

Lord Byron, the Original Goth

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After the Columbine shootings in 1999, schools across the country began cracking down on all things “Goth.” At Valdosta High School in Georgia, Goth make-up and black clothes were banned, even though the school colors were black and gold. The principal stated that while black clothes were appropriate, the “heavy black make-up” was not. At Wilbur Middle School in Wichita, twelve students started the year dressed in the style that was associated with Goth, prompting the principal to ban such outfits in the name of making others feel comfortable. These actions were supported by Sara Trollinger, whose 2001 book, *Unglued and Tattooed: How to Save Your Teen from Raves, Ritalin, Goth, Body Carving, GHB, Sex and 12 Other Emerging Threats*, was hawked on TV and given out at parent-teacher meetings all across the country. Goth, she writes, is a “dark and perverse culture that loves shocking the adult population.”

Funny, almost two hundred years earlier people expressed the same feelings toward Lord Byron, one of the leading poets of the Romantic Movement and perhaps the world’s original Goth.

Destined to be both revered and reviled, George Gordon Byron was born in London in 1788. Ten years later, he inherited the “Lord” title from his great uncle who died and left him an estate in Nottinghamshire. As an adolescent, he turned towards poetry and published his first volume in 1806. Upon the debut of his third book, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron’s fame grew virtually overnight and he became one of the leaders of the Romantic Movement. Handsome and elegant, Lord Byron was the first international celebrity. He had pale skin and deep, expressive gray eyes. Although he had a deformed foot and walked with a limp, women loved his dark, curly mane and often threw themselves at his feet. Some even went to so far as to send the famed poet locks of hair in hopes of seducing him. Caroline Lamb, who would lose her virginity and her reputation to Byron, wrote in her diary: “That beautiful pale face is my fate.”

Lord Byron had a penchant for black clothes and drinking wine out of cups fashioned from human skulls. He was prone to melancholy and bouts of depression. His sexual exploits became legendary. One jilted lover described him as “mad, bad and dangerous to know.” Enemies embellished his reputation, some accusing him of incest with his half-sister Augusta. His likeness was burned in effigy as was his books. One critic, Robert Southey, went so far as to describe Lord Byron as belonging to the “Satanic School” of literature because the “publication of a lascivious book is one of the worst offences which can be committed against the well-being of society.” Multiple scandals and an unconventional life forced Byron to live in self-imposed exile.

Even away from England, Byron received the wrath of critics who saw his poetry as immoral. After *Don Juan* was published in 1819, critics decried the poet, claiming he was luring young people with the beauty of his words, only to expose them to his “depraved heart.” The poem, wrote one reviewer, was “revolting to humanity” and another claimed that Byron was using his art to “trample down morality.”

Those who focused more on the dark side of life were often called “Gothic” romanticists. This included Lord Byron who penned flawed, brooding characters with unpredictable personalities. His characters were often fueled by mysterious events in their past, such as the main character in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

*Yet oft-times in his maddest mirthful mood
Strange pangs would flash along Childe Harold's
brow,
As if the memory of some deadly feud
Or disappointed passion lurk'd below:
But this none knew, nor haply cared to know;
For his was not that open, artless soul
That feels relief by bidding sorrow flow,
Nor sought he friend to counsel or condole,
Whate'er this grief mote be, which he could not
control.*

Byron's characters tended to be tormented and rebellious individuals who live self-destructive lives. This archetype quickly became known as the "Byronic Hero" and could be found in literature throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Modern examples include Snape in the *Harry Potter* series, Edward Cullen in *Twilight* and Bruce Wayne of Batman fame. In a case of life imitating art, Byron himself came to exemplify his own literary creation. He died in 1824, fighting for Greek independence. According to legend, his heart was buried in Greece while his body interred back in England. The poet had finally come home, but was refused burial at Westminster Abbey due to the scandals that plagued his life.

In 1979, the post-punk band Joy Division was the first to receive the more modern label of "Goth" when a critic described the band's music as "dancing music with gothic overtones." Ian Curtis fronted Joy Division; his lonely and troubled life the inspiration for many of the songs on the band's two albums. "Isolation," written by Curtis, is typical of the band's lyrics and could have had a home in the age of Romanticism:

*Mother I tried, please believe me
I'm doing the best that I can,
I'm ashamed of the things
I've been put through;
I'm ashamed of the person I am
But if you could just see the beauty,
these things I could never describe
This is my one consolation
This is my wonderful prize*

Ian Curtis, struggling with depression and fame, took his own life in 1980. Nevertheless, Joy Division became the epicenter of the modern Goth subculture, which included other bands such as Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees and the Cure. Eulogies for Curtis echoed the Byronic Hero of the 19th century. "With his awkward gait and sensible shirts," wrote one author, "Ian Curtis was always an outsider in his own lifetime: only his lyrics gave the world a small insight into the complexities of his mind."

Like their 19th century counterparts, modern Goths celebrate the mysterious, dark side of life.

Misunderstood and often vilified by the media, Goths don dark clothes and lose themselves in tales of horror and the supernatural. Sentimental and nostalgic, Goths were erroneously blamed for the spate of school shootings in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2002, Representative Sam Graves from Missouri secured over \$250,000 in public funds to fight "Goth culture" and "identify Goth cultural leaders that are preying on our kids." In *Unglued and Tattooed*, author Sara Trollinger blames Goth for creating serial killers such as the notorious "Son of Sam." Like Robert Southey's treatment of Byron, Trollinger is prone to exaggeration and links Goths to all things Satanic. "Goths worship death," she writes. "Some even participate in Satanism and vampirism....They will drink blood as a sort of spiritual communion."

From vampires to brooding anti-heroes, Lord Byron is alive and well in modern culture. His unconventional life and the fear of how his words would affect the youth, Lord Byron faced the same scrutiny that modern Goths have faced. With black clothes, a fondness for the macabre, a love of life and a fascination for death, Lord Byron, connected to the modern world through strands of literary allusion and culture, is undoubtedly the world's original Goth. And perhaps the first modern vampire as well.

At a rented villa on Lake Geneva in 1816, Lord Byron and his guests told ghost stories in the light of the fire, challenging each other to write the best tale of horror. Out of that meeting, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* and John Polidori, Byron's personal doctor, wrote *The Vampyre*, one of the first in this genre. Polidori's vampire was not the vampire of the old world, but a wealthy, fiendish nobleman who preys on the unsuspecting in high society. The vampire, Lord Ruthven, has cold, grey eyes and an insatiable desire for women. Polidori based his vampire on Lord Byron. When the novel was released to the public, a rumor spread, most likely by the publishers hoping to sell more copies, that Lord Byron was an actual vampire. He had murdered his mistress, people were told, and drank her blood from a cup made from her skull.