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The Revival of the Byronic Hero in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study the unforgettable character of Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), arguing that he epitomizes the then-forgotten literary archetype of the Byronic hero, a point frequently overlooked in existing analyses. Through an in-depth examination of Porter's complex persona and of the key moments and dynamics in the play, the paper draws parallels between him and some of the most significant Byronic heroes in literary history. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute a fresh perspective to the interpretation of this character, to show how John Osborne brought the riveting archetype back to life in a post-war context, and to enrich the broader discourse on Byronic heroes in 20th-century drama.

Keywords: John Osborne, Look Back in Anger, Lord Byron, Byronic hero, archetypes

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Introduction

Ever since its first performance in 1956, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* has been dubbed a revolution in British theatre. While the play touches on a wide range of issues from masculinity to colonialism and has generated rigorous debates on various topics, the kitchen sink drama's vibrancy comes from its unforgettable main character of Jimmy Porter, who served as a conduit for John Osborne's criticisms of post-war Britain and came to represent the younger generation's frustration, confusion, and alienation. Set in a dismal, cramped attic in the Midlands, the plot of *Look Back in Anger* revolves around the tumultuous relationships of a young group of individuals, the working-class intellectual Jimmy Porter, his upper-class wife Alison, their friend Cliff, and Helena, who later becomes Jimmy's mistress. On the surface, the play portrays the marital conflicts between Jimmy and Alison, their separation, and eventual reconciliation; it underlines the challenges inherent in a union when the partners have vastly different social upbringings. This straightforward premise, however, contains a much deeper exploration of the sociopolitical landscape of post-war Britain. At one point during the play, Jimmy's wife Alison, all too aware of her husband's permanent troubled condition, states that Jimmy "*should have been another Shelley.*"[1] What she does not realize, though, is that rather than the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Jimmy more resembles Mr. Shelley's close friend Lord Byron and his legendary creation, the Byronic hero. While this hero figure scarcely made an appearance in the first half of the 20th-century literary scene compared to the previous century in which he had taken center stage, John Osborne was able to bring him back to the spotlight through his fiery protagonist Jimmy Porter, who is one of the best examples of this literary archetype as he embodies most if not all of the qualities that make up the Byronic hero.

The Byronic Hero: Definition and Historical Context

To say that Lord Byron was the sole creator of the Byronic hero would be incorrect; he had an abundance of literary inspirations that he used to give shape to his extraordinary creation. In fact, according to the scholar Peter Thorslev, "*the Byronic Hero shows the elements of every major type of Romantic hero.*"[2] He carries within himself the Child of Nature, the Hero of Sensibility, the Gothic Villain, the Man of Feeling, the Noble Outlaw, the Gloomy Egoist, and more. However, the reason why the Byronic hero came to be "*the figure with the most far-reaching consequences for nineteenth-century Western literature*"[3] as opposed to other Romantic heroes was because of Byron's incredibly compelling blending of these different components into a single, fascinating figure. Although many critics have varying descriptions of this hero, certain commonalities are also present. The Byronic hero is typically an independent, proud, defiant, cynical, misanthropic, and melancholy male figure. He is tormented by reasons often clouded in mystery; he either fails to achieve certain goals or experiences great loss, usually something to do with love. He is ambitious, aspirational, aggressively individualistic, and quick-tempered. He has his own moral code, an inflated sense of his own superiority, and a touch of the Promethean spark.[4] He is a solitary figure because he lacks the ability to relate to others; his loneliness might also stem from self-exile or being an outlaw. He disdains social hierarchies and institutions, and either passively or actively works against them. As Thorslev remarked, he represents "*a rebellion which asserted the independence of the individual and the primacy of his values not only in the face of society but even in the face of God*,"[5] very much like John Milton's Satan, a pre-Byronic hero, who thought it was "*Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.*"[6] Despite all this, however, the hero also has a touch of vulnerability within him. As Peter Manning stated, he is "*a thwarted figure, ignorant of his essential self, who represses his inner dismay under a shell of sternness,*"[7] and is capable of deep affection and finer sensibilities despite his hardened nature.

