Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_

Honors English 12 Period: \_\_

Lord George Gordon Byron

(1788 – 1824)

## What Lord Byron did... and why you should care

If Lord George Gordon Byron were alive today, he would be photographed getting out of limos and locking lips with the hottest young women - and men. In his life Lord Byron lived large and wild, cultivating a reputation as "Mad, bad and dangerous to know,"[1](http://www.shmoop.com/lord-byron/citations.html#1) as one of his many lovers put it. He was famous for his devastating good looks and his scandalous personal life - oh yeah, and for his writing. As the author of poems like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Corsair* and *Don Juan*, Byron was famous in his lifetime as a poet of tremendous talent and lyricism.

Lord Byron was a man of serious contradictions. In public he was determined not to take himself seriously, yet he slept with loaded pistols by his bed. He gorged himself on pleasures and grew disillusioned with all life by his 23rd birthday. He cycled through friends and lovers, tiring of them quickly and pining desperately for those he couldn't have. He lived everywhere and yet was at home nowhere. Do you see how this might a tortured artist make? His was a short, tumultuous and daring life, but his legacy lives on in some of the most beautiful poems in the English language.

## Brain Snacks: Tasty Tidbits of Knowledge

Byron's birthplace at 16 Holles Street, London is now occupied by a branch of the English department store John Lewis.

When he arrived at Cambridge in 1805, Byron insisted that his college dorm room be outfitted with glasses, decanters and four bottles each of wine, port, sherry and claret. He also brought his pet bulldog.

Byron's guests at Newstead Abbey were offered drinks in goblets he'd had made out of skulls from the Byron family crypt.

At the cremation of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron asked if he could keep Shelley's skull. Knowing Byron's predilection for skull mugs, Shelley's friend Edward John Trelawny refused.

Byron's hedonistic lifestyle in Europe was not without consequences. By the time he was 21, he suffered from raging cases of gonorrhea and syphilis.

Byron was bisexual and had male and female lovers. He thought that men were smarter but women kissed better.

Think your ex is psycho? When Byron broke up with Lady Caroline Lamb, she staged a sort of pagan ritual in which hired young girls danced around a fire burning Byron's effigy, letters and gifts.She also claimed that if Byron ever married, she would buy a gun and shoot herself in front of the newlyweds.(Fortunately, she didn't go through with it.)

Byron always traveled with a bevy of animals. When he visited Byron in Venice, Percy Shelley recorded: "Lord B's establishment consists, besides servants, of ten horses, eight enormous dogs, three monkeys, five cats, an eagle, a crow and a falcon; and all these, except the horses, walk about the house which every now and then resounds with their unarbitrated quarrels as if they were masters of it. ... later I find that my enumeration of the animals in this Circean palace was defective, I have just met on the grand staircase five peacocks, two guinea hens and an Egyptian crane."

Augusta Ada Byron King, Byron's only legitimate child, gained fame of her own as a mathematician who worked on one of the earliest precursors to the computer.

During his summer with the Shelleys in 1816, Byron suggested the group pass a rainy afternoon by writing ghost stories. It turned out to be a momentous contest in the history of horror. Mary Shelley wrote the story that became *Frankenstein*, and Byron's doctor John William Polidori wrote "The Vampyre," the story that has inspired vampire depictions from Dracula to Twilight.

A publisher accused of pirating Byron's *Cain* and *Don Juan* argued that the poems were so scandalous that they did not deserve the word "copyright."

"Poetry is a distinct faculty, - it won't come when called, - you may as well whistle for a wind.... I have thought over most of my subjects for years before writing a line."

Shmoop Editorial Team. "Lord Byron." Shmoop. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

“She Walks in Beauty”

## In A Nutshell

George Gordon, Lord Byron, was an English poet who wrote during the early nineteenth century. Today, he's mostly associated with the movement we refer to as "Romanticism." The Romantic period wasn't just about sappy love poems (although you'll find a few) – it was a political and social movement, as well. The Romantics were reacting against an eighteenth-century obsession with order, rationality, and scientific precision. (If you want an example, just check out Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* – the man made a graph of his personal virtues!) Romantic-era writers and thinkers believed that these Enlightenment-era philosophers and writers (like Franklin) totally missed the boat when it came to understanding human nature. How can you summarize your own personality in a graph? So Romanticism is partly a reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century. That's why it's called "Romanticism" – not because the literature is all about love (it's not), but because "Romanticism" contrasts so strongly with rationalism.

