Mad, bad and dangerous to know

– the Byronic hero in 19th-century fiction

A Level student Bethany Sims considers the appeal of the dangerous, brooding, charismatic ‘Byronic’ hero for nineteenth-century fiction writers and readers ever since.

Byron said that Glenarvon, the novel written by his lover, Lady Catherine Lamb, did not capture its muse, who had not sat long enough for a good likeness. Byron is a subject who, it seems, was incapable of sitting still. Whilst there are many portraits of him, most are sketches which give the impression the artist has worked furiously, for fear that his subject will disappear. The sitter is windswept. He looks distracted and unlikely to remain in the frame for long. Yet, despite his threats to dissolve on the breeze, Byron’s image is arresting. His brooding, unruly-haired profile is iconic.

Byron appears to embody wild and seductive masculinity and it is because he is so romantically aloof, that fictional literary characters with similar enigmatic and impressive qualities have been called ‘Byronic’. Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights and Victor Frankenstein in  Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein have been so-called for their resemblance to the notorious nineteenth-century aristocrat.

**Heathcliff and Byron**
There is something deeply ironic about the parallel drawn between Heathcliff and Byron because Heathcliff, in many ways, parodies an aristocrat. Heathcliff’s rich apparel is a defensive front:

his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat.

His genteel dress makes him look as if he is wearing someone else’s clothes. Heathcliff guards himself with mysteriously acquired wealth but is unable to come across as anything other than a lower-class pretender. He has ‘black eyes’, is ‘dark’, ‘dirty, ragged’, and ‘as black as t’chimbley’. Yet, although he has the same shadowiness as Byron it seems to be because of his Romany origins. He is a real outsider, a ‘gypsy’. When he first appears he is said to be talking ‘gibberish’, in his more colloquial native tongue. Byron’s quirks, particularly his infatuation with orientalism were, however, born out of an almost childish enjoyment of novelty, of dressing up. Byron was a high society man trying to get out. More like Frankenstein he constructed an image of himself as a libertine and wanderer. It was not his natural domain. Heathcliff on the other hand exists on the fringes of society, and is forced into his ‘misanthropist’s heaven’.

Nelly, Brontë’s gossipy narrator, waspishly tells Lockwood about Heathcliff’s obscure birth which, according to a conservative social value system, makes him unacceptable. He is initially referred to as ‘a stupid little thing’ and even ‘it’. Earnshaw talks of inquiring ‘for its owner’ like you might for a stray dog. There is a sense that in ‘christening’ Heathcliff the family attempt to tame him by making him socially acceptable. However, this is self-defeating, as it adds another ghoulish layer to his background because the name is that of another son who died in childhood.

Although Heathcliff is unappealing to many of the other characters in the novel, for the reader he becomes the ‘wolfish’ underdog. He is intriguingly enigmatic, found by Old Earnshaw on a hundred and twenty mile round trip to Liverpool in three days by foot (a journey which is neither physically probable nor much elaborated upon). This is food for the imagination, like something out of a fairytale. The journey is described magically as a ‘spell’. Heathcliff is introduced as an otherworldly being, as ‘a gift from God’. Nelly at one point refers to him as a ‘lamb’ but this seems so inappropriate a comparison that it is easy to dismiss Nelly’s interpretation as naively basic. Heathcliff is almost feral. His name is, disconcertingly, not even a recognisable human name. He does not even have a separate Christian and surname. Indeed, Heathcliff fulfils the prophesy of his name, behaving inhumanely. It is difficult not to be slightly disturbed by the lack of emotion he demonstrates when physically abused by Hindley. Although we sympathise with him as Hindley’s victim, there is something cold-blooded about his lack of retaliation.

**Frankenstein and Byron**
More akin to Byron, Frankenstein is from a ‘most distinguished’ family, has money, friends and property, the social instruments which his monster laments being deprived of. Yet Frankenstein throws away his advantages in pursuit of ‘glory and ‘self-satisfaction’. Frankenstein’s suffering is self-inflicted:

I have drawn down a horrible curse upon my head.