Archetypal heroes inevitably carry the very spirit of the age in which they were created. Their "*life mirrors not so much the events of the age as its tastes, its values, its aspirations and hopes for the future.*"[8] Aside from the personal experiences and beliefs of its creator, the aforementioned nature of the Byronic hero owes a great deal to the extremely turbulent and complex atmosphere that prevailed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Age of Revolution. This was an era of remarkable political, economic, and social changes that saw the birth of new nations and the death of old ones. Whereas rationalism, reason, refinement, and order had been the ideals of the previous century, emotions, individualism, imagination, and freedom came to define the spirit of the age in the early 19th century. Consequently,

[1] John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1994), 103.
[2] Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 4.
[3] Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, 3.
[4] Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television* (Illinois: Southern Illinois UP, 2009), 8.
[5] Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes,* 172.
[6] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (Oxford UP, 2005), 25.
[7] Peter J. Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1978), 61.
[8] Thorslev, The Byronic Hero: *Types and Prototypes*, 19.

the revolutions, wars, and upheavals of the age were reflected in the fervent and defiant nature of the Byronic hero, who was often alienated and disillusioned with the world around him, who critiqued the moral decay and artifice of society, who stood against the unjust and oppressive constraints of power structures, who rejected conformity, and who upheld his autonomy despite stifling societal expectations. The hero's plight resonated with readers; they found in the Byronic hero a reflection of their own disquietudes and disillusionments. As Atara Stein argued, the hero's readers were aware of their own helplessness "*in the face of institutional authority and the combination of wealth and power. Thus, the heroes' defiance of institutional authority and their capacity to succeed in that defiance, if only temporarily, is a most important aspect of their audience appeal.*"[9] Therefore, the turmoil of the 19th century combined with the sensational life and death[10] of Lord Byron himself allowed the Byronic hero to become not just a literary archetype but also an icon of autonomy, resistance, and resilience to its audience. Considering these, John Osborne not surprisingly was able to create the perfect Byronic hero who served as a vessel for the playwright's political and social commentary in post-war Britain, which carried the same chaotic atmosphere that had led to the hero's creation more than a century before.

Post-War Britain

After World War II, Britain was grappling with the devastating aftermath of the war, even though it had ended in victory. The cost was immense as over 300,000 British soldiers and civilians had been killed and many more had suffered severe injuries. Cities, towns, railways, and roads had been shattered by bombs because of the Blitz. Families had been torn apart and uprooted, and the country was overwhelmed by the trauma that was affecting everyone both physically and psychologically. Furthermore, the end of the war and transition to peace did not bring instant relief or a return to the status quo. Instead, a slow process of adapting to social and political circumstances that were unfamiliar to the previous generations occurred. The British Empire was practically stripped of all its foreign financial resources and gradually lost its economic, military, and political power. It grappled with decolonization through India and Pakistan becoming independent in 1947, as well as with economic instability, class conflict, immigration, and social unrest, and went through a period of substantial change. The loss of its imperial lands, the death of Stalin in 1953, the race for the acquisition of nuclear power, the threat of the Cold War, and the Suez Crisis altered the power dynamics in international politics, and Britain struggled to find a new place for itself in a dynamic world. These developments only heightened people's anxieties and fears, which had already been intensified by the memories of the war. To re-establish a sense of safety and well-being in the country, a careful reconstruction of British life was believed to be necessary, and this belief shaped much of the post-war social and welfare policies. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, although both the Labour and Conservative administrations implemented numerous measures aimed at actualizing their post-war idealism, they could not achieve any genuine fundamental change. Combined with the failure of these measures, the post-war austerity, political pessimism, disillusionment, economic hardships, social inequalities, conservatism, and cultural stagnation created a mood of bleakness and inertia in post-war Britain, especially for the underprivileged members of society.

Unraveling Porter's Persona

Such was the backdrop of John Osborne's groundbreaking play *Look Back in Anger*. It was first staged in 1956, and while the war itself was not the central issue, its impact on society and especially on the youth was at the very heart of the play. It displayed how the young generation of post-war British society had come to be disillusioned with the traditional ideals of religion, empire, class, education, and the English identity and severely critiqued these established norms and institutions through its protagonist Jimmy Porter. Just like the first Byronic heroes who were reactions to the turbulent age in which they had been created, Jimmy Porter was John Osborne's reaction to the bleak and confusing state of affairs in Britain, and he managed to create the perfect 20th-century iteration of this fascinating archetype.

The first description of Jimmy Porter in the play denotes the kind of dichotomy Byronic heroes always demonstrate. He is described as "*a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty; restless, importunate, full of pride, a combination which alienates the sensitive and insensitive alike.*"[11] As the character Helena remarks, he is both horrifying and oddly exciting. This image is typical of the Byronic hero, who is usually a

[9] Atara Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 10.

