from sins they commit. Being the most influential type of characters in Romantic era, the Byronic Hero is directly related to Romanticism. Romanticism is mostly associated with revolution. Industrial Revolution had inflicted social structural changes, yet the values and orders still remained out-dated and caused people of lower classes to suffer. Witnessing the injustices, the Romantics clamored for revolutions against the social and political rules passed down from the Enlightenment era. Due to their passionate personality and the image that they never surrender to oppressive social and moral orders, the Byronics have turned out to be the model of the Romantics. More than a fictional character, the Byronic Hero has been elevated to represent the Romantic revolutionary spirit.

However, in the Victorian period, the social atmosphere became hostile to the Byronics. The parliament Reform Act in 1832 had modified political power distribution to a more acceptable status, and a series of social-economical troubles which occurred after 1837 had greatly enhanced the requests for rationality, morality, and social stability. The passionate revolutionary spirit of the Romantics was thus unnecessary to the Victorian society; what's worse, the moral problem of the Byronics was attacked by Victorian writers. The Byronic Hero is often skeptical and defiant toward morals, but, since morality is one of the most important aspect of social unity, which Victorian people hoped to maintain, the Byronics have been harshly criticized. For example, Thomas Carlyle, one of the pioneering Victorian writers, urged his contemporaries to "[c]lose thy *Byron*; open thy *Goethe*" (146) in his *Sartor*

*Resartus*, because he observes that Byron's works condemn morality, while Goethe's approve it. Under such a social atmosphere, the Byronic Hero "survives only as a solitary and sensitive sufferer: with the loss of his titanic passions, his pride, and his certainty of self-identity, he loses also his status as hero" (Throslev 187).

The Byronic Hero had then developed into two categories: the converted and the unmodified, based on the standard that whether their Byronic features were pruned or not. Some of the Byronic characters are converted righteous in the end of the stories, for example, Dickens' Byronic heroes. Harvey points out that many of the characters in Charles Dickens' fictions are "characterized by ennui, restlessness, unrealized potential, and uncertainty of purpose" just as the Byronic Hero. But Harvey has also observed that most of these characters are no more than "dandies" or mere imitations of the Byronic Hero, such as David Copperfield and Pip, and only a few of the characters can be defined as Byronic Hero, for instance, James Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*, and Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* (307-08). After analyzing these characters, Harvey concludes that most of these Byronics are transformed upon their ends. The most obvious case is Sidney Carton, who cynically states "I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me" (Dickens 76) in the beginning of the story, helps Charles Darnay to escape and faces his own death, described in the end of the novel as died so peacefully that even looked "sublime and prophetic" (Dickens 351). Comparing to Byron's Manfred, who dies in great agony and pain, Sidney Carton is rather redeemed, and his death has marked his departure from Romantic Byronic characters.

Except for Dickens' characters, there are still many other transformed Byronic characters in Victorian novels. Among them, the most famous one is perhaps Edward Rochester (or Mr. Rochester) in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Mr. Rochester is undoubtedly Byronic. He is arrogant and does not care much about manners; he imprisons his legal wife and intends to marry Jane Eyre—both behaviors definitely violating social values and rules. However,

during the fire of Thornfield, Mr. Rochester does exhibit his nobility: he wakes the servants and goes up to the attic to save Bertha. And then

he wouldn't leave the house till every one else was out before him. As he came down the great staircase at last, after Mrs. Rochester had flung herself from the battlements, there was a great crash—all fell (C. Brontë 310-11).

