

Analysis of George Gordon Byron's "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos"

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Abstract:

George Gordon Byron's poem "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos" reflects on his own swim across the Hellespont by juxtaposing it with the myth of Leander and Hero, blending romantic nostalgia, self-deprecating humor, and classical allusions. Central themes include the contrast between motivations—Byron's pursuit of "glory" versus Leander's for "love"—and the futility of both, as nature remains indifferent. The poem also intertwines classical nostalgia with modern irony, framing Byron as a "degenerate modern wretch" compared to ancient heroes. Technically, it uses an ABAB rhyme scheme, quatrains, and iambic tetrameter, creating rhythmic order amid turbulent subject matter. Figurative devices include allusions to Leander/Hero and Venus, irony in trivial outcomes, juxtaposition of ancient heroism and modern triviality, and hyperbole. As part of Byron's Romantic output, it critiques human ambition, emphasizing nature's indifference to efforts for love or fame, with self-irony undermining traditional heroic ideals. It remains a poignant commentary on the transience of human achievement.

Keywords: George Gordon Byron; "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos"; classical allusion; irony; human futility; Romanticism

Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos

George Gordon Byron

If, in the month of dark December,
Leander, who was nightly wont
(What maid will not the tale remember?)
To cross thy stream, broad Hellespont!

If, when the wintry tempest roared,

He sped to Hero, nothing loath,
And thus of old thy current poured,
Fair Venus! how I pity both!

For me, degenerate modern wretch,
Though in the genial month of May,
My dripping limbs I faintly stretch,
And think I've done a feat today.

But since he crossed the rapid tide,
According to the doubtful story,
To woo —— and —— Lord knows what beside,
And swam for Love, as I for Glory;

'Twere hard to say who fared the best:
Sad mortals! thus the gods still plague you!
He lost his labor, I my jest;

For he was drowned, and I've the ague.' (Ferguson & Salter, 2004)

George Gordon Byron's poem "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos" reflects his mixture of romantic nostalgia, self-deprecating humor, and classical allusions, as he uses the ancient tale of Leander and Hero to reflect on his own swimming feat.

The poem juxtaposes two central themes, romantic love and personal glory, alongside a commentary on human frailty in the face of nature and fate. The poet compares his own swim across the Hellespont (also known as the Dardanelles) to Leander's mythological nightly swims to visit his lover, Hero. Byron swam for "glory", while Leander swam for "love". The poem reflects on the different motivations behind their swims, and subtly critiques both pursuits as ultimately futile — Leander perished, and Byron caught the ague (a fever or illness, often

associated with chills). The poet also expresses his opinion about human effort and Nature. Byron emphasizes the overpowering forces of nature. The wintry weather and tempestuous seas of the Hellespont present a challenge to both Leander and Byron, reflecting the idea that despite the loftiest of human efforts, nature remains indifferent, and the outcome can be grim, even for those motivated by love or fame. In this poem, classical nostalgia and modernity are craftily intertwined. Byron contrasts himself with the figures of antiquity, particularly Leander. There's an implicit sense of nostalgia for the classical era, but also a recognition that times have changed, and Byron, as a "degenerate modern wretch", cannot live up to the grand feats of classical heroes. This comparison sets up the poem's humorous self-reflection on how modern pursuits seem less grand in comparison to those of ancient times.

Byron's technical skill as a poet is evident through his use of form, structure, and literary devices. The poem follows a regular ABAB rhyme scheme, which gives the poem a structured, rhythmic flow. This regularity contrasts with the chaotic subject matter (swimming in tempestuous waters) and reflects Byron's ability to impose artistic order on turbulent experiences. The poem is written in four-line stanzas (quatrains), creating a balanced and symmetrical form. The measured, controlled structure of the stanzas reflects the measured irony and detachment with which Byron approaches his subject. The poem is written primarily in iambic tetrameter, which gives the poem a steady, rhythmic pulse. This regularity mirrors the strokes of a swimmer — repetitive and rhythmic, reflecting Byron's experience crossing the Hellespont.