[10] Lord Byron, an ardent advocate for liberal causes and independence, supported the Greek War of Independence. He joined the cause and assumed the command of a brigade. Unfortunately, he fell ill with a fever and passed away in Missolonghi on April 19, 1824, shortly after turning 36. His death was met with profound grief, and he was revered as a hero by the Greek people.

[11] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 6.

man of extremes. In fact, it closely resembles the description of Byron's Lara,[12] who was noted to contain "*[m]uch to be loved and hated, sought and feared.*"[13] Lara is Byron's charismatic yet woeful outlaw-hero and, very much like Jimmy, has "*in him a vital scorn of all [events] / As if the worst had fallen which could befall,*"[14] yet he still has "*more capacity for love than Earth / Bestows on most mortal mould and birth.*"[15] This dichotomy of dark and light is what makes these heroes so fascinating to behold. Just like other Byronic heroes, Jimmy is certainly not someone with whom a person could easily sympathize. He is described as a man who alienates love. Furthermore, while his wife Alison dubs him a "*spiritual barbarian*,"[16] some critics have called him a "*volcano of ceaseless, sputtering venom.*"[17] Despite all this, the audience and the characters of the play cannot help but be drawn to Jimmy, as his vibrant energy, inner turmoil, ability to balance the best and worst of the human condition, and, most importantly, the vulnerability he is able to show when he lets his guard down make him an attractive hero. His eloquently explicit anger is another reason for his undeniable appeal to the audience for it becomes their anger. As E.G. Bierhaus stated, "*Audiences and readers may - and do - reject Jimmy's savage selfishness, but they cannot reject his anger because vicariously they enjoy it so much.*"[18] With his constant attacks against stifling societal norms and power structures, Jimmy is able to say what the audience would have liked to say out loud. This is also a typical reaction for the Byronic hero's audience; it was the same in Byron's time as well as in Osborne's, because "*the audience, powerless in the face of institutional authority, cheers the hero's defiance of this authority and glories in the vicarious experience of this defiance*."[19] Although not a very pleasant character, Jimmy, like other Byronic heroes, represents the darker emotions and worries of not a single individual or a generation but of all humanity, which is why he was able to become an undeniably charismatic mouthpiece for Osborne in the post-war atmosphere, just as Byron's heroes had for the poet.

The alienation, defiance, fiery spirit, quick temper, and angst that are quintessential to the Byronic hero are embedded, either obviously or latently, in Jimmy Porter's every speech and action. The play opens with Jimmy and Cliff reading the newspapers on a calm Sunday while Alison is ironing. Jimmy later tosses the papers angrily and starts the action of the play. In the very first few moments, he relentlessly attacks Cliff, Alison, the posh papers, Christianity, the American Age, and the upper classes. It is as if "*the torpor of a normal English Sunday afternoon sums up the nation's lethargy*"[20] for him. In the harsh, inhuman, and stifling atmosphere of post-war Britain, without any good or brave causes left for which to care, the younger generation "*had a baffled sense of purposelessness, a feeling that it had no roots in the past and no hope for the future, leading to a sense of alienation in all walks of life,*"[21] and Jimmy is undoubtedly the embodiment of this frustrated generation that suffered from political and spiritual apathy. He is a young working-class man who has been educated beyond his class identity in what he deems a white-tiled university, one of the new institutions created by the Mass Educational Act of 1944. However, because he cannot do anything worthwhile with his education due to the still-existent rigid patterns of class division, he cannot find or make a suitable place for himself in society. He has tried working as an advertising agent, a salesperson, and a journalist in the past and has to run a sweets stall to make a living, which he feels is not a suitable job for a man of his education. Consequently, Jimmy finds himself without purpose, unable to move anywhere and do anything, which leads to his severe sense of disillusionment and alienation. Nothing seems to be sacred to Jimmy; he even rages against the church bells, claiming that they are making him mad, hinting at the younger generation's anger at the ideals upheld by the Church, one of the most important tools of oppressive power structures.

