

The Image of Darkness in Selected Poems by (George Gordon) Lord Byron

Hassan Abdul Ameer Haraj, Sahar Abdul Ameer Haraj *

Department of English, College of Education, University of Al-Qadisiyah, Diwaniyah, Iraq

* sahar.abudalameer@qu.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT:

Byron in some of his poems utilizes darkness as an image. This image is significant because it bears a hidden political, social and personal meaning. The use of the image of darkness is to express some of Byron's ideas like the sense of the end of the world, the social collapse in relation to its order or hierarchy and the consequences of all these on mankind and the species on earth. It might be a way to show the poet's future view of the universe. In some of those poems he tries to show his view about certain theme in life like nature, spiritual love, and beauty or even political ideas. Byron, in those poems and through utilizing darkness, was after presenting a political, personal as well as ecological views of the world. Consequently, darkness becomes a way to envision and shape the universe in a special image.

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Introduction:

Lord Byron (George Gordon) (1788-1824), one the chief English Romantic poets, is considered the most ostentatious and tarnished one among them. Byron has a tendency towards

reality in which he never lost his association with reality due to the influence of Alexander Pope whom he considered a master. He was also a nonconformist, and had a belief in liberty which was very clear in his endeavors the features of his personality is expressed in different forms and techniques like in satire, verse narrative, ode, lyric, speculative drama, historical tragedy, confessional poetry, dramatic monologue, and seriocomic epic (Steffan, 1997, p40).

Byron is preserved in the popular imagination as being Romantic, enthusiastic, as well as enigmatic with 'cultural immediacy.' During the Romantic Era, to which Byron belongs, the significance of life was the top importance to the romantics. Thus, they struggled to have a fruitful, expressive life in advance to the ills founded in the society.

Among the most important themes during the Romantic era was the theme of light and darkness represented by life and death. Conflicting to the topic of life, there is the subject of death in which both are significant to people as well. Lord Byron, being a romantic, utilize the theme of darkness in some of his poems with reference to death that is related to the people he loved. Those who died earlier or before their time as he himself supposed. Consequently, darkness is an image to represent death he says: "Seasonless, herbless, treeless, man less, lifeless-- A lump of death"(Payne, 2008, p.90-91). Such was the image of life to Byron which is sad and virulent. This is due to the fact that life was filled with adversities like the death of the ones he loved (Bloom, 2004, p. 51).

In his "Darkness" written in 1816, Byron utilizes a speaker who talks about a dream, but not a complete one saying: "I HAD a dream, which was not all a dream," (Byron, 1909, p. 76). This is due to the anticipation made by an astronomer to say that the sun is going to hide itself and this summer is going to be dark without sun. Thus the summer is going to be unpleasant and intemperate leading to people's astonishment. Hence, the earth is going to be gloomy as well as cold leading people to rely on their survival instincts due to the darkness they are living in. such darkness is leading to sadness and despair:

“The bright sun was extinguish'd, 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 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 chill'd into a selfish prayer for light” (Black, 2015, p. 1331).

Consequently, everything gets worse like the birds falling from the sky, snakes losing their malice, the lack of food leading humans to be rummagers, then finally to cannibals. This lead to the earth being just an infertile rock and mankind death:

“On the dull sky,

The pall of a past world; and then again

With curses cast them down upon the dust

And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd,

And, terrified, didflutter on the ground

And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
And twined themselves among the multitude,
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food:
And War, which for a moment was no more,
Did glut himself again: -- a meal was bought
With blood, and each sate sullenly apart
Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;
All earth was but one thought—and that was death”
(Black, 2015, p. 1331)

It is clear that the poet tries to foresee man's behavior that is tend to be an extreme behavior showing people as mere savage animals:

“and the pang
Of famine fed upon all entrails-men
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh
The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,
Till hunger clung them” (Black, 2015, p. 1331).

