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LORD BYRON'S "DARKNESS":
ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
the University of North Carolina in
partial fulfillment of the require-
ments for the degree of Master of
Arts in the Department of English.

Chapel Hill
1977

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER AFI 77-79	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER (9)
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Lord Byron's "Darkness": Analysis and Interpretation,		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Masters Thesis
7. AUTHOR(s) 2d Lt David M. Mazurowski		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER 12
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS AFIT Student at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill NC		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS AFIT/CI WPAFB OH 45433		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) (12) 590		12. REPORT DATE 1977
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 55 pages
		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES JERRAL F. GUESS, Captain, USAF Director of Information, AFIT APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE AFR 190-17.		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		

ABSTRACT

DAVID MICHAEL MAZUROWSKI. Lord Byron's "Darkness": Analysis and Interpretation (Under the direction of RICHARD H. FOGLE.)

→ "Darkness," a short poem Byron wrote in 1816, is a dream vision of the end of the universe. Byron creates a swift movement of Time through the use of blank verse, enjambment, and punctuation. The poem's gloomy and depressing tone is directly related to the personal depression Byron suffered from during his first summer in Switzerland, after he left England for the last time. The contempt for man displayed in the poem occurs in many of Byron's works. "Darkness" is one of Byron's bitterest works, however, as man is reduced to a bestial state where no love, compassion, or heroic action exists. ↗

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INTRODUCTION

During the April of 1816 Lord Byron left England for the continent, never to return. He spent the summer in the company of various friends, including a long stay in Switzerland. In July, after having met Shelley for the first time, Byron wrote a poem entitled "Prometheus," praising this mythic hero for strengthening "Man with his own mind."¹ The poet admits to a darker side of this increased knowledge:

And man in portions can foresee
His own funereal destiny
His wretchedness, and his resistance,
And his sad unallied existence.²

In another poem Byron wrote during this same month he explores the "funereal destiny" of man in greater detail. He called this imaginative vision of the end of time and the destruction of the universe "Darkness."

The subject of the world's end does not occur often in Byron's work. However, Byron at nineteen had written a poem "with visions of the crushing chaos of an expiring world and a sun growing cold."³ In this short piece, "Translation from Horace," an unfeeling

¹ Lord Byron, "Prometheus," The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 390.

² Byron, "Prometheus," p. 390.

³ Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., Byron: The Record of a Quest (Hamden, Conn.: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 200.

Jove is seen "hurtling his lightnings from above," with the brutal result:

The flames of an expiring world,
Again in crashing chaos roll'd,
In vast promiscuous ruin hurl'd,
Might light his glorious funeral pile:
Still dauntless 'midst the wreck of earth he'd smile.⁴

This early conception of the end of time anticipates "Darkness." Here Jove is uncaring and almost sadistic, smiling at the destruction he has created. In "Darkness" no deity appears at all, leaving man on his own in the face of universal chaos. The imagery of the two poems also links them together. Here, as in "Darkness," light and fire imagery are used to parallel the expiration of all life on earth. Finally, the language of this early poem reflects the frightening universal destruction of "Darkness" with its phrases "crashing chaos" and "vast promiscuous ruin."

"Darkness" is a terrifying poem, not only for its nightmarish vision of the end of the world, but also for its bleak outlook on mankind. Marchand summarizes the poem in one sentence: "'Darkness' pictures with inmitigable cynicism and despair the unheroic end of the last men on a dying planet."⁵ Lovell comments on the poem's dark tone, proclaiming that "Byron early enrolled in the Graveyard School of poetry, and he is one of the greatest masters of the language of desolation and black melancholy."⁶ But some critics

⁴ Lord Byron, "Translation from Horace," The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 23.

⁵ Leslie A. Marchand, Byron's Poetry: A Critical Introduction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 128.

⁶ Lovell, p. 254.

have not found Byron's dark view stimulating or masterful, finding instead that the entire poem is distasteful. Sir Walter Scott, for example, found the images so confusing that they "confound and weary the ordinary reader, and baffle the comprehension even of those more accustomed to the flights of a poetic muse."⁷

Other critics have dismissed "Darkness" as a mental purgative Byron wrote only to relieve his maddening depression. Charles du Bos claims all of Byron's work is a mental escape:

This is why, writing solely for relief, though finding that outlet essential to him--for the act of writing more than once in his life represented the only antidote against the temptation of suicide--his sense of relief does not last, does not heal, above all does not liberate.⁸

This claim is not totally accurate. The bitter and depressing tone of "Darkness" is certainly related to Byron's personal problems after the emotional separation from his wife, child, and half-sister Augusta. In addition, Byron later wrote that he contemplated suicide during this period. Yet while the tone of this poem falls under the shadow of the poet's depression, the content presents a theme often repeated in his work: a vigorous contempt for mankind.

The first chapter of this paper will be a detailed account of Byron's creative use of form. Byron's flexible use of blank verse establishes unity and a sense of the flow of Time. He employs enjambment and punctuation to reinforce this swift movement of Time within

⁷ Sir Walter Scott, Review of The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems, Quarterly Review, 16 (1816), p. 204.

⁸ Charles du Bos, Byron and the Need of Fatality, trans. Ethel Colburn Mayne (New York: Putnam, 1931), p. 18.

the poem. I will discuss also the poem's major strength--the powerful imagery in which Byron imagines the end of the universe.

In the second chapter I will consider the tone of "Darkness." Byron uses strong negative words to create a tone of depression and despair. This tone undoubtedly arises from the personal problems facing him at this time: his financial problems, and the separation from his wife, daughter, and half-sister Augusta. Comparing "Darkness" with three other poems he wrote during this period, "The Dream," The Prisoner of Chillon, and the third canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, one finds similar tones of darkness and melancholy.

Finally, in the third chapter I will discuss the content of "Darkness." Byron presents man as a savage, fighting unheroically for survival. Through the events of the poem one sees a growing contempt for man; as the end draws near man mingles with the birds, serpents, and beasts, and all die ingloriously. This scorn for man is not a unique theme. I will look at several other works which deal with man in a similar fashion. Characters in some of the Romantic verse tales, such as The Giaour and Mazeppa, have a bitter feeling toward man, as does the narrator in the third and fourth cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Then I will discuss these views in Manfred, Cain, Sardanapalus, and Marino Faliero, since the major characters in each of these plays is contemptuous of man and human society.

CHAPTER I

POETIC TECHNIQUES

Byron employs several poetic techniques to unify "Darkness" and to create a sense of Time passing away. The poem's blank verse creates the feeling of Time beating wildly, then slowing to a stop as the world's destruction is completed. In addition to the verse form, Byron uses enjambment, punctuation, and alliteration to reinforce the sense of fast-flowing Time, running down as the poem ends. Finally, one of Byron's strongest poetic techniques, the use of imagery, must be considered. The archetypal images in "Darkness" are powerful and terrifying; they provide a coherent link between the form and subject of the poem. Byron shifts the images in the course of the poem, from light, movement, and life to darkness, stillness, and death. These shifts reflect the sense of Time's end created by the verse form and enjambment, while also reflecting the death of the entire universe.

Byron's blank verse does not consist of continuous lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter; the lines rarely scan easily. Some have described his blank verse as "loose" or "uncertain."¹ John Addington Symonds, at the end of the nineteenth century, condemned Byron's

¹ John A. Symonds, Blank Verse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), p. 63.

blank verse, concluding he "needed rhyme as an assistance to his defective melody. He did not feel that inner voice which is the soul of true blank verse and sounding prose."² Yet Symond's requirements are too harsh; most critics have adopted more lenient requirements for acceptable blank verse. Coleridge, for example, advocated flexibility in blank verse poetry.

Herbert Read, after studying Coleridge's remarks in Biographia Literaria summarizes Coleridge's views on blank verse: ". . . Basically it is a direct and even a prosaic expression of the poet's thoughts, with a rhythmic structure of five accents to the line."³ Read further defines blank verse as a "a particular configuration of rhythm, an original choice of epithets and images, and an overall fusion of all these constituent elements in an effortless utterance."⁴ Byron's blank verse lines easily fall within the limits of Read's definition. His lines achieve a flowing, "effortless" rhythm in parts of the poem. For example, these lines from the beginning of the poem have a calm iambic rhythm:

Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chilled into a selfish prayer for light.⁵

This iambic meter does not last for long, however.