Jimmy's extreme alienation extends to the people closest to him. He approaches everything and everyone with suspicion, claiming "*Living night and day with another human being has made me predatory and suspicious.*"[22] Just as Byron's unforgettable heroes Childe Harold, Manfred, and Lucifer, Jimmy also "*provide[s] images of complete independence from any considerations, social, lawful, institutional, or religious.*"[23] Because he lacks faith in all institutions and finds them hypocritical, insincere, and useless, Jimmy creates what Alison describes as his own

[12] Lara, the hero of Byron's last Turkish tale *Lara* (1814), is a Gothic villain turned sympathetic. He is an aristocrat who leaves his ancestral lands and becomes a pirate. When he returns home, he openly challenges social conventions and institutional authorities and later becomes the leader of a peasant revolt. Other nobles eventually kill him.
[13] George Gordon Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 17.
[14] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 18.
[15] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 18.
[16] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 103.
[17] Graham A. Dixon, "Still Looking Back: The Deconstruction of the Angry Young Man in *Look Back in Anger* and *Déjàvu." Modern Drama 37*, no. 3 (1994): 522.
[18] E.G. Bierhaus, "No World of Its Own: *Look Back in Anger* Twenty Years Later." *Modern Drama 37*, no. 1 (1976): 54.
[19] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 3.
[20] Aleks Sierz, *John Osborne's Look Back in Anger*, (London: Continuum, 2008), 14.
[21] S. Chelliah, "The Theme of Alienation as Projected Through the Character Portrayal of Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*: An Appraisal." *European Journal of English Language Teaching 1*, no. 2 (2016): 142.
[22] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 51.
[23] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 4.

"*private morality*,"[24] just like the Byronic hero, who "*in his self-sufficiency, creates a law unto himself and refuses to be subject to any external authority or conventional values.*"[25] The alienation and isolation caused by all this, as well as the intellectual inertia that he believes affects everyone regardless of their circumstances, makes Jimmy feel stuck in a wasteland where, according to him, "*nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions, and no enthusiasm.*"[26] In classic Byronic haughtiness, however, Jimmy has a strong sense of superiority, seeing himself as exceptional. He believes that, unlike others around him, he possesses a burning virility of mind and spirit with no viable outlet for his energy and that he is trapped in an age of apathy with people inferior to him, which is another underlying reason for his plight. Similarly, Byron's Napoleon is also described as having "*a fire / And motion of the soul which will not dwell / In its own narrow being*"[27] and "*a fever at the core, / Fatal to him who bears.*"[28] This similarity with Byron's Napoleon is especially curious because, as Helena believes, Jimmy was "*born out of his time,*"[29] and when she talks to him, she feels as if he thinks "*he's still in the middle of the French Revolution. And that's where he ought to be, of course.*"[30] These characters are restless, always wandering, and always aspiring for more. In Jimmy's case, however, something more is unattainable as he believes he can gain nothing further in life, or more appropriately, that there is nothing further to gain in life in its current state. As per Helena's assessment, Jimmy "*doesn't know where he is, or where he's going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything.*"[31] He believes that he must reside in a world of his own creation and positions himself apart from everything and everyone, calmly stating, "*damn you, damn both of you, damn them all.*"[32] In this intense feeling of alienation and isolation, he seems to be the prototypical Byronic outcast "*who learns through years of suffering that he loves not the world nor the world him.*"[33] Again, he is very much like Byron's Lara, who is described as "*a stranger in this breathing world / An erring spirit from another hurl'd*"[34] and as someone who isolates himself from others: "S*o much he soar'd beyond, or sunk beneath, / The men with whom he felt condemn'd to breathe*."[35] This deep isolation leads to the complex relationships Jimmy forms with everyone around him.

Jimmy's relationships with others are also typical of the Byronic hero. As Atara Stein argued, the Byronic hero is a self-absorbed egoist who does not or cannot relate to the people around him. Because he is unaware of any other way of interacting with others, "*he makes annoying, gratuitous displays of his powers*,"[36] and he "i*nsults people even when he most needs their assistance, and flaunts his powers in a patronizing, self-aggrandizing fashion, yet his very flamboyance seems to conceal a fundamental insecurity.*"[37] The hero's intense emotional turmoil often manifests in hostility and aggression, and his feelings of isolation lead to bitterness and resentment toward others. Accordingly, none of Jimmy's relationships is based on healthy communication; his only mode of establishing a connection with others is through his "*carefully rehearsed attacks*,"[38] and he seems to satisfy his self-esteem by tormenting everyone around him. His attacks also serve as a defense mechanism that allows him to maintain power and avoid being vulnerable, as the hero often struggles with feelings of powerlessness. Furthermore, just like Byron's Napoleon once again, Jimmy "*does not merely isolate himself, but rather he surpasses or subdues mankind.*"[39] The stage directions often support this notion through the constant use of war and hunting imagery. While starting a new speech, Jimmy "*gathers himself for a new assault*"[40]; when "*cheated out of his response,*"[41] he continues his attacks even more savagely because he feels "*he's got to draw blood somehow*"[42] ; when he is interrupted, he is "*resentful of being dragged away from his pursuit.*"[43] He even uses violent imagery to describe Alison's most mundane actions; he thinks that the way she jumps on the bed looks as "*if she were stamping on someone's face*,"[44] and that she draws the curtains like "*someone launching a*

