Byron's Childe Harold Pilgrimage: An Overview

Prasun Banerjee
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Kabi Joydeb Mahavidyalaya

Q. When was Byron's *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* published? 2

A. The first two cantos of Byron's Childe Harold Pilgrimage was first published in 1812 though Byron started it back in 1809 in Albania. Canto III was published in 1816 and Canto IV in 1818.

Q. Write a note on the genre and style of Byron's *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*. 5

At the outset the poem is a long narrative poem modelled on the medieval metrical romances. It purports to describe the travels and reflections of a pilgrim who being disgusted with the life of pleasure and revelry, seeks distraction in a foreign land. It contains elements from different branches of poetry. Its continuality is epical, at least in the style of an episodical epic-poem like the *Odyssey*, or the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto. Its descriptions of scenery and sketches of life are idyllic.

Q. Write a note on the notions of a Byronic hero as you find on *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*. 5

Byronic hero often refers to the character of an angry, self-exiled, melancholic and conceited young man that recurs Byron's works like *Childe Harold Pilgrimage*, *Manfred and Cain*, *Don Juan.* Idea of such a character could be first viewed in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* (in the MS the name was first written as Childe Burun, an old form of the name and title of Byron)through the projection of Childe Harold, a deemed-to-be knight who finds the old order of morality and chivalric code to be redundant. These characters are proud, self-centred, tortured outcast and in revolt against the tyranny of social order and authority which are typical characteristic of Byron himself, who was considered the most subjective even among the romantics.

Q. **Which style and stanza pattern Byron has used in *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* and why? 5**

Having intended his poem to be a long narrative poem in the Spenserian mode as in *The Fairy Queen*, Byron has used the Spenserian stanza which consists of eight iambic pentameter lines followed by an alexandrine which is a twelve syllable line where the primary accent falls on sixth and last syllable and the secondary accent on the half line. The Spenserian stanza is extremely literary which exposes the literary ambitions of Byron for writing this poem instead of his desire to write only an autobiographical travelogue.

Q. Characteristics of Byron's Poetry /Byron as a poet of revolution 10

1. **Byron as a revolutionary and a poet of Sensation-**One of the supreme poets of revolutionary and liberty, Byron's poetry voices the spirit of revolution which captured the imagination of Europe in the earlier years of the 19th century. Byron's poems are very sensuous to the extent of being prone to every sensation that a human mind can capture. A rebel against the society, Byron often challenges the very conditions of human life and the supreme exponent of the distinctive forces of revolution.
2. **The Byronic Hero**

3. **Byron as the Satirist-**
   Byron's genius is essentially satiric. In his expression of his scorn, a kind of sublime and reckless arrogance, he has the touch of the master. However, his motive is to a very large extent personal, and so his scorn becomes one-sided sometimes. But the bigness of heart he possess do not let him be mean or misanthropic. But he lacks the bigger vision of a Cervantes, Sterne, Pope or even a Dryden.
4. **Byron as the Poet of Nature**
   To Byron Nature is chiefly earthly and full of sensation. He looks at Nature with a sense of wonder and delight but she does not have any transcendental significance for him. He did not muse reflectively on Nature but was satisfied with her external features.
5. **Byron's narrative genius**
   Byron is a master story-teller in verse. He has the swiftness and energy which makes up whatever defects are there in technique. His tremendous sympathy for humanity is evident in its interest of inspirational individuals.
6. **Byron's lyrical faculty**
7. Byron's is more rhetorical than lyrical. His lyric exudes his moods. He is a master of passionate self-expression.
8. **Byron-the Romantic Paradox**
   He was a man of the world, a representative of the urban part of society and a great admirer of Pope. But unlike Lamb, he does not find beauty in the humdrum elements of social life but in the lofty ideals of revolution and social reformation. On the other hand, he is not a great disciplinarian like Pope, but a free spirit who was fascinated with romantic subjects. In a way, he looks like a counter revolutionary who tried to confine poetry in its old discipline, but he is closer to Rousseau and Chateaubriand than to Pope and Johnson.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage Short Summary

Inspired by Byron's years of wandering through a number of European countries, "Childe Harold's pilgrimage" uses Spenserian stanzas consisting of nine lines each to tell the story of a young male aristocrat who has fled his native land and the life of sensuous excess he enjoyed there for a seemingly aimless tour of Europe. The circumstances of his flight are left unclear, though the text indicates that he was motivated by psychological reasons, perhaps relating to his involvement with a socially unattainable romantic partner. Byron always denied what critics at the time of this work's publication claimed, that it was an example of veiled autobiography. Nonetheless, Byron makes regular authorial intrusions in the text, and his voice is therefore at times hard to distinguish from that of Harold.