Byron's choice of words plays a significant role in creating the poem's tone, oscillating between classical reverence and modern irony. Byron employs a deliberately elevated and

nostalgic diction when discussing Leander, using phrases like “broad Hellespont” and “wintry tempest roared,” which evoke the grandeur of the classical world. These words set the mythic tone for the comparison between Byron’s modern accomplishment and Leander’s legendary feat. Byron undercuts this grandeur when describing himself with words like “degenerate modern wretch” and “faintly stretch”. His diction becomes more modern and mundane when discussing his own experience, emphasizing the contrast between his reality and the mythic grandeur of Leander’s story. The poem’s language is also playfully ironic. Byron’s lighthearted tone, particularly when he refers to himself as having “done a feat today”, reflects his awareness of the insignificance of his swim compared to the classical heroics of Leander.

Byron’s use of figurative language enriches the poem’s meaning and tone. The entire poem revolves around the myth of Leander and Hero, a famous Greek love story in which Leander swims across the Hellespont every night to meet his lover, Hero, until he tragically drowns. Byron alludes to this myth to draw a parallel between his own swim and Leander’s, while also critiquing the romanticization of such feats. The reference to Venus, the goddess of love, further emphasizes the theme of love in the classical context, contrasted with Byron’s own experience. The poet also uses irony in this poem. It is laden with irony, both in the contrast between Byron’s swim for “glory” and Leander’s swim for “love”, and in the outcomes of their efforts: Leander drowns, while Byron catches a cold. The irony is sharpest in the final line: “For he was drowned, and I’ve the ague”. Byron’s nonchalant tone about both tragic and trivial consequences highlights the futility of human endeavors. Juxtaposition is another figurative language. Byron frequently juxtaposes his own experience with that of Leander, using language to highlight the contrast between ancient heroism and modern triviality. While Leander’s swim

was for romantic love in the face of great natural obstacles, Byron's swim, though arduous, seems comparatively trivial, as his motivation was personal fame or "glory". The last one is hyperbole. Byron's reference to Leander's swim as involving "wintry tempest" and the broad, dangerous Hellespont is hyperbolic, emphasizing the monumental nature of Leander's task. By contrast, Byron's swim is diminished by his humorous description of the outcome as simply catching a cold, heightening the sense of bathos.

The poem holds significance both in the context of Byron's personal life and as part of his broader literary output. Byron actually swam across the Hellespont in 1810, an event he was very proud of. The poem reflects his characteristic blend of personal experience with literary allusion, as he transforms his own achievement into a reflection on classical heroism. By drawing parallels between himself and Leander, Byron places himself within the tradition of classical adventurers, while simultaneously mocking the futility of such endeavors. The poem also serves as a critique of the pursuit of fame and heroism. Byron's comparison between Leander's romantic motivations and his own desire for glory suggests that both pursuits are equally subject to the whims of fate and nature. The poem ultimately suggests that human effort, whether for love or fame, is often met with indifference by the natural world.

Byron, one of the leading figures of the Romantic movement, often wrote about grand passions, nature, and the individual's relationship to both. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Byron's work frequently contains a streak of self-irony and disillusionment. In this poem, Byron undermines the traditional Romantic focus on the individual's heroic struggle by mocking his own desire for glory, as well as the tragic outcome of Leander's quest for love. By comparing his "glorious" swim to Leander's mythological swim and emphasizing

the triviality of their outcomes, He touches on the transience of human achievement. While Leander's love may have been grand, and Byron's swim a notable feat in his lifetime, both are ultimately insignificant in the grander scheme of things. Nature, indifferent to human desires and efforts, remains a powerful force that renders even the greatest feats fleeting.

In "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos", Byron reflects on his own swim across the Hellespont by comparing it to the mythological story of Leander. Through the use of classical allusion, irony, and self-deprecating humor, Byron explores the futility of human effort in the face of nature and fate. The poem critiques both romantic love and personal glory as ultimately transient pursuits, with outcomes often determined by forces beyond human control. Byron's skillful use of form, diction, and figurative language enhances the poem's tone of ironic detachment, positioning it as a humorous but poignant commentary on the limitations of human ambition.

References

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