These acts, especially his attempt to save Bertha, are often explained as the resurrection of Mr. Rochester's morality; however, if his morality has revived, then there is no need for his injury, or his blinded eye and crippled hand may bear the meaning that he is still not forgiven even though he has regained his morality. It might be better to explain that even though Mr. Rochester has revealed his nobility in saving others, his intention to save Bertha indeed has nothing to do with his nobility or morality; rather, the reason why Mr. Rochester wants to save Bertha is that he can not give up the embodiment of his Byronic personalities. Bertha is considered mad and dangerous. Once released, she will set passionate fire or villainously attack Rochester. The image of Bertha is the representation of the most powerful and destructive aspects of the Byronic Hero: passion and villainy. Mr. Rochester, though intending to choose the mild Jane Eyre, is bounded by Bertha, his legal wife, who represents his Byronic nature. Only by giving up Bertha can Mr. Rochester really marry Jane Eyre, but he finds it impossible to separate from his Byronic features. At the last fire, Rochester rushes back to save Bertha because he still wants to maintain his Byronic characteristics, but Bertha just jumps off the attic, marking the separation between Rochester and his Byronic features. The collapse of the house and the injuries of Mr. Rochester have further implied that Mr. Rochester is deformed—not just the appearance but also the structure of his personality. Since his Byronic parts are collapsed, Mr. Rochester is transformed to be a character that meets social expectations in the aspect of personality, and he can finally marry Jane Eyre.

Though many of the Byronic heroes are modified in Victorian era, there are still Byronic characters who are not transformed throughout the whole stories. The most significant

example must be Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff is villainous in the whole novel and even remains unredeemed after his death. Steven Vine discusses Heathcliff as

a trope of radical displacement: lacking a knowable origin (he appears, as if magically, from beneath the cloak of old Mr. Earnshaw's benefaction in a kind of mock nativity), Heathcliff comes from outside, from the other, introducing an instability into the world that precariously incorporates him, and he is never stably lodged in any of the social places he assumes. (Vine 341)

Thus Heathcliff becomes the embodiment of otherness in the book, intruding into not only the Earnshaws' and the Lintons' peaceful lives but the whole world. Interestingly, Heathcliff have the chance to be converted in the story once. When young Heathcliff observes that his uncivilized behaviors and appearances may affect his relationship with Catherine, he tells Nelly, one of the servants of *Wuthering Heights*, that "Nelly, make me decent, I'm going to be good" (E. Brontë 363). But this chance is ruined by Ellen Linton and Hindley Earnshaw, and Heathcliff remains unconverted. The relation between Heathcliff and Catherine also hinders him from being righteous. Vine suggests that young Catherine and Heathcliff have established a "Catherine-Heathcliff unity" (342) so much so that both of them can not separate with each other. The cruel behaviors of the returned Heathcliff are perhaps not Heathcliff's revenges to Catherine's betrayal, but rather the ways which Heathcliff applies to attract Catherine's love even after her death. To Heathcliff, it is the social order, represented by the Lintons and Hindley Earnshaw, which takes Catherine from him:

Cathy [Catherine] stayed at Thrushcross Grange five weeks: till Christmas. By that time her ankle was thoroughly cured, and her manners much improved. The mistress [Mrs. Earnshaw] visited her often in the interval, and commenced her plan of reform by trying to raise her self-respect with fine clothes and flattery, which she took readily. . . . (E. Brontë 361)

Catherine afterwards is no longer that Catherine which Heathcliff knows and can play with, but rather an esteemed "Miss Earnshaw." The social order has effectively damaged Heathcliff's relation with Catherine, thus whom Heathcliff wants to destroy are indeed the Lintons and Hindley Earnshaw who introduce social order in-between Heathcliff and Catherine.