The first canto describes Harold's journeys in Portugal and then in Spain, especially his visits to the towns and battle fields where the armies of Napoleon clashed with the British and Spanish forces during the war that would eventually bring about the collapse of the French empire. Byron spends time discussing the women of Aragon, whose endeavor in fighting the French alongside their male counterparts leads him to compare them to the amazons of ancient Greek mythology, though he finds them still more impressive since they did not receive military training and yet found the strength and courage to conduct themselves as warriors. An atmosphere of melancholy and futility haunts the first canto. Harold's past sufferings make it difficult for him to enjoy human festivities, an inability that Harold realizes most keenly when attending a bull fight in Spain. During the second canto, Harold visits Greece, a country then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. When contemplating what remains of Greece's, specifically Athens' famous buildings and landmarks, Byron draws comparisons between the fall of such structures and the Greek people's fall into subjection by a foreign power. He then describes in vivid detail his travels in Albania, a country of which British audiences knew little during Byron's lifetime.

He published the third canto of this work some time after the first two, and its tone, which is more sombre and reproachful than in the previous cantos, reflects the low ebb of the Poet's emotions, a consequence of his now being in exile from his homeland and separated from the person he loved best. Increasingly, Harold finds consolation in nature, especially in grand and sublime settings such as the ocean and the mountains. However he still finds time to visit the occasional battlefield, notably Waterloo in Belgium, where Napoleon was ultimately defeated, to reflect on how the emperor's extremism led to the perversion of the French revolution's lofty ideals. Proceeding then to Switzerland, Byron engages with, and subsequently rejects the theory of the French philosopher Rousseau, as well as those of his contemporaries, Wordsworth and Shelly. The canto ends in mildly optimistic fashion, with the poet insisting that despite his melancholy, he still believes that goodness and happiness are attainable, if not common phenomena in the human world.

The fourth canto sees Harold visiting Italy and the city of Venice which, like Athens, is only a shadow of its former self. The canto is dominated by Byron's remorse and longing for his homeland England, especially for the society of his daughter, from whom he has now been separated for some years. He speculates that his ghost will one day return to England, in the event of his death. The work concludes with Byron speaking directly to the ocean, commenting on its constancy and inscrutability, in contrast to which all human power is petty and meaningless.

Canto III

Canto 3 begins with Byron sadly recalling his daughter, Ada, whom he has not seen since the breakup of his marriage. Byron returns to the story of Harold, first warning readers that the young hero has greatly changed since the publication of the first two cantos. During the interim, Byron has endured the painful separation and the scandal concerning his relationship with Augusta, all of which essentially forced him to leave England. His bitterness is evident in the far darker tone of canto 3, and the character of Harold and that of the narrator, never strikingly different in temperament, now are more clearly merged. Still unable to completely detach himself from feeling the pangs of human compassion, Harold flees to the solitude of natural surroundings, finding nature to be the one true consoler. He feels a communication with the desert, the forest, the ocean, the mountains. Finding Harold at the site of the Battle of Waterloo, "the grave of France," Byron resumes the theme of Napoleon's despotism and takes the opportunity to examine tyranny in general. Praising the heroes of that fateful and momentous battle, Byron blames Napoleon's extremism, arguing that moderation would have prevented the disastrous results of a once noble plan. Harold then travels to Germany, where he still is not immune to feelings of love and joy, however fleeting. Visiting the Swiss Alps leads Harold to the sites of other battles. Lake Leman (Lake Geneva) recalls to Byron the great French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the forerunners of the Romantic movement. This section, it has often been noted, has a distinctly Shelleyan mood, and indeed Byron wrote it while visiting Percy Bysshe Shelley. Byron explores the pantheistic philosophies of William Wordsworth, Shelley, and Rousseau and expresses feelings of oneness with nature, though he ultimately rejects their ideas. These feelings, furthermore, lead him to consider his feelings of alienation in the world of humankind. Insisting that he is neither cynical nor completely disillusioned, Byron insists that he believes that there are one or two people who are "almost what they seem" and that happiness and goodness are possible. Byron concludes the canto as he begins it, lamenting his absence from Ada, imagining what it would be like to share in her development, to watch her grow.