[24] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 41
[25] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 35
[26] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 21.
[27] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 42.
[28] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 42.
[29] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 142
[30] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 142.
[31] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 142.
[32] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 17.
[33] Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes*, 18.
[34] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron,* 18.
[35] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 18.
[36] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 41.
[37] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 2.
[38] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 30.
[39] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 15.
[40] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 25.
[41] Osborne, Look Back in Anger, 28.
[42] Osborne, Look Back in Anger, 28.
[43] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 18.
[44] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 32.

battleship."[45] For Jimmy, life is a battlefield, and everyone is an enemy, including his wife. Even Cliff, whom Jimmy seems to get along with the best, is not immune to his scorching verbal or even physical assaults. Although they are part of the same class, which is one of the reasons for Jimmy's fondness for Cliff, Jimmy feels superior to him because of the education he received, and in classic Byronic arrogance, he calls Cliff ignorant, a peasant, and a ruffian.

Despite all this, however, a certain vulnerability exists under the shell of sternness the hero dons. Jimmy is devoted to his friend Hugh's mother, who is also like a mother to him. After learning about Alison's miscarriage, he claims he does not "*relish the idea of anyone being ill or in pain*"[46]; he hugs and soothes Alison during her mental breakdown and tells Cliff that he is "*worth a half dozen Helenas*"[47] to him. Although capable of love and affection, the Byronic hero is unable to relate to others easily and lacks the necessary social skills to form healthy connections. Jimmy's awkwardness in this aspect becomes glaringly evident through the contrast between the fantastic explicitness and articulation of his anger and his inability to express his affection straightforwardly. Just as how Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester,[48] another famous Byronic hero, would rather hurt Jane Eyre, the woman he loves, by tricking her into thinking he will marry another woman before he can be vulnerable and confess his love for her, Jimmy too can only show vulnerability after he intentionally hurts Alison by pushing Cliff onto her and causing her to burn her arm:

> **Jimmy:** *All this fooling about can get a bit dangerous.*
> *(He sits on the edge of the table, holding her hand.)*
> *I'm sorry.*
> **Alison:** *I know.*
> **Jimmy:** *I mean it.*
> **Alison:** *There's no need.*
> **Jimmy:** *I did it on purpose.*
> **Alison:** *Yes.*
> **Jimmy:** *There's hardly a moment when I'm not – watching and wanting you. I've got to hit out somehow. Nearly four years of being in the same room with you, night and day, and I still can't stop my sweat breaking out when I see you doing – something as ordinary as leaning over an ironing board.*[49]

Jimmy's affectionate and compassionate attitude appears only after his fits of temper. The only medium through which he is able to show his love freely is when he dons the role of a bear in the fantasy world of squirrels and bears he created with Alison, through which he can pretend to be something other than himself, escape the pain of being a human being, and reveal a softer side to the "*bad-tempered, overbearing, cold, ruthless, and emotionless*"[50] Byronic hero while still maintaining the power imbalance and the threat of violence in his relationship with Alison through the prey and predator imagery.

Through Jimmy's troubled marriage with Alison, Osborne also took on the gradually crumbling ideals of the institution of marriage, which had been one of the pillars of British social life before the war. Jimmy constantly insults, humiliates, and abuses Alison. Again, this dynamic is familiar to the Byronic hero archetype; in fact, it closely resembles that of one of the most famous Byronic heroes: Emily Brontë's attractive yet frightful Heathcliff.[51] As Stein suggested, "*the critique of Byronic romance is most evident in Heathcliff's behaviour toward Isabella, whom he treats with relentless savagery*,"[52] which parallels Jimmy's relentlessly rude behavior toward Alison. In Wuthering Heights, the woman Heathcliff eventually marries, Isabella, is a bored young woman who yearns for some sort of emotional stimulation to get away from the dreariness of her life. Through her relationship with Heathcliff, she seeks an "*escape from a stultifyingly sheltered, smooth, and passionless existence. Compared with her brother's 'milk-blooded' passivity, Heathcliff's intensity, even if sadistic, proves irresistible*"[53] for her. This closely resembles Alison's reasons for marrying Jimmy. Before meeting him, Alison recalls having "*not much to worry about*"[54] in her life and that she "*didn't know*