² Symonds, p. 64.

³ Herbert Read, The True Voice of Feeling, Studies in English Romantic Poetry (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 29.

⁴ Read, p. 29.

⁵ Lord Byron, "Darkness," The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 388. Further references appear parenthetically by line number in the text.

Time, after this smooth, regular beat, soon changes to a faster, different pace. As men run wildly to preserve light and their lives, Time runs like a clock gone wild. Byron emphasizes this swift passage of Time with stark, five-beat lines and mid-line pauses, which contrast with the iambic beats of the opening. For example, note these lines describing the death and famine on earth:

All earth was but one thought--and that was Death
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
Of famine fed upon all entrails--men
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh (ll. 42-45).

These lines read quickly, creating a sense of on-rushing Time. Byron does not employ complex metaphors or difficult ideas that require thought. So the earth's destruction occurs rapidly in the mind, as rapidly as Byron envisioned it. At the very end of the poem, however, Byron returns to the slower-paced, more controlled lines of iambic pentameter. The effect of this return to regular iambic rhythm is the creation of a mood much like the calm after the storm; Time runs down slowly to its final end. Notice the calmness in the following description of the dying elements:

The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The Moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air (ll. 78-80).

Just as the poem's images go from life to death, Time goes from swiftness to slow, dying regularity.

Byron's blank verse has aided in creating unity in two ways. First, the use of blank verse throughout the work helps to weave the distinct images and ideas together. Moreover, Byron employs the verse form to link the poem's rhythms to its content: the blank

verse reflects the major movements in the poem, as swift-flowing Time, activity and life turn to slowing Time, death and stillness.

Byron's use of enjambment further contributes to the fast pace created by the flexible blank verse. "Darkness" has eighty-two lines, and thirty-eight of these lines, almost half the total, have no end punctuation. This technique achieves two goals. First, the enjambed lines noticeably quicken the pace. The following lines illustrate the feeling of speed caused by enjambed lines:

The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled;
And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel, and looked up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky (11.22-29).

One can see the frenzied activity of the men, as they madly rush about gathering fuel. The tempo of the six enjambed lines reflects this frantic motion. Byron's placement of the enjambed lines also reinforces the action in the poem. All of the activity takes place in the first sixty-five lines, and thirty-five of these lines are enjambed. In direct contrast, Byron describes the end of all movement and life in the last seventeen lines. Only three of these lines have no end punctuation. So the enjambed lines mirror the shift from activity and life to stillness and death which occurs in the narration.

Byron's use of punctuation, especially periods, affects the pace, too. The poem has only six sentences. Byron allows no time to pause to rest once the narration begins. The small number of sentences, acting together with the large number of enjambed lines,

makes a reading of the poem an image of the irreversible process of destruction Byron imagines. So the punctuation reflects the feeling of hopelessness and despair found in the content of "Darkness."

Byron relies on colons and dashes to form these extended sentences. Eight colons and seventeen dashes appear in the work. Primarily these punctuation marks allow Byron to move from clause to clause without starting a new sentence. Yet they serve another purpose: they prevent the poem from becoming repetitious. Byron achieves variety and spontaneity with his punctuation, creating pauses and rests within the rhythms of the poem. He has molded the verse form into the context of the poem. The colons and dashes, combined with the enjambed lines, force the poem to read as if it were an actual dream being related.

Another technical device Byron uses is alliteration. Alliteration helps provide the unity lost in the unrhymed verse form. Notice the unifying effect gained by repetition of f and c sounds:

A fearful hope was all the World contain'd;
Forests were set on fire--but hour by hour
They fell and faded--and the crackling trunks
Extinguished with a crash (ll. 18-21).

The passage's alliteration links this clause together. Byron also uses alliterative sounds to enhance the mood he wishes to communicate. For example, near the end of the narration one finds a heavy use of s sounds, strengthening the growing silence and death as it overcomes the earth:

Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless--
A lump of death--a chaos of hard clay.
The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirred within their silent depths;

Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,
And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropped
They slept on the abyss without a surge (ll. 71-77).

Furthermore, alliteration adds emphasis to phrases or ideas. Byron describes the wild beasts as "tame and tremulous," and Death becomes "immediate and inglorious" (l. 35, 1.43). The alliteration highlights key images or events throughout the poem.

All of the preceding technical devices form an important part of Byron's imaginative vision of the end of the universe. Yet the cornerstone of "Darkness" is the imagery. In fact, Karl Kroeber asserts Byron did not care about the meaning of the poem: "The unsettling vividness of this poem does not come from its apocalyptic significance so much as from its concrete dramatization of pure fantasy. Byron seems more excited by the image of the terrific wasteland he has envisioned than concerned with its meaning."⁶ Several powerful archetypal images appear in "Darkness." The destruction of the world is reflected in the image of fire or flame, which by its very nature consumes as it provides heat and light. Animal images also predominate, as man is reduced to an animalistic state in the final hours of life. Byron shrinks man from a noble, defiant being to an insignificant member of a herd or pack of beasts. I will discuss these major images before turning to the three movements or shifts in images which highlight the theme of universal destruction.

⁶ Karl Kroeber, Romantic Narrative Art (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 55.

Fire or flame images dominate the opening lines of the poem. After the sun is extinguished, men start burning fires in an attempt to maintain the world's heat and light: "The habitations of all things which dwell, / Were burnt for leacons" (ll. 12-13). Byron often uses images of fire in his poetry. Gilbert Phelps notes that "fire, in one aspect or another, usually stands for man's defiance, aspiration or daring, or for the turmoil in the poet's mind."⁷ In this poem the fire imagery does correspond with the resistance of the human race, as they battle and ultimately destroy the land's fuel in the effort to provide heat and light to the world. In fact, this futile burning might be the only act of man in the entire poem where man can be seen as noble or heroic.

The Prometheus myth reveals the paradoxical nature of fire. Prometheus provided man with fire (knowledge), but this knowledge also led to an increased awareness of evil and wrong. In Childe Harold's Pilgrimage Byron employs an image of the candle, emphasizing the candle's death, not its light:

That should their days, surviving perils past,
Melt to calm twilight, they feel overcast
With sorrow and supineness, and so die;
Even as a flame unfed, which runs to waste
With its own flickering, or a sword laid by,
Which eats into itself, and rusts ingloriously.⁸

The paradoxical nature of fire appears also in an invocation by the

⁷ Gilbert Phelps, Introduction. The Byronic Byron (London: Longman Group, 1971), p. 30.

⁸ Lord Byron, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 191. Further references to this work appear parenthetically by stanza number,

devil in The Deformed Transformed, a somewhat weak play about a hunchback who is transformed into the image of Achilles. The devil's invocation calls attention to fire as the primal element, and also links fire with the world's destruction:

Fire! without which nought can live;
 Fire! but in which nought can live

 Fire! man's safeguard and his slaughter:
 Fire! Creation's first-born Daughter
 And Destruction's threatened Son,
 When Heaven with the world hath done.⁹

In a soliloquy, the devil imagines how men would react if he dropped a star down from the heavens upon earth:

'Twere a jest now
 To bring one down amongst them, and set fire
 Unto their anthill: how the pismires then
 Would scamper o'er the scalding soil, and, ceasing
 From tearing down each other's nests, pipe forth
 One universal orison! ha! ha! (ll. 234-39).

This passage closely resembles the action of the humans in "Darkness." After a cataclysmic event (the sun's failure), men do run about much like ants in a destroyed anthill. So we can see the link Byron creates between the image of fire and the end of the known universe.

Byron uses animal images in "Darkness" to reinforce the horror of the world's end, and to reveal man as a savage brute in the final period of life on our planet. He describes several inversions of the natural order, highlighting the confusion and helplessness of all life in the final hours. He mentions birds which can no longer fly (ll. 31-23), beasts that have become tame

⁹ Lord Byron, The Deformed Transformed, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 729. Further references to this work appear parenthetically by line number.

(l. 34), and serpents that twine and crawl "among the multitude" (l. 35). Phelps states that in Byron's poetry "man's baser instincts are often symbolized by animals--wolves, bears, tigers, hyenas, and so on--or by insects."¹⁰ This animal imagery often reveals a bitter contempt for man and society. In Manfred, for example, when the Seventh Spirit derides Manfred, she not only calls him a "Child of Clay," but also a "worm."¹¹ Similarly, Arnold, the hero in The Deformed Transformed, when he prays to be changed from his horrible shape, refers to all men as worms:

Resolve back to their elements, and take
The shape of any reptile save myself,
And make a world for myriads of new worms! (ll. 61-63).

