

Paradoxes and Contradictions in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Helen Wu

(Supervisor: Prof. Simon Haines)

Abstract

Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* portrays the Romantic era, a time of ideological, military, and literary and philosophical oppositions in poetic language, and the poet himself is observed as one of double-sided personality. Both Byron's letters and his poetical works involve oxymoron, contraries, and paradoxes, as well as mergences of melancholy and ironic humour. Moreover, the comic and gloomy aspects not only alternate now and then, but also entail each other. In *Childe Harold*, Byron utilizes conjoined contraries and paradoxical depictions to challenge and thereby deconstruct assumed binary oppositions in the society, along with conveying the *sic transit gloria mundi* theme. The contrast between affinity of forms and disparity of contents, as well as the adoption of parallelism, also enhances artistic and thematic effects. As for stanzas about the Sabbath day and the famous Waterloo passage, they embody experiments in mixing up earthly, light, and burlesque tones with serious and solemn ones, by rollicking rhythm, cant expressions, and incongruous rhyming words. Such inconsistency contained in these passages suggests the underlying artistic affinity and progression between Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, though the two works are in general distinct. In this way, paradoxes and contradictions in *Childe Harold* express quintessential romantic agony arising from inexorable dilemmas, as well as Byron's morally lenient attitude towards the world. More importantly, oppositions in the poem reveal that the seemingly antithetical gloomy Byronic disposition and the comic and liberal tone not only belong to the same poet, but also coexist in one single work of his poetic creation.

Reflection

Exploring poetry, or rather exploring literature as a whole, is like having a journey without physical toils, entering a theatre of no boundary of the stage, appreciating music that would not be affected by the quality of instruments, or having conversations with others while not being confined by restrictions of courtesy. How amazing it is that even though reading about a distant place of ancient times, depicted in a language other than one's mother tongue, by an author whose identity is in every aspect distinct from that of the reader, one can still sense feelings most solacing and secret to one's own heart. Loving literature is a devotion that needs not be requited, being always rewarding to one who is eager to understand just a little more about the human soul.