[45] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 32.
[46] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 145.
[47] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 131.
[48] Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester is one of the best examples of the Byronic hero in the 19th century. He is intelligent, arrogant, and independent; he does not care for the constraints of conventional social norms and is burdened with a great sin, the imprisonment of his first wife in his estate due to her madness. However, he is shown to be capable of great love and remorse. In the end, he is reformed through his relationship with Jane Eyre.
[49] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 45.
[50] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 3.
[51] Like her sister Charlotte, Emily Brontë was also influenced by Byron and his heroes. Her unforgettable character Heathcliff, like Mr. Rochester, although certainly darker than him, has become almost synonymous with the Byronic hero. Heathcliff is a tortured, cruel, and proud character whose only redeeming quality is the great love he bears for Catherine, who dies while they are still young. He never recovers from her death and mourns her until he dies.
[52] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 26.
[53] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 26.
[54] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 65.

she was born."[55] In contrast, "*everything about [Jimmy] seemed to burn*,"[56] and she knew that in marrying him, she would be "*taking on more than [she] was ever likely to be capable of bearing.*"[57] Jimmy was a breath of fresh air to the stagnant and uncomplicated life that she was leading, and her decision to marry him was not truly out of love but rather a form of escape. Therefore, Heathcliff's claim that Isabella "*abandoned [her family] under a delusion . . . picturing in [him] a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from [his] chivalrous devotion*"[58] is also true for Alison. She describes Jimmy as a knight in the story of his relentless battle with her parents; however, the fact that she remarks, "*his armour didn't really shine very much*"[59] points to her disillusionment with this romantic idea after three years of marriage where she has experienced how deep-rooted Jimmy's anger really is. In fact, her disillusionment extends to the entire establishment of marriage. During her confrontation with Helena, Alison claims, "*I gave up believing in the divine rights of marriage long ago. Even before I met Jimmy. They've got something different now, constitutional monarchy*,"[60] mocking both the divine rights of kings and the institution of marriage in the same breath, which reflected the younger generation's attitudes at the time.

Similar to Alison, Jimmy's reasons for marrying her are also corrupt. Just as Heathcliff marries Isabella to avenge himself "*not only on those who wronged him but on their innocent descendants as well,*"[61] Alison, in a conversation with her father, claims that Jimmy married her for revenge. According to Alison, regardless of Jimmy's love for her, he decided to marry her the moment her family rejected him as a suitor. Jimmy saw their rejection as the culmination of everything wrong with the world and as an act of war against himself and went "*into battle with his axe swinging round his head – frail, and so full of fire*."[62] However, Jimmy's battle was not only against Alison's parents but also against "*Dame Alison's Mob*,"[63] as he calls it: the entirety of the upper class and the establishment that he believes caused his suffering, humiliation, and alienation. His hostility and bitterness extend to everyone who, in his eyes, lends either direct or indirect support to the traditional power structures and reminds him of his place in the world. Consequently, he fights for Alison not out of love but to possess her, to take her away from the enemy trenches and win her over to his side. When he wins the battle, she becomes a "*sort of hostage*"[64] for him. Therefore, his continuous abuse of her during their marriage can be seen as the continuation of the revenge that he believes he has taken on his natural enemies by marrying her. To complete his revenge, however, Alison needs to "*break unreservedly with her past, wipe away all fond records, and submit herself at the cost of old ties and comforts to a new set of loyalties and ideals. She must endure uncomplainingly cramped living conditions and unspeakable insults heaped upon her family and friends.*"[65]