Through the cases of Dickens' characters, Mr. Rochester, and Heathcliff, two separate diversions of the Byronic Hero in Victorian fiction can be observed: characters such as Dickens' Byronic characters and Mr. Rochester are transformed, while other ones like Heathcliff remain unconverted. To explain this phenomenon, a psychoanalytical method may be viable. Lacan in his seminar XX discussed "sexuation," which involves the two different structures related to *jouissance*: masculine structure and feminine structure. According to Bruce Fink, a Lacanian scholar, masculine structure operates through "jouissance of the drives," in other words, the "phallic jouissance" (37). Masculine structure is established upon exceptions—i.e. upon laws. Since the laws or the symbolic order imply that there is an exception, like the deceased Father in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, who has the power to transcend the laws and to have unlimited jouissance, people with masculine structure will tend to be regulated by the laws to defer or give up their phallic jouissance to attain the possibilities of having unlimited jouissance. Feminine structure, unlike the masculine one, operates through "jouissance of the Other" (Fink 37, Žižek 59). Feminine structure is based on something unspeakable, or something out of laws. All the existing jouissance of people with feminine structure are phallic jouissance, but there are still some types of jouissance that is not phallic jouissance. Since these types of jouissance are not phallic jouissance, they do not exist, but they can still be experienced; in other words, the jouissance of the Other is out of the symbolic order, such as language or laws, and thus "can only ex-sist, it cannot exist, for to exist it would have to be spoken" (Fink 39). People with feminine structure may also enter the symbolic order, but they will find that there is always something that the order can not

make sense of, which turns out to be their enjoyment.

If applied such a categorizing way, the converted Byronic Hero may be related to masculine structure, and those Byronics who remain untamed should be associated with feminine structure. The converted Byronic characters in their stories embrace social and moral values, rules and orders, keeping on being gazed, identified, or recognized by general people, reassuring their existence in the symbolic order. It is true that these characters have earned their own reputations at last. Sydney Carton is going to be remembered by people forever, and Mr. Rochester has finally married Jane Eyre. They have paid some prices—injuries or even their lives; in other words, they are somehow "castrated." But their existence in the social order is ensured. As for the characters with feminine structure, though they can "potentially have both [social reputation and their Byronic personalities]" (Fink 41), what they celebrate is perhaps their Byronic parts, or their otherness. Although Heathcliff has once accepted the social rules, he soon finds that there is a part of him which is outside the laws yet closely linked to Catherine. He wants Catherine back, but he sticks so much to his otherness that all his attempts to win Catherine's love are rather villainous.

Still, it should be noticed that the masculine and feminine structures are indeed two modes of symptoms to deal with a certain trauma or structural loss. However, the attempt to directly investigate what the loss is in Byronic characters may be fruitless, because fictions are just re-presenting parts of reality, and thus may not cover all the aspects of the whole Victorian society. The Byronic heroes live and discourse only according to their stories, and the world of their stories are only partial reflections of reality. To discuss structural losses through the Byronic characters may be to miss the forest for the trees. The Byronics may not even really have any structural loss; instead, it should be the Romantics, who are represented by the Byronic Hero in literature, suffer from such a loss or trauma. During the Romantic period, with social and political power distribution problems occurring after the Industrial Revolution, social and political reforms or even revolutions were approved by the Romantics.

The revolutionary power of the Romantic people was not limited in social-political aspects, but also in art. The Romantic poets, painters, and musicians sought to depart from Neoclassicism and develop new aesthetics to directly express strong feelings. The norms established since the Enlightenment age had been challenged or even replaced by revolutionary new orders. There were pangs and struggles, but the intellects were devoted to fight against social injustices, the social atmosphere was progressive. The Byronic Hero, which rooted in Milton's works, blossomed in such a circumstance. However, when it came to the Victorian period, although the society was still under some reformations, the whole social-political structure was gradually stabilized. The revolutionary passion of the Romantics became excessive and even unnecessary to the Victorian society. What the Victorian society needed to maintain the internal unity of the empire is morality and stability, both of which were exclusive to the spirits of the Romantics. Also, in the fields of art, with the rising of "objective" Realism and Impressionism, the passion of the artists were fading out in textual and visual arts.