Detailed Analysis of Selected Sections from Canto 3

Stanza 1-

Byron here recollects his daughter, Ada Lovelace, whom he had not seen since he had separated from his wife. He is making his final send-off to her and his homeland. He feels that he has lost all his desires to stay connected with his homeland.

Stanza 2-7

In these stanzas, Byron, the individual comes out of the shadow of poetic persona, Childe Harold and gives an account of his thought process, his past desires and present frustrations through regrets and recollections. First, he is found to be elated having resumed his journey calling the waves his driving force, his guide whose impetuosity and swiftness he surrenders to:

> Still must I on for I am as a weed,
> Flung from the rock, on Ocean's foam, to sail
> Where'er the surge may sweep, the tempest's breath prevail.

He declares to seize the old 'theme' again which tales a tale where he 'finds' 'The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,/ Which, ebbing, leave a sterile track behind .' He is found regretting for having often indulged in 'the weary dream/Of selfish grief or gladness' but his willingness to 'cling' to the old 'theme' 'through a dreary strain' is to 'wean' him away from the selfishness. He seems to find an answer to the eternal debate of the finite human heart nurturing infinite desires claiming that all our private, secret thoughts seek expression through 'airy images' to satiate our incessant craving to create. It is our desire to create through imagination a life more intense than we live, a life that we imagine or wish we might live. Byron is again seen here to regret that the wild life he has lived, a life equivalent to 'A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame' has destroyed his fame and happiness: '...untaught in youth my heart to tame,/My springs of life were poisoned.' And though it is 'too late/Yet am I changed; though still enough the same/In strength to bear what time cannot abate,/And feed on bitter fruits without accusing fate.'

Stanza 8-16

'The long-absent Harold' makes a comeback in Stanza VII though time has also changed him in 'soul and aspect as in age': '...years steal/ Fire from the mind as vigour from the limb;/And life's enchanted cup but sparkles near the brim.' His life has changed forever and though he has tried to fill life his with perpetual spring-spirit, yet in vain. What Byron is probably trying to suggest here that Harold would no longer have the fanciful vision of life as the invisible chain of life has fettered him forever, yet with the keenness still burning he will continue to move on. But one definite change has occurred to his outlook is that he longer finds solace in the company of men or the civilized society but to Nature he turns for companionship. He finds amidst Nature an echo of his 'desolate' voice whereas the human society has always conceived him as a 'restless' and wild brat: '...they spake/ A mutual language, clearer than the tome/ Of his land's tongue...'. Self-exiled Harold decides to start again but this time with no hope of retribution and therefore, with less gloom. Realisation of the meaninglessness of living process has made life much bearable for him.

Stanza 17-35

In this section, Byron proceeds to record his observation on French Revolution and its outcomes, an incident that has profound impact on Byron both as an individual and a poet and also On Napoleon Bonaparte. He praises the lofty ideals of the revolution but puts forward a critique of its extremities. The Revolution, despite all its lofty promise for the proletariat, has finally resulted in being a 'king-making victory' and Waterloo has turned out to be 'the place of skulls', 'the grave of France'. In its endeavour to 'teach all kings true sovereignty ', it has re-established despotism and dictatorship: 'Shall we, who struck the Lion down, shall we/ Pay the Wolf homage?' He calls Napoleon 'one fallen despot', the 'trampler' of Europe's 'vineyards'. He recounts how a scene of merry-making by the youth at the Capital of Belgiam has been replaced by 'a deep sound' of impending doom, of 'the cannon's opening roar' resulting in desolation, in getting 'the cheeks of youth go pale'. The youthful vivacity has been supplanted by 'choking sighs' and 'awful morns', 'lusty life' given way to 'sound of strife' and Nature is seen grieving for the bravehearts who are going to fruitless war never to return again. Byron proceeds to record the names of well-known and little-known personalities like Howard and Frederick Williams, Duke of Brunswick who has sacrificed their lives to the altar of the revolution.However, Byron is quick to indicate at the futility of the lust for fame that all these personalities may have vouched for while throwing themselves to the fire of revolution and casts a doubt over the fact whether Waterloo would be remembered as a place that brought significant change or just a battlefield which ahs devoured so many promising lives with no such gains:

More than enough, thou fatal Waterloo!
Millions of tongues record thee, and anew
Their children's lips shall echo them, and say,
'Here, where the sword united nations drew,
Our countrymen were warring on that day!'
And this is much, and all which will not pass away.(35)

Stanza 36-

There sunk the greatest[1], nor the worst of men,
Whose spirit anithetically mixed
One moment of the mightiest, and again
On little objects with like firmness fixed;
Extreme in all things! hadst thou been betwixt,
Thy throne had still been thine, or never been;
For daring made thy rise as fall: thou seek'st
Even now to reassume the imperial mien[2],
And shake again the world, the Thunderer of the scene!

Annotations: 1. Napoleon Bonaparte, 2. Overbearing attitude

Analysis:

Napoleon Bonaparte, the French politician and dictator who took the reign of France after the Revolution is called here an antithetical personality, full of noble spirit but also with extremities which according to Byron brought about his downfall. Had he been less adventurous and less daring, he might have sustained his reign as well as royal attitude and could again be hailed as one of the world-leaders.

Stanza 37

Conqueror and captive of the earth art thou!
She trembles at thee still, and thy wild name
Was ne'er more bruited in men's minds than now
That thou art nothing, save the jest of Fame,
Who wooed thee once, thy vassal, and became
The flatterer of thy fierceness, till thou wert
A god unto thyself; nor less the same
To the astounded kingdoms all inert,
Who deemed thee for a time whate'er thou didst assert.

Analysis:

Byron continues its mocking tone against Napoleon. He jeers at Napoleon for having claimed to be the 'conqueror' of the earth and goes on to opine that he is remembered by the world when he is no longer an emperor. He is really the mockery of fame who only flatters to deceive. Byron is critical of the over-bearing attitude of the then exiled leader who once thought himself to be 'a god unto thyself.' Now time has taught him a lesson as well as those kingdoms who thought likewise.

Stanza 38

Oh, more or less than man—in high or low,
Battling with nations, flying from the field;
Now making monarchs' necks thy footstool, now
More than thy meanest soldier taught to yield:
An empire thou couldst crush, command, rebuild,
But govern not thy pettiest passion, nor,
However deeply in men's spirits skilled,
Look through thine own, nor curb the lust of war,
Nor learn that tempted Fate will leave the loftiest star.

Analysis:

In his good days, Napoleon thrives in fighting battles with other nations, making the deaths of monarchs (definite reference to the beheading of Louis XVI on the guillotine) the stepping stone to his success. But at present his status is even lesser than the simplest and weakest soldier in his army as he is languishing at St Helena waiting to die. But this monarch who has such a knack for commanding, crushing and governing others, could not govern his temptation to rule, 'the lust of war'. His high time has failed him to understand the fate could ruin even the greatest of the stars.

Stanza 39

Yet well thy soul hath brooked the turning tide
With that untaught innate philosophy,
Which, be it wisdom, coldness, or deep pride,
Is gall and wormwood to an enemy.
When the whole host of hatred stood hard by,
To watch and mock thee shrinking, thou hast smiled
With a sedate and all-enduring eye;
When Fortune fled her spoiled and favourite child,
He stood unbowed beneath the ills upon him piled.

Analysis

Unlike the previous stanzas, this stanza is an eulogization of Napoleon and his indomitable spirit which stands unfledged even amidst adversities. Despite many faults, Napoleon has been hailed as the maker of his own fortune.

Stanza 40

Sager than in thy fortunes; for in them
Ambition steeled thee on to far too show
That just habitual scorn, which could contemn
Men and their thoughts; 'twas wise to feel, not so
To wear it ever on thy lip and brow,
And spurn the instruments thou wert to use
Till they were turned unto thine overthrow:
'Tis but a worthless world to win or lose;
So hath it proved to thee, and all such lot who choose.

Analysis:

Adversity proves to be a better teacher for Napoleon than prosperity. His vaulting ambition in Byron's opinion made him go too far both in scorn and desire which should not constitute the core of one's being and the instruments of hatred and scorn that he has used to make a name for him in the world gets boomeranged for him. For him and for people like him which the speaker may be himself the world proves not to be good enough to 'win or lose'.