Though the poem tends to be built upon assumptions as well as guesses, yet there is also this sense factual facts that gives the poem an aspect of reality to some extent. The poem, historically, is affected by the confusion resulted from the "Year without a Summer." In this poem Byron is trying to show his idea, affected by "Year without a Summer", his prophetic view of the future, and what might happen of such a future event. So, darkness here reflects to what extent there is equality between man and the poet's own expectation on what mankind supposed to be at the of this life. A social view here is going to be presented as well, for at the end people are going to be equal, rich and poor. This is due to the fact that at the end people are going to starve because the earth becomes a barren rock, and consequently class distinction is going to be abolished. "Darkness" carries within it an apocalyptic view that is applicable not only to mankind only but to animals as well. The prophetic view is to shed light at war as well leading to the prediction that war is going to end. Quite natural that when people cease to exist,

war and fighting will cease as well. It also provides a prediction that man no longer is going to interfere with the natural order, for the universe has returned to chaos (Black, 2015, p. 1332).

In the classical as well as philosophical tradition light is connected with unity and male while darkness is connected with plurality as well as female. And since darkness is a descendent of chaos, so darkness is feminine and it is the source of all mankind's anguishes. This is what is mentioned at the end of the poem. Personally, Byron in the year of writing the poem lost his wife, child, and sister. Consequently, darkness in this case might refer to the chaos in Byron's life and the losses he witnessed: "Darkness had no need/ Of aid from them-she was the universe" (Guimaraes, 2017, p. 9).

In his "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1816), which is about the story of Francois de Bonnavard, who is a sixteenth century patriot imprisoned for the protection of the freedom of Geneva, chooses a historical figure.

It happens that a prediction of an eruption was supposed to happen during the summer of 1816, its name was Tambora eruption anticipating a "year without summer." Such eruption and the news about it led Byron to make prophesy about the collapse of the human race. This event led many literary figures to write about these climate variations that follows this event as well and such led to the meditation about the downfall of the earth. "Darkness" is considered a historical poem in its nature as well as an anticipating one. Byron tries in this poem to show the horrors of the period after this eruption in actuality as well as the metaphorical revolution of this eruption during its time as well (Cantor, 1984, p. 147).

Byron in his " She walks in Beauty", which was written in 1814, and was part of his volume *Hebrew Melodies* uses darkness to reflect his major theme which is the exceptional beauty of a woman he saw. He tries to create an unearthly portrayal of this woman through bringing contradictory images of dark and white with the shadow of an evening that is light with stars (Cochran, 2010, p. 83). Darkness here is used in terms of opposites related to nature to rejoice the beauty of the woman like the dark hair and the bright eyes:

"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
Which heaven to gaudy day denies" (Zoghbor & Alexiou, 2020, p223)

Thus bringing such opposites together lead to the perfection this woman had while dressed in black being in a status of mourning which means dressed in black. Such dress adds to her enormous beauty as Byron saw it. Also such contradicting features as the shades of dark and light. Are features of nature and considered a standard of beauty. The poet's use of the combination of light and dark may embody another added meaning which is the idea of the woman's purity or the whiteness of her heart in comparison with the dark dress she wore for she owns a "heart whose love is innocent" she walks as a " the night." Consequently, the black

dress she wore is noteworthy due to the fact that she is unable to understand its significance because she got "thoughts serenely sweet" the thing he can figure out. It is because of this innocence that Byron was attracted to her and consider her a source of inspiration and innocence: " a heart whose love is innocent "(Heald, 2011, p. 13).

Darkness in the poem might refer to sexuality or the kind of love that is opposed to spirituality which is represented by light. The perfection of the beauty of the woman comes from the combination of these contradictory things internal which spiritual that is supposed to be illuminated and the external represented by darkness which is supposed to be hidden. Consequently, perfection in another interpretation might refer to art or poetry by pairing these two opposites to reach to art that beautify or bring light to what is ugly or dark to reach a balance. In this way poetry or art is personified by the beautiful woman (McBratney, Onyett & Ward, 2015, p. 78).