By choosing to create a ‘wretched creature’ he chooses his own fate. His self-destructive decision is not unlike Byron’s choice to fight for liberation of the Greeks from Turkish rule, a cause for which he was under no obligation to risk his life. This could be interpreted as proof of moral fortitude, but it seems to have been, at least partially, an act of self-aggrandisement. He led a band of men which he named after himself: ‘Byron’s Brigade’.
Victor Frankenstein’s very name implies that the character has similar aspirations to fame. It is unconventional but with a Latinate dignity, suggesting he is destined to be victorious and be commemorated in stone. In his quest to be immortalised, to become a godly ‘creator’, Frankenstein breaches sacred boundaries. In his Promethean attempt to discover ‘the spark of life’ he trespasses on the divine. His creation of the monster, his ‘filthy’ replica, is arguably a narcissistic act, as the monster forms a shady sort of double. The ‘figure...in the gloom’ transforms Frankenstein into ‘a friendless outcast’.

Byron is remembered for his wanderlust; he is the original gentleman traveller. Frankenstein’s journey across Europe as a ‘divine wanderer’ is almost a low-spirited Grand Tour, a pilgrimage with no clear end. We feel that he and Heathcliff, banished to the moors, are lost souls, similar to the Ancient Mariner, doomed to wander the Earth, haunting vast and belittling landscapes. Frankenstein is lost in the stormy alpine valleys. Shelley presents us with a speck under the ‘black and comfortless sky’, as if Frankenstein is standing on the edge of hell or oblivion. He watches ‘lightnings playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figure’, and ‘the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific’, in sublime fascination.

Heathcliff is so beastly and wild that he almost becomes part of the wild Yorkshire moorland. There is something inherently deviant and unnatural, or rather too natural about Heathcliff. He usurps Hindley’s black colt and, at one point, is even described as having a colt’s mane himself. This strong animalistic association gives us an impression of him as an unbridled and anonymous being rather than a character. Charlotte Brontë may have been too apologetic in claiming her sister never meant to create Heathcliff in her preface to the 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights, but I think her evaluation of Heathcliff as untamed landscape, ‘a crag...half statue, half rock’ is perfectly apt. In fact, Heathcliff is aligned with ‘bleak, hilly, coal country’. He appears to be an incarnation of the windy and rugged Wuthering Heights.

Byron’s notoriety for his sexual conquests is also echoed in Heathcliff and Frankenstein. They appear to own the women in the texts. Frankenstein promises to ‘deliver’ to his monster a female, as a possession might be delivered, and Elizabeth waits faithfully at home and ‘acquiesce[s]’ to Frankenstein’s will. Cathy declares ‘I am Heathcliff’, arguably suggesting she abdicates her independence from him.

Yet, neither Frankenstein nor Heathcliff remain faithful to one woman. Heathcliff has relationships with both Cathy and Isabella. Frankenstein on the other hand, abandons Elizabeth for science, his monster, and Clerval. Equally, Frankenstein’s pursuit of knowledge is depicted in sexually loaded terms. He is a ‘slave of passion’ attempting to ‘penetrate the secrets of nature’. The moment of melodramatic climax, in which the monster is created, occurs in a phallic tower. Byron similarly invited the monstrous indoors at his inherited house, Newstead. He treated the place irreverently, notably keeping a bear and using the dining hall for pistol practice. In the same way, Wuthering Heights is full to the eaves with hunting dogs and has primitively painted guns, symbolic of aggressive masculinity, mounted on the walls.

**The Byronic hero**
Lady Catherine Lamb famously described Byron as ‘Mad, bad and dangerous to know’ and he has been mercilessly caricatured as the ‘Wicked Lord Byron’. Yet, Byron is considered more as a character type than as a real historical figure, hence this label: ‘The Byronic Hero’. To love such an anti-hero is, as Cathy discovers in loving Heathcliff, like ‘embracing thorn’. I think the essence of the appeal that Heathcliff, Frankenstein – and Byron himself – have is their promise of dangerous pleasure. They are attractive  to women in the same way as lanterns are to moths, particularly because we only ever catch a glance of them, never being quite sure if we have seen them looming in the dark. They skulk in the margins. Frankenstein’s narrative is framed within Walton’s, Heathcliff’s voice is only ever heard in sparse moments of reported and indirect speech, and still these men somehow manage to dominate the text with their presence. They are remote and unknowable, yet criminally notorious, so we are left always wanting more, to know what is at the centre of their heart of darkness. Whatever he truly was, Byron has projected the ever-moving shadow of his reputation into Gothic literature thus ensuring his immortality:

He left a name to all succeeding times,
Link’d with one virtue and a thousand crimes.
The Corsair

Bethany Sims

This article first appeared in emagazine 34.