References to worms, of course, carry the connotation of the serpent, or evil, as in Milton's Paradise Lost. So Byron in other works compares man with animals to deride and belittle them.

Besides inverting the natural order of the animals, Byron also inverts man's natural state. At the end of Time man is no longer a rational being, in control of his environment. Instead, as we have seen, the snakes and beasts mingle freely with him. Byron does not allow man a dignified end. One faithful dog guards his master's corpse from the starving animals, including humans. The dog has to hold "the birds and beasts and famished men at bay" (l. 49, italics added).

¹⁰ Phelps, p. 31.

¹¹ Lord Byron, Manfred, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 398. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

Byron's final image of man--an insignificant member of the pack or herd--grows by implication out of his word choices. When the serpents come amongst men, the people are only referred to generally as "the multitude." Several lines later, they are merely "the crowd" (l. 55). Man is reduced to the low level of a herd or a nameless crowd in several of Byron's poems. In Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, the poet asks "Is it not better thus our lives to wear [alone],/Than join the crushing crowd, doomed to inflict or bear?" (Stanza lxxi). In Manfred, the Byronic hero tells the Abbot he has chosen to live alone, rather than

become,
A mighty thing amongst the mean--and such
The mass are; I disdained to mingle with
A herd, though to be leader--and of wolves.
The lion is alone, and so am I. (III, i, ll. 119-23).

These images of man as an animal in a herd, or as part of a nameless crowd reinforce the poet's contempt of man.

The images in "Darkness" are not just unrelated flashes from the poet's imagination. Sensory images and images of motion help establish three major movements or shifts in the poem. First, a general movement downward is created through a variety of images. Then Byron employs images of sight, fire, and eyes to provide a shift from light to darkness. Finally, sound images and images of motion or activity, shift at the end of the poem to images of silence and stillness.

Several images denote a downward motion. Byron begins the poem with a description of the sun and stars, wandering in space, high above man. From this point, however, the emphasis turns to

falling and movement downward. Men try to save the light by burning down palaces, cities, and forests. Other men, realizing the futility of the fires, "with curses cast them down upon the dust" (l. 31). Then, in a powerful image, Byron combines sound and motion imagery, describing the birds, which "shrieked/ And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,/ And flap their useless wings" (ll. 31-33). As the end draws nearer, men, beasts, and the birds are seen "dropping dead" (l. 50). After all life has ceased, Byron descends further, stating that all life had died within the "silent depths" (l. 74). In the last falling image, the masts fall "down piecemeal" from the rotting, empty ships (l. 76).

These images of falling imply a movement toward death; movement downward is in the direction of the grave and Hell. The combined force of this set of images once again reinforces the feeling of despair and hopelessness Byron builds throughout the poem. The imagery of light shifting to absolute darkness achieves the same goal.

Byron reveals the movement from light to darkness through a series of fire and sight images. The second line begins the extinction of light, as the "bright sun" loses its light, and the stars "wander darkling in the eternal space" (ll. 2-3). Men begin burning objects to try to maintain the light of the world. Byron imagines a forceful image, of men "gather'd round their blazing homes/ To look once more into each other's face" (ll. 14-15). Eventually, all the forests are burned, to no avail, since they provide only "despairing light" (l. 22). Near the end of life, the two

final survivors meet in a city, and they attempt to revive a flame from dying embers. The two are enemies, and they make "a flame/ Which was a mockery"; they look into each other's faces and die from the sight (ll. 63-64). At the end of Time no light exists. In fact, the final two lines personify Darkness, stating: "She was the Universe" (l. 82).

These images give the reader a linear movement from light to absolute negation of light. Phelps, speaking generally about Byron's poetry, notes that in some contexts "the 'light' or 'fire' of life and hope are placed in contrast to images derived from darkness, frost, ice, deserts, decomposition, and the blight on fruit or foliage."¹² Byron begins with the bright sun. Then he describes the burning of cities, forests, which give way to one weak, flickering flame in a dying city. These images contrast severely with the darkness which reigns at the poem's conclusion. The images of Darkness imply death, Hell, and evil; night and darkness have been linked to evil and the Devil for centuries. Therefore the poem's movement toward total darkness heightens the sense of depression and desolation Byron wishes to create.

The third set of images move from activity and sound to the stillness and repose of the poem's end. This activity begins with the frantic scurrying of men who attempt to save the world's light by burning the cities and forests. Byron describes the activities

¹² Phelps, p. 31.

of men as the fires go on burning:

. . . some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled;
And others hurried to and fro, and fed
Their funeral piles with fuel (ll. 24-28).

These actions then increase in intensity as the sound imagery appears.

Men, in despair and frustration, cast themselves onto the ground, while they "gnash'd their teeth and howled" (l. 32). Animals and men begin to mingle and die together. The "wild birds shrieked/ And terrified, did flutter on the ground" (ll. 32-33). The snakes even "twined themselves among the multitude,/ Hissing" (ll. 35-36). Byron envisions the end of the world as a cacophony of the beasts and men. The sounds and activity begin to decrease, however, in a manner similar to the dying-light imagery.

Two final sounds are heard. The last faithful dog licks the hand of his master's corpse, then dies "with a piteous and perpetual moan,/ And a quick desolate cry" (ll. 52-53). The two enemies, catching sight of the horrible aberrations of each other's bodies in the light of the last flickering flame, simultaneously produce the last sounds and activity on earth: they see each other, shriek, and die (l. 66).

As the end of the universe occurs, silence and stillness replace the activity and sounds of anguish. Byron turns to sea imagery to describe the negation of motion. "The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,/ And nothing stirred within their silent depths" (ll. 73-74). The falling masts from rotting ships cannot even stir the water, as "the waves were dead; the rides were in

their grave" (l. 78). Finally, the winds wither, and the clouds perish: All movement on the earth, in the air, and in the water has ceased. The effect of these images is devastating. All known sensations end; all sound and activity in the universe come to a dead stop.

Viewed from a technical standpoint, "Darkness" is an excellent poem. Byron unifies the work with his use of blank verse, enjambment, and alliteration. Moreover, Byron keeps the poem from becoming repetitious through the skillful manipulation of the meter and the use of punctuation. Finally, the powerful and striking imagery of "Darkness" illuminates and intensifies the poet's imagined end of the universe. All of these images, however, are seen in conjunction with a tone of depression and despair: Byron's vision of the end of the world is not a glorious and heroic occasion for man.

CHAPTER II

THE TONE OF DEPRESSION

The tone of "Darkness" can best be described as black despair. The language depicting the terrible holocaust of universal destruction and the repeated use of negative modifiers help create this intensely dark mood. Byron also sets "Darkness" as a dream poem, writing as if the poet has just experienced a vivid nightmare. In this chapter I will first discuss how Byron creates this intense and sustained tone in "Darkness," through his use of language and choice of genre. Then I will look at the personal facts lying behind the mental despair Byron underwent in Switzerland. Finally, I will compare the tone of "Darkness" with three other works written during this same period: "The Dream," The Prisoner of Chillon, and Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III. Significantly, these three poems contain similarities of language and tone with "Darkness"; all four poems reflect in some way the mental state of depression Byron experienced during the summer of 1816.

Byron's choice of language is the primary method he employs to create a tone of despair and depression. Ernest Lovell feels this poem is narrated by "the voice of disbelief." Therefore, the poet "speaks in a language that may be understood still, the language of discontent, blank misgiving, and spiritual desolation."¹ Byron

¹ Lovell, p. 240.

uses strong adjectives to describe the world's dying state. For example, after the sun is extinguished, Byron's imagined world is "icy . . . blind and blackening" (ll. 4-5). In addition, this event affects all men: they forget their passions in the cold, and are "chilled into a selfish prayer for light" (l. 9).

Words connected with expiration and destruction appear throughout the poem, often in alliterated phrases which lend added emphasis. As men try to maintain light and heat in the world, homes are "burnt for beacons," and "cities were consumed" (l. 13). Then people begin dying, and in a powerful alliterative phrase Byron describes death by starvation: "the pang of famine fed upon all entrails--men/ Died" (ll. 43-45). In the final section of the poem, this language of expiration continues as all of Nature dies:

The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The Moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were withered in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perished (ll. 78-80).