Darkness for Byron might mean old age, decay and the fact that man cannot live for eternity. This is well exemplified in his "So We'll Go No more a Roving." In this poem, he uses the nature imagery to explain the idea that the end of this life is darkness or death, he says:

“So, we’ll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright
For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest
Though the night was made for loving, And the day returns too soon,
Yet we’ll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon”

(Black, 2015, p. 9).

Byron in "My Soul is Dark" (1815), uses darkness to show how far sadness might be related to the darkness of the soul and this is what the person in the poem. In the poem there is music heard and the narrator expresses the fact that they listen not for joy rather for a purifying sense of association. Because they were sad. Consequently, darkness here is due to the sense of sadness and sadness make people save happy songs and be connected with the sad ones to cry, to shed tears and to express the dark side that led their soul be mournful. They cannot bear their feelings anymore and they need this sad music to enable them to express the darkness of the soul which represents sadness here (Werman, 2003, p. 127).

“My soul is dark – Oh! quickly string
The harp I yet can brook to hear
And let thy gentle fingers fling
Its melting murmurs o’er mine ear”
“If in this heart a hope be dear,
That sound shall charm it forth again:
If in these eyes there lurk a tear,
‘Twill flow, and cease to burn my brain”
“But bid the strain be wild and deep,
Nor let thy notes of joy be first:
I tell thee, minstrel, I must weep,
Or else this heavy heart will burst;
For it hath been by sorrow nursed,
And ached in sleepless silence, long;
And now ’tis doomed to know the worst,
And *break* at once – or yield to song”

(Byron, 1860, p. 91)

The poem is written due to the sadness Byron felt after making self-imposed exile in London due to the bad rumors spread about him due to his bad relations. Darkness in Byron's poem "Ode to Napoleon" took a political significance. This is due to the fact that the poem was written due to the shock Byron got when his political ideal Napoleon suddenly abandoned his lead of the Revolution. Consequently, it was a calamity to Byron. Byron, like the Romantics, considered the revolution and its leader ideals, he was affected and agitated by napoleon's performance, he was for him an idol image, a human divinity, but after the waterloo this idealistic and divine image was distorted, smashed and stained. Thus Byron turns against Napoleon, and against himself because of his belief in Napoleon and considering him a hero with human divinity while he discovered him less than human failure, he proves to be not better than the worst bitter ordinary man and less impressive as well. He addresses him saying:

“And now thou art a nameless thing:
So abject—yet alive!
Is this the man of thousand thrones,

Who strew'd our earth with hostile bones,
And can he thus survive?
Since he, miscalled the Morning Star"

(Byron, 1860, p. 91).

Byron consider the fall of Napoleon as the worst one, it is a fall to darkness, that is worse than the fall of Lucifer or any other one had ever fell he says: " Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far." Byron, in the second stanza of the poem uses a sense of irony when he calls him:

"Ill-minded man! why scourge thy kind
Who bow'd so low the knee?
By gazing on thyself grown blind,
Thou taught'st the rest to see
With might unquestion'd,—power to save,—
Thine only gift hath been the grave,
To those that worshipp'd thee;
Nor till thy fall could mortals guess
Ambition's less than littleness!"

(Byron, 1860, p. 91).

This means that Napoleon turns to be a traitor to all those who worship him bringing disappointment to them and staining his hero image. Another dimension might be added to the character of Napoleon being a hero who fails to achieve heroism which is his being a tragic hero. This might be connected with his "Dark Spirit" this means that no longer Napoleon is a sage or a wise person but he turns to be a wicked person:

"The triumph and the vanity,
The rapture of the strife—
The earthquake voice of Victory,
To thee the breath of life;
The sword, the sceptre, and that sway
Which man seem'd made but to obey,
Wherewith renown was rife—

All quell'd—Dark spirit! what must be
The madness of thy memory!"

