

Welcome

A lesson on the
following topic will be
imparted to the learners

Don Juan (canto 1)

George Gordon

Lord Byron

Critical

Analysis



In Don Juan, Lord Byron criticises and mocks many of the values of his day, seeking to sketch the world 'exactly as it goes' and offering us a harsh dose of reality coupled with a direct disregard for convention. In 'A Thousand Colours', Guy Steffan highlights our inclination to assume Don Juan to be largely, if not wholly, negative in its expression as a result of the constant and numerous portrayals of the inconvenient truths of society at the time. Though Byron does provide readers with little celebration of his time, this does not mean that he does not offer readers any positive values of his own. It is actually quite the opposite; the values Byron offers us in Don Juan are, in many ways, the most positive values he could offer us. These are the precious values such as truth, education, introspection, hope; in a manner, that is energetic, good humoured and colourful. Byron himself asserts, "Good workmen never quarrel with their tools" (Canto 1 Stanza 201). As Helen Gardner most aptly notes, in her essay 'Don Juan' - "Although Byron can be bitter, he is not sour", and while the skeptic attitude he has can be found today, his mighty spirits and passion for life are much rarer qualities.

By giving us a depiction that is ruthless and unflattering to our hopes, Byron does not deflate us, but reminds us – through the example and choice of protagonist – that the ordinary man is capable of acts of great compassion and kindness. Byron finds a balance – refraining from the self-righteous nature of the epic traditions without sacrificing his thirst to paint the thousand colours of reality. He is also wise enough to understand the nature of truth as being ever changing and complex – too complex for him to declare a universal truth, instead wisely stating “I don’t pretend that I quite understand/My own meaning when I would be very fine” (Canto 4 Stanza 5). Byron takes the accepted mould of not just the epic tradition but society as a whole; and does not just question and criticises them, but also, and more importantly, leads us as the reader to question them. This is one of the most important and most positive values he offers readers.

One of the main ways Byron's does this is through the character of Don Juan. The choice in making Don Juan the protagonist for his poem is an important one. From the first canto, Byron's principle is set in opposition to the established line, reflected through his choice in his epic hero – much to the disregard of calls from his contemporaries such as John Murray to produce a 'great work'. Why is this choice an important one? Don Juan represents a choice in a man who was an infamous womaniser and rogue – seemingly a counter intuitive choice to make after declaring, "I want a hero, an uncommon want," in the very first line. However, the fictitious Juan created by Byron is not the active agent in his pursuit of adventure and women throughout the entirety of the poem, but victim of the ambitions of successive women, including his own mother, Donna Inez. The Juan created by Byron is very different to what we would expect – ever young, innocent and "good at heart". Despite the constant changes, whether in setting, lovers or situations, he remains to some degree the same and changes very little. Therefore, when set against the existing creeds and conventions of Byron's time, the character of Juan blends in as a natural man of his environment.

We are able to explore the nature of the relationship between the individual and society from a perspective that is equal to that of society – Juan is neither a hero nor villain. The perspective Byron gives us through the character of Juan is honest. He is not the best or the worst of his time and this works in Byron's favour, and more importantly in our favour, as we are able to see things from a more honest human perspective – for all its flaws and contradictions. By using a figure as well chronicled and known as Don Juan, Byron is able to play with our expectations, as they are not the values we would anticipate from Juan. Byron tells us, without any of the bravado and exuberance he often employs, that the value of compassion is so great, that it outweighs any amount of violence. Upon first reading these comments, it would be easy for this statement to be lost in the 'battle's roar' because of the quiet manner in which Byron touches on the subject, moving smoothly along with the narrative – not allowing us to dwell for even a moment to absorb the weight of his words. The result of this is, we are shown that Juan, who is not elevated to the status of an epic hero, a common and natural man, is able and capable of great acts of compassion, loyalty and kindness.

Therefore, we as the reader, even if we do not learn anything from the parody and humour, are shown that there can be a speck of hope amidst the chaos. Byron softens the hard blows and we are able to take comfort that even a character like that of Juan is able to succeed where so many others are not.

This is not the only positive value offered by Byron in order to comfort the blows provided by the mockery and attack of western culture throughout the poem. Byron may suggest to his reader that he sings 'carelessly', however, on closer inspection of the numerous revisions and meticulous planning which he put in Don Juan, we know that this is not the case. It was not until 1944, when Professor G. Steffan began his lengthy study of the manuscripts of Don Juan, did he focus shift from Byron the man to Byron the poet. The result was a print that included variations of Don Juan, including drafts and notes made by Byron. This gives us a valuable insight in seeing Byron at work as a poet, through the changes and approaches he made – the various revisions of the first canto being a prime example of this. Helen Gardner comments that the revisions show us the efforts made by Byron in order to give 'maximum expressiveness to the truth of substance and force of feeling'. This brings us onto another positive value offered to the reader by Byron – his 'gusto of expression' as Steffan calls it.

In Don Juan Byron does satirise many of the values of his day, in doing so he offers readers a scope on reality, which is a positive value in itself, without any claims to knowing a universal truth. Byron as a poet is confident and intuitive enough to understand that values such as the truth will themselves cut through “canals of contradiction”. As a result, Byron is able to, despite his own feelings being clear, mock the negative values of his time and present the reader with the truth. He does this not by portraying the truth itself, but by bringing together and satirising the consistent dualities throughout his epic; allowing the contradictions to expose themselves. The result is the reader is provided with an image of truth, which is unflattering, but revelling nonetheless in its purity – without the intrusion of Byron or his narrator.

There is, because of these vivid depictions of the truth, a danger that the poem becomes lost in negativity and dullness. However, Byron strongly detested dullness and Guy Steffan remarks it was Byron’s aim to “blast dullness out of the epic. The more earnest Byron is about what he has to say, the more energetic he becomes in the way he says it”. The result, Steffan proposes, is that Byron provides the entertainment and enjoyment to fulfil the needs of readers plagued by boredom and restlessness. Steffan sums up the positive value offered by Byron in Don Juan as a whole when he writes: “We can be struck as much by the manner as by the matter, and frequently only by the manner. The poet should make the manner, but sometimes in Juan, the manner makes the poem” .

To give further evidence to back up this statement, we can see a number of examples of this throughout the poem, one of which in particular can be seen in Canto 3 Verse 88:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like a dew upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.
'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
Of ages. To what straits old Time reduces
Frail man, when paper, even a rag like this,
Survives himself, his tomb, and that's his.



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