All that remains at the conclusion of the poem is Darkness.

Words and phrases with connotations of Death also aid in the creation of the intense, black tone of "Darkness." Various forms of the word die or death occur nine times in the poem. The fires lit by men in the attempt to save themselves become "funeral piles" (l. 28). The bodies of dead men remain "tomblless" (l. 45), and the last two surviving men on earth have "cold skeleton hands" (l. 61), even before their hideous deaths. In addition to this language denoting death and expiration, Byron employs negative descriptions which reinforce the depressing tone of "Darkness."

Throughout this poem one finds descriptions in negative terms. In the poem's opening, for example, the sun appears "rayless and pathless" (l. 4), as the Earth swings in "the moonless air" (l. 5). Byron continues the use of this negative suffix -less in the narrative. One sees the serpents come "hissing, but stingless" (l. 37), and the birds flapping their "useless wings" (l. 33). Finally, after all activity has ceased on earth, Byron describes the world as "seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless" (l. 71). All of these negative terms help form the tone of the poem. George Ridenour accurately sums up the mood Byron creates in "Darkness," concluding: "The force of the poem is in its depiction of enervation, powerlessness. Exhaustion of the sun is exhaustion of all man's world, and of man himself, and exhaustion for man means loss of humanity."² This loss of humanity underscores the bitter tone of "Darkness." At the end of Time man performs no noble or heroic acts; all men end up dying as just another animal in the final slaughter of life. The poet's contempt for man contributes to the tone in the poem, however, I will discuss this bitter view of man fully in the next chapter.

Byron's final means of creating the terrifying and black tone of this work is by presenting the poem as a nightmare. H.G. Cooke sees "Darkness" as "an obsessive nightmare of all-annihilating

² George M. Ridenour, "Byron in 1816: Four Poems from Diodati," From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 458-59.

death [which] batters into the reader's consciousness."³ Karl Kroeber in Romantic Narrative Art discusses the poem in terms of the "tradition of the formal prophetic-dream poem," but he concludes "unlike most poems in this tradition . . . Darkness does not give us the setting and situation in which the dream occurs, [and] does not provide us with the present reality against which the direful prophecy is launched."⁴ The crucial first line states: "I had a dream, which was not all a dream." Yet after this line the poet never again refers to the vision of universal destruction as a dream, purposely leaving the question of reality or illusion ambiguous. In fact, the poem ends at the point where the universe has ended: Darkness and Death reign over all. By couching the work in the terms of a dream poem or nightmare, Byron removes from himself restraints of reality. He presents the poem like a nightmare, flashing image after image of terror and horror before the eyes of the reader. Robert Gleckner relates the poem to myth or fable, stating:

It is again a Fable for Byron's time, the logical end product of what Du Bos calls his 'massive sense of nothingness'--a world without light and without prisons, palaces, huts, or class distinction, a world with the ultimate freedom and democracy but no love, a world of cannibalistic warfare, the death of God, the eternal void.⁵

³ M.G. Cooke, The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron's Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 116.

⁴ Kroeber, p. 55.

⁵ Robert F. Gleckner, Byron and the Ruins of Paradise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), pp. 199-200.

So Byron gives us a dream poem, in which his imagination has run freely, presenting a vision of the worst possible end of mankind and all life.

The depressing and melancholic mood of "Darkness" did not grow out of a vacuum. During the summer of 1816 Byron had severe lapses of mental depression arising from his deep personal problems. T.G. Steffan summarizes the problems affecting Byron during this period:

The anger with Lady Byron, her family, and the lawyers, the humiliation and social opprobrium of the separation, and the grief and resentment over being forced away from his half-sister Augusta and his daughter Ada soon produced in Byron's mind the gigantic distortion of himself--of his own position in the pageant of the world's tragic and pathetic creatures.⁶

Byron's personal life was in a shambles after his exile from England. In addition, his early ideas about religion and fatality were in his mind. Byron had contributed to his own downfall in England, almost as if he had no control over his fueling of the rumors and scandal which forced his separation and exile-in-disgrace. Phelps traces the origins of this feeling, commenting that "there had, too, been a kind of inexorable logic in the train of events which chimed in with his belief that he belonged to 'a doomed race,' and he could not help feeling that he was somehow fulfilling a preordained destiny."⁷

"Darkness" therefore is a product of Byron's mind during a period of intense self-review and confusion. His depression at times

⁶ T.G. Steffan, "The Token-Web, The Sea-Sodom, and Canto I of *Don Juan*," University of Texas Studies in English, 26 (1947), p. 130.

⁷ Phelps, p. 12.

became so severe that he even considered suicide during his summer in Switzerland. Byron later wrote about this period, conceding "I was half mad during the time of its [Childe Harold, Canto III] composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies."⁸ He concludes the statement with a somewhat macabre joke: "I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law; and, even then, if I could have been certain to haunt her--but I won't dwell upon these trifling family matters."⁹

These statements leave little doubt concerning the mental anguish Byron was feeling during his summer in Switzerland. Partly as an extension of these feelings, his writing and poetry turned to the subjects of death, loneliness, and life after death. Heinrich Straumann in his lecture Byron and Switzerland points out the connection between Byron's exile and his thoughts about death:

These are questions pointing towards the association of death with solitude and separateness and with the idea that the absent are dead to the absent--a flash of that consciousness of being exiled, i.e., of being dead to those he had left behind in England, as well as the awareness of the eternal mystery of consciousness after death and of the haunting thought of those millions and millions that have gone before us.¹⁰

⁸ Lord Byron, Letter to Thomas Moore, 28 January 1817, The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, IV (London: John Murray, 1898-1901), p. 49.

⁹ Byron, Letter to Moore, p. 49.

¹⁰ Heinrich Straumann, Byron and Switzerland (Nottingham: John Clough and Son, 1949), p. 17.

To Byron, his exile was much like a death, and letters from Augusta during this period brought renewed sorrow to him. As Marchand points out in July "news from England had brought back the whole stream of his past, which now rolled through his mind as a fevered reverie."¹¹

Comparing some of the poems Byron wrote during this summer with "Darkness," one sees how dominant his private despair became. "The Dream," another short poem Byron wrote in July of 1816, is similar to "Darkness." This poem is a description of an imagined dream, a recounting by Byron of his youthful love for Mary Chaworth, her marriage, and his consequent disillusionment. In The Prisoner of Chillon Byron envisions the despair and loneliness of Francois De Bonivard, who had been a political prisoner in the dungeons of Chillon. The dungeon's gloomy, dark setting, coupled with the deaths of Bonivard's two imprisoned brothers, helps create a tone similar to that in "Darkness." Finally, the third canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage reflects the confusion and depression in Byron's mind, as the poet alternates between periods of hope and utter despondency.

Gleckner views the poems of 1816 as acting out "the misery and lostness of man, the eternal death of love, and the repetitive ruination of paradise."¹² Most of "The Dream" traces out the death of a young love in the poet's mind. Marchand, in Byron: A Biography,

¹¹ Leslie A. Marchand, Byron: A Biography. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 17.

¹² Gleckner, p. 251.

calls "The Dream" "a capsule history of his life from youthful idealism through disillusionment to sad resignation and melancholy despair."¹³ "The Dream," like "Darkness," is presented as a poetic vision or dream poem. Ridenour feels that in this poem Byron "is playing with relations between the mind and reality, and the notion of dream is helpful to him because of its equivocal middle status, between the imagined and the experienced, past and future."¹⁴ Byron emphasizes that this poem is a dream vision to a much greater extent than "Darkness." The entire first stanza addresses the question of the status of sleep and dreams:

The dread of vanished shadows--Are they so?
Is not the past all shadow--What are they?
Creations of the mind?--The mind can make
Substance, and people planets of its own
With beings brighter than have been.¹⁵

Throughout the work, unlike "Darkness," Byron reminds the reader of the dream. Each stanza after the first begins with the refrain "A change came o'er the spirit of my dream." Then, in the final stanza, Byron returns to the realistic level of the narrator with the words "My dream was past; it had no further change."

The first stanza has some echoes of the setting in "Darkness," as shadow, Death, and darkness are all mentioned. This poem does have a few happy stanzas, while Byron recalls his childhood love for

¹³ Marchand, Biography, II, p. 637.