Jimmy believes that Alison has not completely abandoned her former world and that she still has a lot to learn even after three years of marriage. Hence, to become a "*recognizable human being*"[66] in his eyes, she needs to experience suffering, loss, and death just as he has as a working-class man. He wants to attack and annihilate every part of her that is unrecognizable to him, or recognizable to him as the enemy. This line of thinking is similar to that of Melmoth[67] from *Melmoth the Wanderer*, another famous Byronic hero of the 19th century. Like Jimmy, Melmoth believes that causing pain to Immalee, the woman with whom he is in love, is what will improve her and thinks "*she must learn to suffer to qualify her to become [his] pupil.*"[68] And just like Alison, Immalee's attraction to Melmoth is almost masochistic. The pain she feels because of him is tempting because it is "*more stimulating than anything else she has experienced*"[69] and because it gives her an escape from the barrenness of her life. Just like Immalee, Alison's role as Jimmy's pupil is again underlined several times by different characters throughout the play. Alison's father Colonel Redfern tells her that Jimmy "*has obviously taught [her] a great deal, whether [she] realize[s] it or not.*"[70] Helena also draws attention to this dynamic when she asks if Alison's opinion on the divine right of marriage is "*something [she] learnt from*

55 Osborne, Look Back in Anger, 65.
56 Osborne, Look Back in Anger, 65.
57 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 65.
58 Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, (London: Penguin Group, 1994), 135.
59 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 66.
60 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 140.
61 Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 29.
62 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 66.
63 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 66.
64 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 63.
65 Samuel A. Weiss, "Osborne's Angry Young Play." Educational Theatre Journal 12, no. 4, (1960): 286.
66 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 52.
67 Melmoth is a scholar who sells his soul to the devil to extend his lifespan. Charles Maturin created Melmoth to illustrate the fatal consequences of his ego, passions, and aspirations. However, he somewhat failed in his aim since he unintentionally made Melmoth such an attractive character, a fate every Byronic hero apparently shares, so much so that he had to add a footnote to remind his readers that Melmoth was actually a bad character.
68 Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, (Oxford UP, 1989), 288.
69 Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 26.
70 Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 103.

[Jimmy]."[71] Helena also points out that Alison sounds as if she were quoting Jimmy all the time. However, the things she learns under Jimmy's tutorage for three years are not enough. Only at the end of the play, when she comes back to Jimmy after the loss of their baby, does Alison appear to have qualified to become Jimmy's pupil completely. In the final scenes, Alison is at her most passionate; she does not seem to be trying to "*escape from the pain of being alive*"[72] anymore, as Jimmy believes, but fully claims her experience, however painful it may be. Because of her devastating loss, she comes to see the world the way Jimmy has always wanted her to, and "*only when she is baptised in the waters of pain and deprivation does she achieve true humanity and cast her lot unequivocably with Jimmy.*"[73] While Alison has a breakdown and expresses her wish to die in the final scene, it becomes an easy task to imagine Jimmy as Byron's Manfred,[74] who believes himself to be responsible for the death of his beloved Astarte, thinking "*I loved her and destroy'd her.*"[75]

Yet another feature shared by the Byronic hero and the angry young man of the play is their unexpected passivity. The issue of "*the paradoxical mixture of verbal power and practical impotence*"[76] has become one of the most discussed aspects of Osborne's play. Although Jimmy complains about anything and anyone that crosses his path and blames the upper classes and the establishment for their uncaring attitude and the current state of affairs in Britain, he also takes no proactive steps to change the way things are or the way he feels about it. Ultimately, his vicious attacks are ineffective. Indeed, if there are so many things to complain about, surely there must be some good causes left to care and fight for. However, Jimmy does not want to take part in them in a serious manner. Although fiery, his anger is barren, lacks direction, and only manifests itself through pointless rants and outbursts; he cannot use it productively. As stated before, this lethargy and disengagement with political issues are not unfamiliar to Byronic heroes, who have a "*problem of commitment*"[77] and an "agonized passiveness."[78] As Peter Manning stated, these heroes are, "*in [their] flamboyance, alien to any genuine political engagement.*"[79] Instead, they focus on their own internal struggles and quests for personal fulfillment and meaning. Because these characters are so fiercely individualistic, "*engaging in an internal struggle, a struggle that presumably has the potential to be much more fruitful than a political one*"[80] seems to be the more viable option for them, as they have a strong distaste for societal norms and establishments. This preference for the internal as opposed to the external and the individualism it causes stems from the disillusionment regarding both the ineffectuality and oppressiveness of institutional authorities. These heroes often see themselves outside the political systems, believing these systems to be corrupt or viewing attempts to effect any real change as futile, which leads them to disengage from political activism. Jimmy's traumatic past, as well as the current climate of the country, is a crucial reason for his disengagement. At one point, he reveals that his father had joined the anti-fascist International Brigade that had fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War against General Franco's forces. While this was considered one of the last romantic crusades of the 20th century, the Republicans were eventually defeated. Jimmy's father was wounded in the conflict, and Jimmy had to watch him die while his family "*were embarrassed by the whole business . . . As for [his] mother, all she could think about was the fact that she had allied herself to a man who seemed to be on the wrong side in all things.*"[81] Jimmy claims that this experience taught him to be angry and helpless at a very early age. It was "*his baptism of revolt, the initiating process everyone should go through*"[82] to become a recognizable human being. Watching his father slowly and painfully die because he wanted to help people and make a change through his actions, without any concrete success or appreciation, was one of the earliest and strongest causes of Jimmy's severe disillusionment, alienation, and political disengagement. Thus, the advice Byron had Lucifer give to Cain, that he should "*think and endure,—and form an inner world / In your own bosom—where the outward fails*"[83] became a reality for Jimmy in the face of this helplessness. According to John Russel Taylor, "*Jimmy Porter is the self-flagellating solitary in self-inflicted exile from the world, drawing strength from his own weakness and joy from his*