(Byron, 1860, p. 91).

Thus, Byron changes his tone in the poem from admiration towards Napoleon into irony towards a person who might be ill-minded with a dark or evil spirit of pride that led him towards loss (Jamil, 2019, p. 75-84).

"The Prisoner of Chillon" is another poem by Byron that dealt with the image of darkness. The poem is about a real prisoner who had been imprisoned in the Castle of Chillon between 1526-1432, his name was François Bonnavard, a writer and his imprisonment was due to his belief. It was because he hates being imprisoned for one's own belief, Byron wrote the poem. In the poem the prisoner is living in darkness, in his prison under the earth, a dungeon. The situation is so horrible that he wishes death due to his desperation:

"I had no earthly hope—but faith;
And that forbade a selfish death?"

(Byron, 1898, p.36).

Being in his dark prison, the speaker might felt confusion to think of himself as a king, a powerful king who controls everything. Yet this power is limited to his prison, cell and his own subjects were only mice and insects:

"And I, the Monarch of each race,
Had power to kill – yet, strange to tell!?" (Byron, 1898, p.37).

There is this sense of irony with the meaning of a real king who practices real deeds of the king. There is a reference also to insight which is related to darkness: "We could not see each other's? face, / But with that pale and livid light/ That made us strangers in our sight;?" (Byron, 1898, p.37).

The sense of desperation might lead to hope where the prisoner does not have but he got only faith because his imprisonment was due to his beliefs: "I had no earthly hope – but faith" (Byron, 1898, p.37).

Byron when writing the poem, he did not know that Bonnavard was a highly-respectable martyr for Republican liberty and a foe of the Duke and bishops, he was also a pattern of charity and tolerance. Darkness here represents loss to the prisoner for it foreshadows the death of his brothers. They died one by another and he was unable to help them. He then turned to be a 'wreck' due to his sufferings and grief to the extent that he cannot distinguish between light and dark or life and death because he turned to be with "no thought, no feeling" which means that he has lost not only the light but also darkness for he becomes numb as a stone, similar to the pillar he is chained to:

"What next befall me then and there

I know not well—I never knew—
First came the loss of light, and air,
And then of darkness too:
I had no thought, no feeling—none—
Among the stones I stood a stone,
And was, scarce conscious what I wist,
As shrubless crags within the mist;
For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;
It was not night—it was not day;
It was not even the dungeon-light,
So hateful to my heavy sight,
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, and a stirless breath
Which neither was of life nor death;
A sea of stagnant idleness,
Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless!"

(Byron, 1898, p.37)

The prisoners in this prison are dehumanized and the oppression they suffer make them unable to eradicate the terror being "lying still" in the heart of each one of them or even remove the darkness that dwell's there: "Within midnight always in one's heart, And twilight in one's cell" (Byron, 1898, p.37).

This is because prisoners live "each in his separate Hell" Such hell or hellish prison is further enhanced by the appearance of 'Lord of Death' and 'Deread and Doom' together with the predominant darkness. Such creates the sense of sin as well as entrapment leading to that sense of dark disgrace that comes as a result of man's 'grim justice'. Consequently, this leads to a prolonged torture, which includes food, drink, and sleep deprivation. Therefore, this kind of treatment leads the prisoners to be deprived of what is left from their humanity (Kędra-Kardela & Kędzińska, 2028, p. 149-164). The sufferings of the prisoners that includes their

being humiliated and being turned into 'mad grief' makes them relive Christ's despair before his own death on the Cross. It is a kind of having deep faith in Christ's redemption and consequently the prison changes from prison cells into spaces of prayer, leading to the change from sacred to profane (Kędra-Kardela & Kędzierska, 2028, p. 149-164).

In another poem entitled "Love and Death", the image of darkness expresses his prophecy of expecting his own death:

“And when convulsive throes denied my breath
The faintest utterance to my fading thought,
To thee—to thee—e’en in the gasp of death
My spirit turned, oh! oftener than it ought”

(Bloom,2009, p. 115).