¹⁴ Ridenour, p. 460.

¹⁵ Lord Byron, "The Dream," The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 385. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by line number.

Mary Chaworth, but these happy moments do not last. The poet becomes a wanderer, and when his love marries another, he falls into deep depression:

What could her grief be?--she had loved him not,
Nor given him cause to deem himself beloved,
Nor could he be a part of that which preyed
Upon her mind--a spectre of the past (ll. 139-43).

The poet's depression leads to pain and loneliness; the poem ends with a tone of bitterness found throughout "Darkness":

The beings which surrounded him were gone,
Or were at war with him; he was a mark
For blight and desolation, compassed round
With Hatred and Contention; Pain was mixed
In all which was served to him (ll. 185-90).

"Darkness" and "The Dream" have a similar tone of despair and hopelessness. A comment by Gleckner neatly summarizes the tone of the two works: "Man's dreams are but the caverns of his despair, the world the macrocosmic externalization of his inner hell."¹⁶

The Prisoner of Chillon continues the same gloomy and despairing mood found in the two poems discussed above. This poem is set in the dark, cold dungeons of Chillon, a world which mirrors Byron's imagined Earth after the sun was extinguished in "Darkness." Note the similarities in the description of the dungeon with the language of death and horror in "Darkness":

Lake Lemán lies by Chillon's walls:
A thousand feet in depth below
Its massy waters meet and flow.
.....
A double dungeon wall and wave
Have made--and like a living grave;

¹⁶ Gleckner, p. 202.

Below the surface of the lake
The dark vault lies wherein we lay.¹⁷

Byron emphasizes the depth and lack of light in the dungeon, much as he uses downward movement and images of darkness to create the tone of "Darkness."

After the death of both his brothers in Prisoner, Bonivard undergoes an intense mental collapse which has strong ties with the universal end Byron imagines in "Darkness":

First came the loss of light, and air,
And then of darkness too:
I had no thought, no feeling--none
.
But vacancy absorbing space,
And fixedness--without a place;
There were no stars--no earth--no time--
No check--no change--no good--no crime--
But silence (ll. 233-35, 243-47).

Just as the two dream poems brought up the questions of reality and illusion, death and the afterlife, a similar feeling overcomes Bonivard. He is neither alive or dead, but suspended, as if in eternal sleep. These ideas of life and death were active in Byron's mind during this period of self-contemplation. A stanza from the first canto of Don Juan brings the question of an afterlife into focus:

Few mortals know what end they would be at
But whether Glory, Power, or Love, or Treasure,
The path is through perplexing ways, and when
The goal is gained, we die, you know--and then--
What then?¹⁸

¹⁷ Lord Byron, The Prisoner of Chillon, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 382. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by line number.

¹⁸ Lord Byron, Don Juan, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 794.

None of the poems of 1816 reveal an answer to the problem of life after death. In "Darkness" no afterlife exists; the entire universe is slain and only Darkness remains. In The Prisoner of Chillon Bonivard avoids stepping on the graves of his brothers, but he concludes the soul of his brother could not be in the songbird who brings him out of his trance, since the bird leaves him alone in his cell.

Byron also worked on the third canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage during his summer stay in Switzerland, and this canto reflects some of the same depressing tones found in his other works of this period. In Canto III the poet at one point surrenders to his fate, while pondering the evils of the past and present:

And thus I am absorbed, and this is life:--
I look upon the peopled desert past,
As on a place of agony and strife,
Where, for some sin, to Sorrow I was cast,
To act and suffer (Stanza lxxiii).

In this third canto Byron reveals the confusion in his mind, chastising himself for his melancholic moods:

Yet must I think less wildly:--I have thought
Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,
A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame;
And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,
My springs of life were poisoned (Stanza vii).

The tone of Canto III in several places is the same gloom and melancholy seen in "Darkness." In one segment, Byron visits the battlefield of Waterloo, and his thoughts turn to death and the needless slaughter. He calls the battleground "this place of skulls,/ The grave of France" (Stanza xviii). Then the poet moves on in his travels to the Rhineland, but again he has mixed feelings. He sees the Rhine as a "work divine,/ A blending of all beauties; streams

and dells" (Stanza xlvi). Yet in the following stanzas depression again surfaces as Byron recalls the futility of conflict:

There was a day when they were young and proud;
 Banners on high, and battle passed below;
 But they who fought are in a bloody shroud,
 And those which waved are shredless dust ere now,
 And the bleak battlements shall bear no future blow (Stanza xlvii).

Futhermore, Byron states that the river cannot wash away "blackened Memory's blighting dream," even though it has washed away the "blood of yesterday" (Stanza li). So the poet, even in the midst of nature, cannot shake the depression and melancholy from his spirit or his writing.

There are similar tones in all four of these poems written during the summer of 1816, and I have discussed the personal reasons which lie behind the depression and uncertainty Byron felt during this period. E.D. Hirsch, in "Byron and the Terrestrial Paradise," divides Byron's work according to his three "principle moods."¹⁹ His poetry can be ecstatic, ironic, or "cynical, corresponding to the complete failure of the ideal."²⁰ Obviously "Darkness," with its tone of despondency and gloom, falls into this cynical category. In the next chapter I will discuss the poem's content in the light of the cynicism and contempt for man it portrays.

¹⁹ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "Byron and the Terrestrial Paradise," From Sensibility to Romanticism, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 482.

²⁰ Hirsch, p. 467.

CHAPTER III

CONTENT: BYRON'S CONTEMPT OF MAN

The content of "Darkness" can be loosely broken down into five sections or episodes. First, the sun ceases to shine and we see man's initial reaction: homes, cities, and forests are burned to provide heat and light. Secondly, man is reduced to the level of the animals, as the horror and fear of the coming doom grow. In this episode War and Famine arise, and men begin dying. In the third section of the narration we see the only altruistic act in the poem: one faithful dog protects his master's corpse from the ravaged men and beasts. In the fourth section, Byron imaginatively describes a final meeting of men in the ruins of a dead city. These last two men are enemies, and this scene is filled with bitter irony and cynicism. In the final section, Byron depicts the dead universe; everything has ceased to exist, and only Darkness remains.

In this chapter I will first look closely at these five parts of "Darkness," as each section adds to the poet's contemptuous view of mankind. Unlike the tone of the poem, which can be traced to Byron's depression and melancholy, this same contempt for man appears in many of Byron's works. In the second half of this chapter I will compare the bitter view of man in "Darkness" with similar views found in other works of Byron.

The first section of "Darkness" establishes the backdrop of the nightmare. Then, the dream begins on a cosmic level, with the description of the cataclysmic event: the light of the sun is extinguished, and

the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy Earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air (ll. 2-5).

These opening lines leave one important question unanswered. Byron states the "sun was extinguished," but he never mentions who extinguished it, or the reason why it was extinguished. This is a key question, and by avoiding the answer Byron leaves man totally alone on the earth to face the disaster.

Ridenour finds the poem "scrupulously naturalistic," emphasizing this same point, that "there is no feeling of divine purpose being worked out, or any power beyond the natural energies that are running down."¹ Ridenour attributes the detached narrative viewpoint to a source of the poem, an early science fiction-type novel, entitled The Last Man, or Omegarus and Sideria, an anonymous work written in 1806. "Darkness" is significantly different from this novel, though, as The Last Man's "main impression is of an irresponsible God and a victimized humanity."² So Byron has removed any presence of deity in his narrative, and, as one quickly sees, he does not portray man as victimized. Once the initial disaster has been described, Byron swiftly moves to man's reaction to it.

¹ Ridenour, p. 458.

² Ibid., p. 458.

Men futilely attempt to survive by creating huge watchfires, in order to combat the darkness and cold. Byron skillfully includes all mankind in these efforts, as he describes the sources of fuel for these fires. The wealthy are mentioned first, as the thrones and palaces of kinds are burned. Yet in the next breath Byron reveals "the huts;/ The habitations of all things which dwell,/ Were burnt for beacons" (ll. 11-13). Finally, entire cities are consumed, as well as the forests. For the first time in the history of man, all men are equal, but the result is chaos, not utopia.