When we talk about Romantic-era poets, we usually focus on six principal figures. William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth were the oldest, and are generally credited with kicking off this literary movement. The younger generation of poets includes John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. Byron was something of a rock star in his own day – he was wildly popular, but his lavish, decadent lifestyle and loose morals made Lady Caroline Lamb famously describe him as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know."

In fact, Byron was considered so "dangerous to know" that he eventually left Great Britain for continental Europe, where people were less uptight and judgmental about his tumultuous love life. He decided to leave Britain after his wife filed for an official separation in 1816. This separation was a much bigger deal in 1816 than it would be nowadays, when divorces are relatively common things. There were rumors that Byron abused his wife, that he had affairs with various actresses, that he was bisexual, and even that he had an incestuous affair with his half-sister, August Leigh. The jury's still out on a lot of those rumors, and we may never know the whole truth about Byron's love life. Suffice it to say, though, that there was a sufficient hullabaloo over his personal affairs in England that he thought he'd better move out of the country, at least for a while.

Byron ended up settling down near Geneva, in Switzerland. That's where he met poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Shelley's soon-to-be wife, Mary Godwin (a.k.a. Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*). Byron's love affairs didn't cease when he left England – he ended up having an affair with Mary Shelley's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, and had an illegitimate daughter with her.

Byron continued to produce poetry until the end of his life in 1824. He was only 36 when he died – he caught a fever when he was in Greece, helping to fight for Greek independence from Turkey. Although his name was mud in England for a while after he died (those rumors about his half-sister and his other affairs were hard to squelch), he was eventually celebrated as a freedom fighter as well as one of the Romantic period's greatest poets.
"She Walks in Beauty" is an eighteen-line poem, much shorter than Byron's famous narrative poems, like *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or *Don Juan*. But despite its relative brevity, "She Walks in Beauty" has become one of the most well-known and easily recognized poems written by Byron. It was penned in 1814 (before the furor over the breakup of his marriage made him leave England), and published in 1815 in a volume of poems called *Hebrew Melodies*. As the name of the volume suggests, the poems in that volume were written to be set to music. They were originally set to traditional Jewish tunes by composer Isaac Nathan, but several other composers have attempted it since then as well. Check out the "Best of the Web" section for a few examples.

**WHY SHOULD I CARE?**

Before you go any further, we should warn you: "She Walks in Beauty" is not a love poem. Sure, it's a celebration of a woman's beauty, but the speaker never says he's in love with her. He just thinks she's really, really gorgeous.

So, what is so special about this particular poem? There are plenty of songs out there about beautiful women, from The Beatles to Oren Lavie. But Byron did it first, and did a pretty awesome job. Next time you find yourself sitting in a coffee shop, trying to find the right words to describe that beautiful individual you can't get out of your mind, chances are you'll find yourself haunted by the words of Byron, the father of all emo poets.

Shmoop Editorial Team. "She Walks in Beauty." Shmoop. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

She Walks in Beauty

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light 5
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face; 10
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,  15
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Getting At meaning

1. In the first stanza to what is the lady’s beauty compared? Is it darkness? Is it brightness? What is that tender light?
2. How does the second stanza define the lady’s “Nameless Grace” in terms of both darkness and light?
3. In line 17, what is meant by “all below”?
4. **Sound Devices and Mood.** How do consonance, assonance, and alliteration add to the musical quality of this poem? How do they contribute to the prevailing mood? Cite evidence from the poem to back up your answer.
5. **Theme.**  What does the woman’s physical appearance reveal about her. What does this poem suggest about the relationship between body and soul? What similar relation is revealed in this poem? Does the poem support the Romantic concept of the unity of all creation? Explain.

Bring on the tough stuff - there’s not just one right answer.

1. Why do so many people think of this as a love poem, when the speaker never once mentions being in love?
2. Why does the poet compare the woman to "night" instead of to "day"?
3. The poem emphasizes that the woman's beauty has to do with the harmonious blending of light and dark in her features. Does the speaker believe one better than the other? Why or why not, and how can you tell? What do you think?
4. Most critics believe that the woman described in this poem is Byron's cousin by marriage, Lady Wilmot Horton, whom he met at a party the night before writing this piece. If that's true, why doesn't he mention his subject by name? Does your interpretation of the poem change, knowing that it may have been inspired by a specific woman? How so?