Stanza 41

If, like a tower upon a headland rock,
Thou hadst been made to stand or fall alone,

Such scorn of man had helped to brave the shock;
But men's thoughts were the steps which paved thy throne,
THEIR admiration thy best weapon shone;
The part of Philip's son[1] was thine, not then
(Unless aside thy purple had been thrown)
Like stern Diogenes[2] to mock at men;
For sceptred cynics earth were far too wide a den.

1 Alexander the Great 2 Greek Philosopher and Founder of the Cynic School

Analysis:
The scorn of the world has somewhat helped him to brave the shock and stand tall as a valiant warrior. It is here Byron perhaps identifies with Napoleon as he himself has to face a lot of criticism from his countrymen and the civil society. But he also admits that admiration or sympathies of men has vindicated Napoleon's position as a leader where he is comparable to Alexander the Great who faced the same criticism from the Diogenes, the Cynic school of philosophers in ancient Greece. He lashes at the critiques for their negative vision and their readiness to find fault.

Stanza 42

But quiet to quick bosoms is a hell,
And THERE hath been thy bane; there is a fire
And motion of the soul, which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire;
And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,
Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire
Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,
Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

Analysis:
This stanza is a beautiful description of the romantic spirit of aspiration and adventure. Byron clarifies his dislike for quiet and sedate individuals and hails the daunting spirit of Napoleon to always excel beyond one's capacity. Aspire saddled with the horse of desire becomes an indomitable, unquenchable spirit that always focuses upon high 'adventures' and can never tire or rest. This spirit often proves to be fatal for the possessor.

Stanza 43

This makes the madmen who have made men mad
By their contagion! Conquerors and Kings,
Founders of sects and systems, to whom add
Sophists, Bards, Statesmen, all unquiet things
Which stir too strongly the soul's secret springs,
And are themselves the fools to those they fool;
Envied, yet how unenviable! what stings
Are theirs! One breast laid open were a school
Which would unteach mankind the lust to shine or rule:

Analysis:
This spirit to continuously outgrow one's capacities, to outscale one's limits has made men mad with desire and infects their peers with the same madness. This spirit has governed kings and conquerors, bards and statesmen to create, explore and build. But often in their desire to do that they bring sufferings to the world and also suffers themselves. In their achievements they often invite envy of others but in the sufferings they are highly unenviable. Their lives are sorts of learning schools for people of the world ' Which would unteach mankind the lust to shine or rule...'

Stanza 44

Their breath is agitation, and their life
A storm whereon they ride, to sink at last,
And yet so nursed and bigoted to strife,
That should their days, surviving perils past,
Melt to calm twilight, they feel overcast
With sorrow and supineness[1], 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.

Annotations:1. Passivity, indifference

Analysis:

Their revolutionary spirit makes their life stormy without any peace to which they finally perish but their eagerness to strife makes them overcome many lows with elan. But in way their life is self-consuming; they die by the sword they have once upheld and rust without the glory they have always hankered after.

Stanza 45

He who ascends to mountain-tops, shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though high ABOVE the sun of glory glow,
And far BENEATH the earth and ocean spread,
ROUND him are icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head,
And thus reward the toils which to those summits led.

Analysis*:*

Byron here gives his own account of how humongous and lonely adventures for super-human glories finally conclude with icy loneliness and tempest-tossed journeys. One who goes too high in the mountain of success finds himself or herself wrapped in 'clouds and snow'. Besides these, he was also subjected to the envious hatred of those he has passed on the course of his upward journey of life. Going high one may inch closer to the sun of glory and he remains surrounded by 'icy rocks' and tempestuous weather which are final consequences of his summit journey.

Important Questions

10 Marks

Q. Describe Childe Harold as the epitome of the Byronic Hero?

Q. Write an essay on Byron's style as a poet of the Romantic Period/Find out the romantic elements in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

5 Marks

Q. Briefly comment on Byron's portrayal of Napoleon's character.

Q. Write a short note on the Spenserian stanza and its use in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.*

2 Marks

1. **To whom Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is addressed to and why?**
2. **Who is called 'the son of Philip'? Who was he compared to and why?**
3. **Who is Diogenes?**
4. **Why does Byron think that Napoleon is an antithetical personality?**