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Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

The Story:

Childe Harold, a young English nobleman, became despondent, because the only young woman he loved would not return that love. He had long been engaged in drinking and general idleness, and was generally seen as a very unpleasant character by almost everyone, including his parents. Desperate, he decided to embark on a journey in an attempt to find happiness, or at least to give some meaning to his life.

He left England by ship, with no clear destination. As he left, he sang a mournful song, bidding farewell to his homeland, to his parents, and especially to his young page. He landed on the shore of Portugal and found himself moved in strange and unexpected ways. He began exploring the land on horseback, moving aimlessly in search of his destiny. He wandered into the mountains northeast of Lisbon, a land called Cintra.

Harold found the land beautiful. At the same time, he found the people to be dirty and immoral. He lamented on the sorry state of such men and women blessed with such a beautiful land, and continued into France.

In France, as in Portugal, Childe Harold found a beautiful land but a decadent people. He lamented that everywhere it seemed that the ancient glories were gone, replaced by the ruins of once beautiful works and a people who could not live up to their glorious heritage. He moved on to Spain.

In Spain, he was again thrilled by the magnificence of the scenery but appalled at the depths to which the civilization had fallen. His first real understanding of human cruelty occurred in Spain, where he watched a bullfight. He watched the cruelty of the humans tormenting the bull and the courage of the beast, who clearly could not understand why anyone was trying to hurt him. The bullfight, as always, ended in the death of the bull but brought Harold no further in his quest to understand the meaning of his life.

Childe Harold's first real change of heart occurred as he traveled through Albania into Greece, where he met a great many people of a variety of nationalities and religions. He found the Albanians to be barbaric by his standards, but in some ways nobler than the more civilized people he had encountered thus far. His spirits began to rise as he realized that whatever the situation of civilization, there was still great hope in both the wonders of nature and the natural state of humanity.

The next great change came in Germany, along the banks of the Rhine. There, finally feeling a sense of hope and beginning to see some meaning in the human condition, he was able to fall in love for the first time since he had left home. While he still lamented his first lost love, he found a young woman named Julia and found once again true love, although it was a very different sort of love from the love he had known before.

For the first time, Childe Harold was able to accept a love without the physical rewards of sex. He sang love songs to Julia but did not feel himself worthy to be her lover, and he soon left, feeling better but still in need of answers to the basic questions of life.

The journey ended in Rome, after long journeys through the Italian countryside and the ancient cities that were once part of the Roman Empire. He died in Rome, still unfulfilled, but having learned much about the world, and about human nature.

Critical Evaluation:

George Gordon, Lord Byron, was one of the greatest poets of the Romantic Era of British literature. He was a rebel, a malcontent, and a traveler. While Byron was writing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he was himself traveling; he visited all of the places he described in the poem.

The poem is difficult in several ways. It was published in three sections, over a span of six years, and Byron wrote other works in between. Since the poem was written, critics have widely disagreed as to its meaning and even as to whether it should be considered as two separate poems, or even three.

The first two cantos (the equivalent of chapters in prose) were published in 1812 and are as much a travelogue as they are the story of a pilgrimage. Byron interrupts his narrative regularly to make political and sociological comments about his own time. Often, it is difficult to know when Harold is speaking and when the poet Byron is commenting.

According to his introduction to the first two cantos, Byron intended the poem to be a long narrative poem in the style (and even the meter) of Edmund Spenser, a sixteenth century English poet. The language of the first two cantos is deliberately archaic, as was Spenser's deliberately "medieval" sounding poem. Byron uses Middle English words such as "whilome" and "hight," and the very title is intended to lend a medieval flavor to the work: "Childe" was originally a term used to refer to a young man approaching knighthood, but it had taken on its current meaning (and spelling) centuries before Byron was born.

Many critics have insisted that in *Childe Harold*, Byron was merely fictionalizing his own life. While this is not literally true—the two have much in common—Harold is more of a literary device than a real human being. This becomes increasingly obvious in the third and fourth cantos.

