

Byronic Heroes and the Women who Love Them

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For my thesis I am interested in researching fictional Byronic heroes and the women who have relationships with them. Beginning with Lord Byron himself, who was (in)famously described as “mad, bad and dangerous to know”, I will then research a handful of Byronic heroes in literature. However, my main focus will be on the women who become romantically involved with these men. I am interested in the identities of these women, what draws them to “dangerous” prospective mates, and the effect these relationships have on them. Who were they before they loved these men? Who do they become during and after their relationships?

The foundation of my thesis is based on my love of Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre*, which has fascinated me since my freshman year of high school. The gothic elements of the novel, including the requisite imposing, potentially haunted estate, a brooding Byronic love interest, and a pale, virginal heroine, are not only supplemented, but later disassembled by complex character development and Bronte’s almost joyful

embrace of the flaws and chaos which reside in all of her characters. Nothing is what it seems in *Jane Eyre*, least of all Jane herself, who strikes out on all occasions against the confines of a world which has no place for the passions of a “poor, obscure, plain and little” governess.

My interest in *Jane Eyre* spread to a number of other works which have Byronic heroes within them. *Wuthering Heights*, the other famous and controversial work of a Bronte, written by Emily, seethes with chaos, violence and the agonized, primal relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine. As Byronic as Heathcliff is, trapped in a home he hates and violent to those around him, Catherine matches his capacity for senseless cruelty. Cruelty and violence are a constant theme in Byronic characters and in the relationships they have, which is well elucidated by Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a raw exploration of Rochester’s relationship with his first wife, or “the madwoman in the attic”, from her point of view.

The character of the modern vampire, exhibited in such works as *Interview with the Vampire*, *True Blood*, and *Twilight*, is an interesting offshoot of the Byronic mold. While Stoker’s *Dracula* was a parasite devoid of morality, the vampire myth has evolved to create characters who struggle with their homicidal urges and who are capable of redemption. They are in many ways a perfect example of the Byronic hero, in that they are an extreme contradiction. They want companionship and love from humans as strongly as they desire to kill them. They are beautiful yet deadly. They live forever, yet their immortality is dependent upon the mortality of humans.

Another constant in the plot arcs of stories involving Byronic heroes is the attraction they hold for women. Coleridge described Lord Byron’s smile as “the opening of the gate of heaven”, yet Byron brought ruin to all of the women who loved him. In the novels I am using, while the relationships do not always end as badly as in Byron’s life, they often force the female characters to reevaluate their own morality. I believe that for these women, the encounters they have with Byronic heroes are defining experiences of an epic nature. The women are destroyed or saved at the close of their tales, having had to look at the darkest parts of themselves through the mirror that is the Byronic hero. The woman is the crux in the story of these heroes, her internal chaos deciding the outcome of the action just as much as the more physically active, often aggressive role of the Byronic hero.



Mia Wasikowka in Focus
Feature's *Jane Eyre* (2011)