Men do not band together in the face of this catastrophe; Byron clearly states that men "forgot their passions in the dread" (l. 8). Moreover, in the face of danger each man has a "selfish prayer for light" (l. 9), instead of strong feelings of universal brotherhood and compassion. These actions contrast severely with those of most of Byron's major heroes. As Phelps explains:

. . . neither Byron nor his heroes were melancholy and disillusioned in a passive way: on the contrary, wrapped in their dramatic cloaks and with fierce scowling brows they wandered about the earth as if driven by furies, breathing pride and defiance.³

The human beings portrayed in "Darkness" do not even have this somewhat admirable quality of defiance. Instead, their selfish and hopeless burning of civilization and nature speeds the destruction of the world.

The concept of nature in this first section of the poem is notable. As Lovell notes, nature for Byron symbolized "his often

³ Phelps, p. 9.

instinctive rebellion against established institutions, his dream of a life apart from the world."⁴ The attempt to escape from himself and society through nature failed for Byron, though, and M.K. Joseph suggests this is why "he reacted so violently against Wordsworth and the Lakers."⁵ In this poem nature does not aid man in any way. In fact, man can find no escape or relief from the inevitable doom, and both men and nature perish ingloriously before the poem ends.

In the poem's second section, man does come closer to nature, but only by a returning to an animalistic state. In this episode man is reduced to a bestial level, slaying wild animals and even serpents for food. Two forces dominate the Earth--War and Famine--as Byron gruesomely imagines the deaths of intermingled men and animals. Again Byron emphasizes the loneliness of man; the aftermath of War is a meal "bought/ With blood" (ll. 39-40), and each man sits "sullenly apart/ Gorging himself in Gloom" (ll. 40-41). Byron even implies cannibalism in this section, as "The meagre by the meagre were devoured" (l. 46). He leaves the reader's imagination to decide whether the animals or men are devouring each other, or themselves.

This second section further reinforces the poet's contemptuous outlook on man. As men realize the futility of their attempts to survive, they return to their savage state, throwing themselves on

⁴ Lovell, p. 21.

⁵ M.K. Joseph, Byron the Poet (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), p. 81.

the group wailing and gnashing their teeth. These sounds are echoed in the shrieks of the helpless birds, flapping their useless wings. Clearly, mankind in "Darkness" deserves no salvation or merciful intervention; men die side by side with all the beasts of the earth.

In the third episode one sees the only heroic act in the entire poem. Significantly, this act is performed by a dog, not by a human being. Life has become grim by this point in Byron's nightmare, as men and animals are starving to death. Those left alive are feeding on the remains of the dead, and even dogs are attacking their masters (l. 47). Yet one dog remains faithful to his master, guarding his corpse from the ravenous men and beasts.

Byron may have had personal experience in mind while writing this short episode, for his love of animals, especially dogs, has been well documented. As a teenager, Byron owned a great Newfoundland hound named Boatswain. According to Marchand, it was a tragedy when Boatswain "with whom he had romped so often, and who had won his affection more than any of his other quadrupeds, went mad and died before his eyes."⁶ In fact, the epitaph Byron wrote for the dog's tombstone summarizes the qualities he imagines in this last heroic dog in "Darkness":

Near this spot
Are deposited the Remains of one
Who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,

⁶ Marchand, Biography, 1, p. 160.

Courage without ferocity,
And all the Virtues of man without his Vices.⁷

With a touch of melodrama, Byron describes the inevitable death of this one noble creature on earth:

But with a piteous and perpetual moan,
And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand
Which answered not with a caress--he died (ll. 52-54).

Indirectly this episode reinforces the poet's scorn for mankind. By giving a dumb animal the only noble and praiseworthy quality exhibited in the poem--and then only to one dog--Byron illustrates just how low and worthless he imagines man to be. Lovell quotes Bromme, a friend of Byron's in Italy, who recorded that Byron "spoke frequently of the inane pursuits of mankind, and our limited intelligence, dwelling at some length on . . . the nothingness of all human intellect."⁸ Byron's episode of the faithful dog reflects these feelings of nothingness, as life only leads to death and desolation. The fourth section of "Darkness" also contains this element of nothingness, as well as a bitter view of the deaths of the last two men on earth.

Byron's cruel cynicism flowers in the imagined meeting of the last two survivors. They meet in the ruins of a deserted city, "beside/ The dying embers of an altar-place" (ll. 57-58). Byron adds a touch of mystery here, noting that by the altar "had been heaped a mass of holy things/ For an unholy usage" (ll. 59-60).

⁷ G. Wilson Knight, Lord Byron: Christian Virtues (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 9.

⁸ Lovell, p. 207.

These two lines might be referring back to the eating of dead bodies in the previous section, but Byron leaves the "unholy usage" to be defined in the reader's imagination. Then these two men act together, in an attempt to raise a flame from the dying embers:

they raked up,
And shivering scraped with their cold skeleton hands
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath
Blew for a little life, and made a flame (ll. 50-64).

This flame, the last glimpse of light and hope on earth, illuminates a scene of Gothic horror:

then they lifted up
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld
Each other's aspects--saw, and shrieked, and died--
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,
Unknowing who he was upon whose brow
Famine had written Fiend (ll. 64-69).

Byron makes his disdain and contempt of man complete in this scene, as he imagines the total irony in this last meeting of men. First their horrid end comes at an altar-place, but the scene is a far cry from a celebration or mass in honor of godhead. Secondly, the two who meet and attempt this one humane act together are enemies. Finally, with a bitter twist, they die from the terrible sight of one another, without even knowing they were enemies.

In the poem's fifth and final section no activity or life remains on the planet. The world is "manless, lifeless" (l. 71); it is a "chaos of hard clay" (l. 72). Byron emphasizes the final death of all life in this last section. No pleasant afterlife or redemption occurs; the poem's end corresponds with the end of the universe. So Byron ends reinforcing the hopelessness of human existence. Not only is man himself contemptuous, exhibiting the

characteristics of beasts and savages, but his horrible and brutal extinction is meaningless. No heaven awaits the faithful and penitent souls, and no hell opens for the guilty. Man's existence simply comes to an end, much like the last flicker of a dying candle.

Byron's view of man in "Darkness," while perhaps his bitterest and most cynical portrait of human action, is found often in his other works. Heroes in the romantic verse tales, such as The Giaour and Mazeppa have a profound dislike of mankind. The Byronic hero in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage also finds man and society corrupt and distasteful. Finally, in several of Byron's dramatic works, major characters present contemptuous views of all mankind. Manfred, Cain, Sardanapalus, and Marino Faliero all have major figures who find men distasteful, disloyal, corrupt, or weak. As we shall see, however, one great difference also exists between these other works and "Darkness": no love at all can be found in this poem, while most of Byron's heroes have experienced a deep love for some human being.

The heroes of Byron's Oriental tales are, for the most part, alienated from society. They are outcasts; as Lovell notes "they prefer a life apart from civilization, to be sure, and feel hemmed in by cities, which they sometimes feel to be centers of corruption, but each one is a man of violence and lacks the benevolence of the noble savage."⁹ The hero in The Giaour has the typical characteristics found in Byron's verse tales; he is young, bold, and defiant. He

⁹ Lovell, p. 248.

does not find any comfort in the society of man.

This story is set in Greece, and the poem's opening paints a grim picture of the state of man in Greece:

The hearts within thy valleys bred,
The fiery souls that might have led
Thy sons to deeds sublime,
Now crawl from cradle to the Grave,
Slaves--nay, the bondsmen of a Slave,
And callous, save to crime;
Stained with each evil that pollutes
Mankind, where least above the brutes;
Without even savage virtue blest,
Without one free or valiant brest,
Still to the neighboring ports they waft
Proverbial wiles, and ancient craft.¹⁰

So Byron from the story's opening displays the brutish and contemptible level that the Greek state has fallen to. The Turks, who have enslaved the Greeks, are no better. When Hassan, a Turk, discovers that his slave girl has been unfaithful to him, he has her drowned in the sea. The illicit lover is the story's hero--the Giaour, who takes revenge on the Turk.

The Giaour's revenge reveals his distaste for man. He destroys Hassan and twenty of his followers. Byron's vivid description of the dying Hassan highlights the fury and ruthlessness of the Giaour's revenge:

With sabre shivered to the hilt,
Yet dripping with the blood he split
.....
His breast with wounds unnumbered riven,
His back to earth, his face to Heaven,
Fall'n Hassan lies (ll. 555-56, 667-69).