This prophecy is because he was ill when he was sailing to Missolonghi for Greek War of Independence (1821-32) he says:

“I watched thee when the foe was at our side, Ready to strike at him—or thee and me, Were safety hopeless—rather than divide Aught with one loved save love and liberty”

(Bloom,2009, p. 115)

Later on he survived this illness to write "On This Day I Complete My 36 Year" (1824). Which is the last poem of his, Byron turned to explain his feelings about his life and about freedom. The poem consists of ten stanzas and has been written on the eve of his birthday (Dick, 1978, p. 182). Byron died three months later due to another fever. The poem talks about darkness which is the fatal end for the poet, death, that he is anticipating (Dick, 1978, p. 182).

“My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of Love are
Gone;
The worm—the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!” (Dick, 1978, p. 183)

But the darkness he talks about is different here. He is searching for darkness, he wants darkness represented by death, but a darkness which is not dark rather it is the opposite. He is after a memorable death and he goes towards it. He wanted to die a warrior, a hero, a defender of love, his love towards Greece and defender for freedom which is the liberation of Greece, he says:

“But 'tis not *thus*—and 'tis not *here*
Such thoughts should shake my Soul,

Nor *now*,

Where Glory decks the hero's bier,

Or binds his brow,

The Sword, the Banner, and the Field, Glory and Greece around us see!

The Spartan borne upon his shield

Was not more free” (Dick, 1978, p. 183).

Consequently, he wishes to die like a soldier in the battlefield, and in this case darkness is not going to be dark, rather it is going to be Glory. That's why he himself was searching for death rather than waiting for it:

“Seek out—less often than found—

A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;

Then look around, and choose thy Ground,

And take thy rest” (Dick, 1978, p. 184).

Consequently, darkness for Byron might stand for different things, but in his last poem it represents for him victory, light as well as glory which is his dream being romantic and revolutionary at the same time. Long in his poetry he was after the configuration of the hero, and not any traditional hero, this is the Byronic hero. His death and the darkness he walks towards was truly the choice of a Byronic hero since the death was not death but life.

Conclusion:

Among the most important themes that Byron uses in his poetry is theme of darkness. Darkness was a major image in Byron's poetry. By using it in his poetry, he is after conveying many ideas like fear of the unknown future especially when there is a scientific foreshadowing about a bad future. It might also mean the inequality between men during Byron's time. Darkness also used critically to show the degradation of humankind. It too refers to the creation of dramatic feelings, gloom and mystery, or revolution against the unsatisfactory conditions people are living. Love was also among the varied meanings behind the use of darkness in Byron's poetry as well as the ability to stand the miseries man is living because there is always a light behind the darkness of the tunnel.

صورة الظلام في قصائد مختارة لجورج كوردن لورد بايرن

حسن عبدالامير حرج، سحر عبدالامير حرج *

قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية التربية، جامعة القادسية، الديوانية، العراق

* sahar.abudalameer@qu.edu.iq

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ملخص البحث:

يستخدم بايرون في بعض قصائده الظلام كصورة للتعبير عن بعض أفكاره مثل التعبير عن شعور نهاية العالم، والانهيار الاجتماعي فيما يتعلق بنظامه أو تسلسله الهرمي وعواقب كل هذا على البشرية والأنواع على الأرض. قد تكون طريقة لإظهار نظرة الشاعر المستقبلية للكون. في بعض تلك القصائد، يحاول إظهار وجهة نظره حول موضوع معين في الحياة مثل الطبيعة والحب الروحي والجمال أو حتى الأفكار السياسية. كان بايرون، في تلك القصائد ومن خلال استخدام الظلام، يسعى إلى تقديم وجهات نظر سياسية وشخصية وكذلك بيئية للعالم. وبالتالي، يصبح الظلام وسيلة لتصور وتشكيل الكون في صورة خاصة.