[71] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 140.
[72] Osborne, Look Back in Anger, 147.
[73] Weiss, "Osborne's Angry Young Play." 286.
[74] Manfred is perhaps the most defiant, independent, isolated, and remorseful of all Byron's heroes. Again, burdened with a secret sin that has to do with the death of his love Lady Astarte, Manfred invokes supernatural entities to ease his suffering; however, he denies their help when the price is revealed to be his obedience. In the end, he dies on his own terms, refusing to submit to any other authority than his own.
[75] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 124.
[76] Dixon, "Still Looking Back: The Deconstruction of the Angry Young Man in *Look Back in Anger* and *Déjàvu*," 521.
[77] William R. Harvey, "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction 24*, no. 3 (1969): 306.
[78] William R. Harvey, "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero." 306.
[79] Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, 211.
[80] Stein, *The Byronic Hero in Film, Fiction, and Television*, 22.
[81] Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, 87.
[82] Claude Combres, "Osborne's Imagery in *Look Back in Anger*." Caliban, no. 15 (1978):47.
[83] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 156.

own misery."[84] This self-inflicted exile from society and burrowing into himself hinder Jimmy from taking any kind of meaningful step to make a change about the things he thinks are wrong. Just like Byron's Manfred, who claims he is separate from other humans and that he is "*not of [their] order*,"[85] Jimmy creates his own inner world and private morality. Consequently, because he does not consider himself to be a subject of the external world he despises so fiercely, he does not actively or effectively work to change it.

Conclusion

The larger-than-life Byronic hero, conceived by the captivating Lord Byron, has stood as a towering figure in the literary world, striking a chord with audiences across the centuries. This hero is always the sufferer and wanderer; often arrogant, dissatisfied, gloomy, rebellious, tyrannical, cruel, and yet, at the same time, capable of profound sensibilities, love, and remorse. Whether in the pages of a 19th-century poem, on the stage of a 20th-century drama, or in a 21st-century movie, the Byronic hero has continued to captivate and enthrall his audience with his raw emotional intensity and ability to embody and illuminate the complexities and contradictions of the human experience, regardless of time and space. His audiences have easily found solace in him despite his glaring flaws because his plight is so very human and familiar.

Although this enduring figure had retreated from the forefront of the literary scene in the first half of the 20th century, he was able to find himself a perfect background in post-war Britain and a perfect host in Jimmy Porter who, with his seething discontent, barren rage, profound alienation, restlessness, dysfunctional relationships, and longing for authenticity, emerged as a poignant embodiment of the Byronic hero archetype. Jimmy carries within himself not only Byron's iconic characters such as Lara, Manfred, and Napoleon, but also the iterations that came after Byron, such as Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester, Emily Brontë's Heathcliff, and Charles Maturin's Melmoth. Similar to other Byronic heroes before him, Jimmy's troubles both with himself and the external world represented those of a young generation grappling with the complexities and stagnation of a post-war society and resonated deeply with audiences who sought to navigate their own turbulent emotions and dilemmas in tumultuous times. As Jimmy raged against the injustices and constraints of his world on stage, audiences saw reflections of their own struggles for autonomy and fulfillment, very much like the readers of the Byronic hero a century before. Jimmy's painful pursuit of and wish for autonomy, meaning, and identity in the 20th century echoed that same, timeless quest of Byron's creation. Therefore, Jimmy Porter, the iconic angry young man of British drama can also be dubbed the angry young Byronic hero.

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[84] John Russell Taylor, *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 77.
[85] Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, 385.

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