¹⁰ Lord Byron, The Giaour, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 437. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by line number.

After this brutal slaying, the Giaour withdraws completely from society at a monastery. Significantly, though, he does not associate with the monks in any fashion, as one monk relates:

But never at our Vesper prayer,
Nor e'er before Confession chair
Kneels he, nor recks he when arise
Incense or anthem to the skies,
But broods within his cell alone,
His faith and race alike unknown (ll. 802-807).

In the end of this tale, the Giaour confesses on his deathbed to the Prior of the monastery, admitting his love for the slave girl and revealing his hatred and revenge on the Turk. This poem, while containing a dim view of mankind, cannot match the bitterness and contempt for man held by the narrator in "Darkness." Furthermore, a strong element of love exists in The Giaour; his love for the slave girl partially causes his hatred for mankind. He betrays his emotions on his deathbed, stating "I loved her--Love will find its way/ Through paths where wolves would fear to prey" (ll. 1048-49). Even though the Giaour's love leads to the girl's death and his bitter revenge, Love is a force that exists in the poem, unlike "Darkness," where no possibility of human love remains.

Mazeppa another of Byron's verse narratives, contains a similar view of man as "Darkness." Mazeppa, a Cossack, is the hero of the tale, and he is remarkably similar to the Giaour. When Mazeppa is caught with a lord's wife, his punishment consists of being strapped onto his horse and whipped out of the castle. At this point Mazeppa begins to display his hatred for mankind. As he is carried into the forest, he hears the "savage laughter" of

"that rabble rout."¹¹ His response is sudden and violent:

With sudden wrath I wrenched my head,
And snapped the cord, which to the mane
Had bound my neck in lieu of rein,
And, writhing half my form about,
Howled back my curse (ll. 384-88).

Mazeppa, like the Giaour, ultimately has his day of revenge.

Mazeppa even boasts about his return to the lord's castle, which resulted in the total destruction of the manor:

I paid it well in after days:
There is not of that castle gate,
Its drawbridge and portcullis' weight,
Stone--bar--moat--bridge--or barrier left;
Nor of its fields a blade of glass,
Save what grows on a ridge of wall,
Where stood the hearth-stone of the hall;
And many a time ye there might pass,
Nor dream that e'er the fortress was (ll. 393-401).

Mazeppa never returns to society after this affair, remaining a warrior for his entire life. To him men are just a nameless mass or "horde" (l. 504). His revenge on the lord for his humiliation is devastating; his totally destructive act is reminiscent of the desolation and brutal end of the world in "Darkness." Yet in this poem, as in The Giaour, the human emotion of love does exist. Mazeppa speaks of his love in the seventh and eighth stanzas of the poem, declaring: "I loved, and was beloved again;/ In sooth, it is a happy doom" (ll. 295-96). Furthermore, Mazeppa never loves again, even though he was a young page at the time of the affair. This strong, emotional love is not seen anywhere in "Darkness."

¹¹ Lord Byron, Mazeppa, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 437. Further references appear in the text by line number.

The emotion of love is also absent in the third and fourth cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Byron speaks out openly in these cantos about the corruption and weakness of man. Byron changed Childe Harold in these last two cantos; Harold is no longer a fictional person on a journey. Instead, as Marchand notes:

As he took up the theme again of Childe Harold, 'The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind,' he felt free to speak in his own voice without subterfuge or pretense of fiction. Henceforth the Harold is Byron's own self, or his acknowledged alter ego.¹²

Byron speaks harshly about man in these two cantos, as he tries to dissociate himself from society and the rest of mankind.

In Canto III Byron defines his relationship with the world, and he denies having belonged to society:

I have not loved the World, nor the World me;
I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed
To its idolatries a patient knee,
Nor coined my cheek to smiles,--nor cried aloud
In worship of an echo: in the crowd
They could not deem me one of such (Stanza cxiii).

In the next stanza, Byron firmly dissociates himself from the rest of mankind, repeating: "I have not loved the World, nor the World me,--/ But let us part fair foes" (Stanza cxiv). Sir Walter Scott gracefully summed up the poet's message in this passage, stating that here Childe Harold bids "a long and lasting farewell to social intercourse, and . . . brands the mass of humanity whom he leaves behind as false and treacherous."¹³

The fourth canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage also lashes out against mankind. Byron travels through Italy, and the ruins of

¹² Marchand, Byron's Poetry, p. 46.

¹³ Scott, p. 205.

past civilization bring to his mind the futility of life and the inhumanity of man. In the Colosseum, for instance, he imagines the gladiatorial combats of the past:

And here the buzz of eager nations ran,
In murmured pity, or loud-roured applause,
As man was slaughtered by his fellow man.
And wherefore slaughtered? Wherefore, but because
Such were the bloody Circus' genial laws,
And the imperial pleasure.--Wherefore not?
What matters where we fall to fill the maws
Of worms--on battle-plain or listed spot?
Both are but theatres--where the chief actors rot (Stanza cxxxix).

Byron condemns man's inhumanity and all warfare as theater, an entertainment for the masses. Byron also catalogs some of man's other faults in the fourth canto, such as their deceit and hypocrisy:

From mighty wrongs to petty perfidy
Have I not seen what human things could do?
From the loud roar of foaming calumny
To the small whisper of the as paltry few--
And subtler venom of the reptile crew,
The Janus glance of whose significant eye,
Learning to lie with silence, would seem true (Stanza cxxxvi.)

In this canto, almost as if he were Mazeppa, cursing at his foes as his horse sped into the forest, Byron lashes out against all mankind:

Not in the air shall these my words disperse,
Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak
The deep prophetic fulness of this verse,
And pile on human heads the mountains of my curse! (Stanza cxxxiv)

At the end of this poem Byron is weary; he wants to escape from all mankind and flee into the Desert with one "fair Spirit," hoping "that I might forget the human race,/ And, hating no one, love but only her" (Stanza clxxvii). The poet is reduced to one faint glimmer of hope: an impossible dream of a life away from man in the arms of a perfect love. Childe Harold openly displays Byron's distrust and

contempt for man and society; he is tired of their hypocrisy and weakness. The view of man in this poem is similar to the poet's view in "Darkness." No real love exists in the world, and both poems portray man with disdain and disgust.

The major characters of several of Byron's dramatic works also have this bitter outlook on man. King Sardanapalus, in the play Sardanapalus, is hypocritical towards his subjects. Sardanapalus refuses to fight some rebels in his kingdom, in order to save the lives of his subjects. However, Allen Whitmore, in The Major Characters of Lord Byron's Dramas, says "the king's contempt for his subjects, because of what he feels is their ingratitude, is somewhat contradictory. He professes to avoid war in a desire to spare his people; yet this motive is somewhat questionable, when we see how utterly he despises these same people."¹⁴ The king clearly loathes his subjects, calling them "ungrateful and ungracious slaves," and a "vile herd."¹⁵ He then concludes that his dogs are better than they. Sardanapalus is unique among Byron's dramatic heroes: he has a contempt for man and is himself contemptible.

Manfred, written in the summer of 1816, exhibits the same gloomy atmosphere and depressing tone found in "The Dream" and

¹⁴ Allen Perry Whitmore, The Major Characters of Lord Byron's Dramas, Salzburg Studies in English Literature Under the Direction of Professor Erwin A. Sturzl (Salzburg, Austria: Salzburg University Press, 1974), pp. 71-72.

¹⁵ Lord Byron, Sardanapalus, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 558. Further references to this play appear parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

"Darkness." In addition, the hero displays a bitter dislike for any relationship with man. In the play *Manfred* speaks with various spirits he has learned to conjure, trying to find relief for his personal guilt. Marchand sees *Manfred* as "beyond the point where common human satisfactions, even those of an idealized Noble Savage, can substitute for his immortal longings."¹⁶ *The Witch of the Alps* illustrates this view, calling *Manfred*

A being of the race thou dost despise--
The order, which thine own would rise above,
Mingling with us and ours.¹⁷

Manfred cannot escape the fact of his humanity, but he does vigorously assert his separation from the rest of mankind. One reason he refuses to belong to society is the hypocrisy involved:

I could not tame my nature down: for he
Must serve who fain would sway; and soothe, and sue,
And watch all time, and pry into all place,
And be a living Lie (III, ii, ll. 116-19).