The Romantics thus faced a major crisis that they were being othered by the Victorian social structure. They were no longer leading roles in the Victorian society; what was worse, the whole society was excluding them, diminishing their stances in the political-social structures. Under such an anxiety of being the others, the Romantics had taken two different modes to form their new identities in the Victorian society, and their attempts would be reflected on the Byronic characters—the Romantics' doubles in literature. As the Byronic characters represented them, the Romantics with masculine structure tended to give up their otherness—their Romantic traits—to reassure their existence in the Victorian society. Since they wanted to be recognized by and inscribed in the symbolic order, they would sacrifice their otherness. But it might be impossible for the Romantics to let go of all parts of their Romantic spirit, they might still need to make choices. Thus the struggle of the masculine-structured Romantics was often about to choose from themselves or the whole



social order, a choice between their spirits and their symbolic existence. For every bit of their otherness sacrificed, they would tend to fill the lack by gaining the identifications from the social order, for example, being more righteous; but since these attempts were just symptoms that can only provide temporary satisfactions rather than really filling up the lack, the Romantics would only be more and more transformed and merged into the Victorian social order.

As for those with feminine structure, though they might appear to obey the social order, they tended to represent the otherness of the whole structure by retaining their Romantic personalities. These Romantics did not really care about their symbolic existence in the order. They might enter the social order and submit to some degree, but they seldom totally surrendered. Facing the crisis of being othered, feminine-structured Romantics might also apply the standards of the Victorian society to examine themselves so that they would know how they could play with the rules set up by the Victorians, but they did not truly give up their Romantic spirit. By going into the order with their otherness, these Romantics wanted to be the otherness, or to become the embodiment of such an otherness, of the symbolic order. They might well notice that the society had been different from that of Romantic times, and they knew that it was their Romantic spirit that was being excluded by the Victorians, but they still went into the society with their otherness, because these Romantics who obtained feminine structure wanted to complete the world. They intended to be the otherness which were lacked in the social order, but they could never exist as concepts, thus their attempts might not fully satisfy them; but from being the other within the order, these Romantics found their enjoyment, so they kept on trying, and their ways to maintain themselves in the social order might grow to be more and more sinister. These Romantics, as their Byronic representations in literature, might be horrible to their contemporaries. People could not know what and why these Romantics enjoyed, because what was enjoyed was beyond the structure; but still they enjoyed, and thus became more and more monstrous.

Thus the loss is not of the Byronic Hero but of the Romantics, who are represented by the Byronic characters in Victorian fiction. Considering the difference between the social-political atmospheres, rules, and order of the Romantics and the Victorians, the structural loss which causes the Byronic Hero to develop two different psycho-structures, the masculine and feminine structures, should be the Romantic spirit, or the revolutionary passion. With this lack in the social structure, the Romantics were forced to adapt into the new Victorian society, and they had taken two separate ways, to give up their Romantic spirit—their otherness to the new order—or try to be the lacked otherness in the structure. And the attempts taken by the Romantics are represented in fiction through the Byronic Hero, so that it can be observed that the Byronic characters have exhibited two faces. From the representations can phenomena be acquired, but not by understanding the historical context of the subjects can explanations be made. The split Byronic Heroes in Victorian fiction is due to the structural loss of the revolutionary passion in the society. However, because only a few of Victorian fictions are discussed, this conclusion may fail to totally cover the truth, thus further detailed researches are still needed to examine or modified the conclusion of this paper. Also, since the Byronic Hero is closely related to Gothic villains, this paper should contribute to future studies on Victorian Gothic fiction, which, not being the subject of this paper, is not discussed here.

#### Works Cited

- Barnard, Suzanne, and Bruce Fink. eds. *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*. New York: State U of New York P, 2002. Print.
- Brontë, Anne, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë. *The Brontë Sisters: Three Novels:*

- Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and Agnes Grey. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. New York: Bantam, 1989. Print.
- Fink, Bruce. "Knowledge and Jouissance." Barnard and Fink 21-46.
- Harvey, William R. "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24.3 (1969): 305-16. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.
- Poole, Gabriele. "The Byronic Hero, Theatricality and Leadership." *The Byronic Journal* 38.1 (2010): 7-18. *Project MUSE*. Web. 14 Dec. 2010.
- Thorslev, Peter L. *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1962. Print.
- Vine, Steven. "The Wuther of the Other in *Wuthering Heights*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49.3 (1994): 339-59. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Dec. 2010.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "The Real of Sexual Difference." Barnard and Fink 57-76.