In canto 3, published in 1816, Harold appears only briefly. This section is almost entirely dedicated to a description of Greece and its environs, with a lamentation that the ancient glory has been lost. References are made quite directly to the emperor Napoleon (who lived contemporaneously with Byron), to contemporary poets including John Keats, and even to Byron's personal friends.

In the introduction to canto 4 (1817), Byron virtually disowns Harold, explaining that since virtually everyone seemed to assume that he was Byron's alter ego, there was no longer any point to keeping up the pretense. The entire canto, by far the largest of the four, is dedicated to a description of Rome, historically and currently. *Childe Harold* makes only a very brief appearance at the end, essentially to die and end the original story.

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage is not very exciting as a romantic quest. On one level—the shallowest level of the poem, and the least satisfying—it is the story of Harold's journey, but "pilgrimage" is probably an inappropriate word for this journey. Harold is never searching for anything specific; rather, he is running away from his past and trying, in the process, to find some meaning in life.

Byron's own pilgrimage was of quite a different sort. He was a member of the nobility, a wealthy man, and a highly successful writer. He had domestic problems, and the divorce from his first wife was a scandal of sorts. He lived in various parts of Europe, rarely in England. He had very specific viewpoints, and he had no problem in making them known.

Suffusing *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and many other of Byron's poems, is a love of nature, a sentiment characteristic of all the Romantic poets, of whom Byron was perhaps the most famous during his own time. There are also powerful political messages, most of them having to do with the decadence Byron perceived in his own times, as compared to the glorious past of ancient Greece and Rome. At a deeper level, there was the question of human identity itself.

The sections of the poem that directly relate to Childe Harold are rendered in the Spenserian meter and archaic language alluded to above, but at times both the meter and the language change considerably. Byron's dedications at the beginnings of the cantos, and the love poems interspersed throughout, are written in much more modern form. Finally, in the fourth canto, the medieval language is almost entirely gone, replaced by the language that Byron spoke himself, with only a few outmoded words to preserve some of the flavor of the earlier sections and try to give some coherence to the whole.

It is essential to view *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in its historical context. When it was written, the French Revolution had failed, and Napoleon had assumed the robes of emperor—deeply disappointing the idealistic Romantics, who had seen the French Revolution and Napoleon as beacons, leading the way to a bright new era of Republican liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Although Byron and many of his contemporaries longed for bygone days, they also emphasized the dignity of humankind and the importance of equality. The rise of Napoleon, his subsequent fall, and the return of the French monarchy were tragedies. So, too, was the destruction of many ancient works and the barbarism of the Reign of Terror.

The influence of this poem on later literature is great. There are no earlier or later versions of the specific tale, but its echoes are immense. In *Childe Harold*, the “Byronic hero” was born, a literary device that has lasted to the present day. The Byronic hero is essentially an antihero, alienated and rebellious. This is a very difficult type to portray effectively, because although the hero may be depicted as extremely unpleasant (as is Harold himself), the reader must sympathize with him.

The essential point is that although Childe Harold certainly changes during the narrative, his basic nature never changes. Even when he falls in love, even when he describes great beauty, the reader knows he can never be happy. For happiness, he would require an impossible world, an ideal which can never be achieved. Nevertheless, he will continue searching for that ideal, against all odds.

Ultimately, Byron's basic goal in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is to explore the nature of humankind and humanity's relation to nature. The descriptions of natural and ancient architectural beauty are far more moving than the descriptions of Childe Harold and his journey. Byron's long forays into social criticism are even more fascinating.

A contemporary writer would probably make the central points of this poem in a political essay. Once the difficulties of language, and the sometimes confusing switches in personas, are overcome, however, Byron's method is far more effective. His long poem, written in deliberately outdated language and meter, is still strangely moving, even to a person living in a society far removed from Byron's. Even when it is uncertain whether the traveler is Childe Harold or Lord Byron, the journey is compelling, and the reader wants to join the pilgrimage.

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