Manfred hates humanity so much that he even tries to deny any relation with parents, friends, or loves:

. . . I have not named to thee
Father or mother, mistress, friend, or being,
With whom I wore the chain of human ties;
If I had such, they seemed not such to me (II, ii, ll. 100-103).

Manfred further reveals his dislike for mankind in the episode with the Chamois Hunter. *Manfred* attempts a suicidal leap from a high

¹⁶ Marchand, *Byron's Poetry*, p. 79.

¹⁷ Lord Byron, *Manfred*, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 404. Further references appear parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

mountain cliff. The Chamois Hunter frustrates his attempt, however, and leads Manfred to his chalet to revive him. Manfred is not grateful for the aid or for the Hunter's advice. When the Hunter offers Christian patience as a possible solution for Manfred's guilt, the hero again rejects his status as a human:

Patience--and patience! Hence--that word was made
For brutes of burthen, not for bird of prey!
Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine,--
I am not of thine order (II, i, 11. 35-38).

Whitmore notes that while Manfred feels superior to the Chamois Hunter, he nevertheless needs someone to confess to.¹⁸ Byron never fully delineates Manfred's "crime," yet several strong hints are in the play. Andrew Rutherford, in Byron: A Critical Study, suggests "that his Manfred's great sin was that of incest. A hint of murder is soon discredited, for it was his love that had proved fatal."¹⁹ Manfred's illicit love for Astarte led to her death and his continued suffering. These facts link Manfred with the Oriental tales, as the illicit love of the heroes leads to their suffering and alienation from all mankind.

Marino Faliero, one of Byron's two Venetian dramas, contains some of the poet's most vigorous denunciations of mankind. Marino Faliero, the Doge of Venice, is betrayed by the ruling aristocracy, who refuse to give just punishment to a man that has insulted the Doge's young wife. Faliero decides to join with a rebellion of the commoners, as Whitmore shows, only to extract his personal revenge,

¹⁸ Whitmore, p. 20.

¹⁹ Andrew Rutherford, Byron: A Critical Study (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 83.

ignoring the good of the state.²⁰ The Doge's language leaves little doubt that he hates the treachery of the ruling class. He calls them the "Patrician pestilence," linking them with disease and the plague:

. . . At length it smote me in my slumbers.
And I am tainted, and must wash away
The plague spots in the healing wave.²¹

The conspirators also view the ruling class with disdain. Calendaro, one of the revolt's leaders, condemns the aristocracy, stating:

. . . They form but links
Of one long chain; one mass, one breath, one body,
They eat, and drink, and live, and breed together,
Revel, and lie, oppress, and kill in concert,--
So let them die as one! (III, ii, ll. 33-37).

Later, when the Doge joins this conspiracy he agrees with this sentence of death for the entire council in order to gain his revenge.

The Doge, though, while conspiring with the plebeians, finds them as distasteful as the aristocrats. He compares them to wolves, who will attack in a brutal pack:

Though Circumstances may keep it in abeyance,
Will urge the rest on like to wolves; the sight
Of blood to crowds begets the thirst of more,
As the first wine-cup leads to the long revel;
And you will find a harder task to quell
Than urge them when they have commenced (IV, ii, ll. 58-63).

Furthermore, when the Doge agrees to work with the conspirators, he almost betrays his true feelings of them:

²⁰ Whitmore, p. 41.

²¹ Lord Byron, Marino Faliero, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 486. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

Chief!--General!--I was General at Zara,
 And Chief in Rhodes and Cyprus, Prince in Venice:
 I cannot stoop----that is, I am not fit
 To lead a band of----patriots (III, ii, ll. 218-21).

Faliero's pregnant pauses in this speech leave unsaid the Doge's true sentiments for the common people. Byron allows the reader's mind to fill in any term of derision and scorn in place of the flattering "patriots."

The Doge shares the same view of man as the narrator in "Darkness." He has no love for his peers or for the common man; the aristocrats are hypocritical and deceitful, while the commoners are just an animal-like mass.

Cain, the final drama to be considered, has interesting links with "Darkness." Cain, of course, is the first man on earth to suffer from a hatred of his fellow beings. Cain is alienated from other men in Byron's play, even before his murder of Abel. Byron wrote that "Cain is a proud man," and his pride and ambition lead him further and further away from his natural kinship with humanity.²² Cain speaks with Satan in an attempt to increase his knowledge, but also to separate himself from the other humans on earth. Cain displays an active contempt for his parents in one outburst of frustration. When Adah, his wife, says they must suffer for their parent's sin, he scornfully replies "what is that/ To us? they sinned, then let them die!"²³ Whitmore feels that Cain "shows little

²² Lord Byron, Letter to John Murray, 3 November 1821, The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, V (London: John Murray, 1898-1901), p. 470.

²³ Lord Byron, Cain, The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, 6th ed., ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1972), p. 644. Further references appear in the text parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

sympathy for the rest of mankind, He is essentially unforgiving and resentful, saving his sympathy for himself, and, only to a lesser extent, for his wife and child."²⁴ We see Cain, therefore, in a similar light as the other major dramatic figures I have discussed in this chapter. Like Manfred and Marino Faliero, Cain is alienated from those surrounding him, and he also has an active disdain for other human beings. Cain also has strong ties to the narrators of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and "Darkness," as he shows no strong love for any human being. He is strongly attached to his wife and child, but he does not display the violent passion for Adah that the Giaour or Mazeppa have for their loves.

One other interesting link exists between Cain and "Darkness." When Cain flies off with Lucifer to learn about Death, Lucifer shows him the ruins of a past world, a world that had been populated by creatures nobler than man. Cain is astounded as Lucifer describes how this world was destroyed:

By a most crushing and inexorable
Destruction and disorder of the elements,
Which struck a world to chaos, as a chaos
Subsiding has struck out a world; such things,
Though rare in time, are frequent in eternity.--
Pass on, and gaze upon the past (II, ii, ll. 80-85).

The language and imagery of this brief view of a fallen world is similar to the language in "Darkness." Moreover, this poem does not explain the reasons for the destruction and chaos, just as "Darkness" never reveals a cause for the end of the universe. Cain, in horror

²⁴ Whitmore, p. 94.

asks Lucifer why this past world fell, and Lucifer's answer is:

"Ask him who fells" (II, 11, 1. 78).

In this chapter I have shown that the content of "Darkness" has many analogues with the body of Byron's work. Each of the five episodes or sections of "Darkness" contributes to the narrator's contempt for man and society. This powerful denunciation of man occurs in many of Byron's poems, especially as a trait of the Byronic hero. In most of Byron's work, though, some hope for man exists. As we have seen in several of these works, the human emotion of love does play an important role. In direct contrast, the narrator of "Darkness" denies the existence of love during the crisis of the destruction of the world. So "Darkness" contains a disdain for mankind which comes closest to the view of man seen in the last two cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and Cain. In both of these works, as in "Darkness," no strong human love can be seen, and little hope for man is possible.

CONCLUSION

Byron reveals his intense and vivid imagination in "Darkness." His vision of the end of the universe occurs rapidly, as image after image flashes by the reader. The imagery within the poem is a major strength. Byron uses fire and light imagery and animal imagery effectively throughout the poem. In addition, the three movements of images: from light to darkness, activity to repose, and a general downward movement, all reinforce the death of all mankind and the death of the universe.

The tone and mood of this poem undeniably stem from the severe depression which Byron underwent during the summer of 1816. One finds this same mood of depression in several other poems he wrote during this period. Byron does allow the tone to get out of control in "Darkness," though. He sustains this dark, gloomy mood throughout the entire poem with no relief. This sustained melancholy only makes Byron's vision seem unrealistic. The poem could have become more frightening if the mood were subtler; instead it becomes somewhat melodramatic with its heavy, Gothic tone. Sir Walter Scott addressed the same point, concluding that "the framing of such phantasms is a dangerous employment for the exalted and teeming imagination of such a poet as Lord Byron, whose Pegasus has ever required rather a bridle than a spur."¹⁵

¹ Scott, p. 204.

Finally, the meaning of "Darkness" has been shown through an examination of the five loosely connected episodes. As the poem progresses, Byron's bitterness and contempt for man becomes clearer. This attitude of his is by no means confined to this poem. In several works Byron or his heroes display similar attitudes towards their fellow man. "Darkness" remains, however, one of Byron's most cynical poems, for he allows man no dignity at all in his final hours.

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