

Analysis of George Gordon Byron's "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year"

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Abstract:

George Gordon Byron's poem "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year", written shortly before his death during the Greek War of Independence, comprises ten quatrains with an ABABCD CD rhyme scheme. It reflects his disillusionment, loneliness, and mortality awareness, marking a shift from romantic despair to a focus on heroic purpose and freedom. The narrative evolves in three stages: lamentation, resolution, and awakening. Compared to China's Song Dynasty "Heroic and Unrestrained Ci" represented by Xin Qiji, Byron's heroism centers on personal struggle and individual immortality, while Xin's emphasizes unfulfilled patriotic duty and collective good, reflecting cultural differences in heroic ideals.

Keywords: George Gordon Byron; "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year"; Byronic hero; heroism; Xin Qiji; Heroic and Unrestrained Ci

On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year

Missolonghi, 8 January 22, 1824¹

George Gordon Byron

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet, though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!

My days are in the yellow leaf;

¹ This poem was written by Lord Byron in 1824, shortly before his death. At the time, Byron was in Greece, where he had joined the fight for Greek independence against the Ottoman Empire.

The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

The fire that on my bosom preys
Is lone as some volcanic isle;
No torch is kindled at its blaze—
A funeral pile.

The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
The exalted portion of the pain
And power of love, I cannot share,
But wear the chain.

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 me see!
The Spartan, borne upon his shield,
Was not more free.

Awake! (not Greece—she is awake!)
Awake, my spirit! Think through whom
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,
And then strike home!

Tread those reviving passions down,

Unworthy manhood!—unto thee
Indifferent should the smile or frown
Of beauty be.

If thou regrett'st thy youth, why live?
The land of honorable death
Is here: — up to the field, and give
Away thy breath!

Seek out — less often sought than found —
A soldier's grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy ground,
And take thy rest. (Ferguson & Salter, 2004)

“On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year” was written by Lord Byron in 1824, shortly before his death. At the time, Byron was in Greece, where he had joined the fight for Greek independence against the Ottoman Empire. The poem is made up of ten four-line stanzas with the rhyming scheme of ABABCD CD. The poem reflects his sense of disillusionment, loneliness, and awareness of his mortality. Byron, once known for his passionate and tumultuous romantic life, expresses a desire to find purpose, heroism and glorious sacrifice rather than romantic relationships. The poem marks a turning point in his life, shifting from romantic despair to a sense of duty and freedom, as he prepared to face the challenges of war.

The narrative of this poem can be divided into three stages, reflecting the evolution of the author's thoughts and emotions: from lamentation to resolution and ultimately, awakening. In the first four stanzas, the speaker mourns the loss of youth and love, feeling profoundly isolated and desperate. The metaphor is particularly striking here — he compares himself to “yellow

leaves (in autumn)” and love to “gone flowers and fruit,” symbolizing his ailing body and fading love respectively. At the same time, he wrestles with loneliness and death, comparing himself to a solitary volcanic island and his life to a funeral pile. These images reflect the dark, decaying, hopeless, and sorrowful tone of this section.

The fifth stanza marks a significant transformation in tone, as the author breaks free from the chains of personal emotions and finds an unswerving, heroic determination. Inspired by the warriors around him, this sets the foundation for his transition from personal love to heroism and the awakening of his will.

The last four stanzas reveal his awakening — abandoning personal love in favour of devotion to the revolution, seeking immortal glory. The tone becomes enthusiastic and direct. However, the sacrifice he is willing to make is not entirely selfless. He compares himself to the Greek warriors and passionately exclaims, “The Spartan, borne upon his shield, Was not more free,” expressing a desire to become an immortal legendary hero and achieve ultimate freedom. One of the most noteworthy aspects of this poem, aside from its abundant literary devices, is the embodiment of the romantic “Byronic hero” — a complex figure marked by deep, intense affection and hatred, often cynical, proud, desolated, and tormented by inner misery. The personality the author portrays in this poem is undoubtedly a reflection of this.

In classical Chinese Song Ci (宋词), there is also a genre known as the “Heroic and Unrestrained Poetic School” (háofàngpài, 豪放派), which conveys the ideal of heroism. One of its prominent representatives is Xin Qiji (辛弃疾, 1140-1207). Compared to the heroic image portrayed in Byron’s poetry, Xin Qiji’s works, while also expressing cynicism, regret over the passing of youth and the eagerness to sacrifice, differ in significant ways. Unlike

Byron's pursuit of personal immortality and salvation, Xin Qiji's poems are imbued with the sorrow of being unable to serve his country and an unrestrained spirit in the face of life's hardships. In other words, it is not despondent but heroically tragic. This highlights a key distinction between traditional Chinese heroism and Byronic heroism. Here are excerpts from two of Xin Qiji's poems for readers to appreciate.

The first one is "Water Dragon Chant" (水龙吟):

Don't say for food
The perch is good!
When west winds blow,
Why don't I homeward go?
I'd be ashamed to see the patriot,
Should I retire to seek for land and cot.
I sigh for passing years I can't retain;
In driving wind and blinding rain
Even an old tree grieves.
To whom then may I say
To wipe my tears away
With her pink handkerchief or her green sleeves?¹ (Xu, 2011)

Since the "driving wind and blinding rain" symbolize the nation's political and warlike turmoil, it is evident that the author is wiping tears for his country and feels ashamed of his own incapability while still calling himself a patriot. The second one is "Tune: Congratulations to the Bridegroom" (贺新郎):

That I should have aged so!
And my fellows, alas! how many still remain?

¹ The original Chinese Ci is: 休说鲈鱼堪脍，尽西风，季鹰归未？求田问舍，怕应羞见，刘郎才气。可惜流年，忧愁风雨，树犹如此！倩何人唤取，红巾翠袖，搵英雄泪！

Life spent with naught to show
But hair turned silvery in vain.
Yet with a smile I part
With all that is mundane,
Whereof nothing gladdens the heart.
Charming are mountains green.
I would expect the feeling to be
Mutual, for we
Are somewhat alike, in mood and mien.¹ (Xu, 2011)

The narrative of this poem includes missing friends and drinking, while also incorporating landscape appreciation. It expresses the poet's sorrow over the flying of time, unfulfilled ambitions, and the difficulty of finding a true confidant, as well as his integrity in preferring to immerse himself in nature rather than pursue worldly fame and fortune.

Byron and Xin Qiji both present unique visions of heroism, shaped by their different cultural contexts. Byron's heroes are marked by personal struggle and existential angst, embodying the Byronic heroism of melancholy, intense self-reflection and a quest for individual freedom. In contrast, Xin Qiji's heroism is rooted in patriotism and duty shaping by Confucians idealism. His poetry reflects a commitment to serving his country amidst political upheaval, emphasizing sacrifice for the collective good over personal redemption. These differing perspectives illustrate how cultural and historical contexts shape the expression of heroic ideals.

¹ The original Chinese Ci is: 甚矣吾衰矣。怅平生、交游零落，只今余几！白发空垂三千丈，一笑人间万事。问何物、能令公喜？我见青山多妩媚，料青山见我应如是。情与貌，略相似。

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