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From the Byronic Hero to Nietzsche's Übermensch: A Critical Review of Comparative Studies on Nihilism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a philosophical-literary question: can Lord Byron and Friedrich Nietzsche be seen as existential twins, each a solitary rider in his own realm, one in literature, the other in philosophy? Both faced the crisis of nihilism, defined by Nietzsche as the collapse of the highest values. Byron's poetic persona, especially the Byronic Hero, seems to reflect Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch: a figure who embraces the void but resists it actively. Through a critical review of past comparative studies, this article highlights how Byron's rebellious spirit through the Byronic Hero and Nietzsche's active nihilism through the Übermensch intersect. It also points out the limitations of previous research, which often focused only on Manfred and Nietzsche's own views of Byron, and which remained abstract without offering practical cultural insights. The paper concludes by suggesting a new direction: future studies should explore nihilism in love and desire, here called "romantic nihilism", where Byron's Don Juan and Nietzsche's Dionysus provide richer models for confronting meaninglessness.

Keywords: *Byronic Hero, Nietzsche, Nihilism*.

1. *INTRODUCTION*

Lord Byron and Friedrich Nietzsche lived in different centuries, spoke different languages, and worked in different fields. Yet something in their spirit feels strangely familiar. Both were rebels. Both were poets of crisis. And both wrestled with the same enemy: nihilism.

Nietzsche defines nihilism as the moment when the highest values lose their value, and the question "why?" finds no answer [1]. He saw this as the greatest danger of modernity. But he also offered a response: the Übermensch, a figure who accepts the meaninglessness of life and still chooses to create, affirm, and live with strength [2].

Byron, too, seems to embody this spirit. Reading his collected works shows that the Byronic Hero is not a passive sufferer, but a proud, defiant soul who walks through darkness with awareness. He knows life is tragic, but he does not collapse. Instead, he resists [3].

This paper asks: Can Byron's literary persona be read as a version of Nietzsche's Übermensch? Can we see Byron not just as a Romantic poet, but as a philosophical figure who lived through nihilism and responded with existential courage?

Methodologically, this paper adopts a comparative literary-philosophical approach, based on a critical review of past scholarship and a conceptual analysis of Byron's and Nietzsche's ideas within their historical and cultural contexts.

To answer the questions above, the following sections will first review past studies that compared Byron and Nietzsche. These studies often limit themselves to Manfred and to Nietzsche's own writings, where he expressed his views on Byron and the Byronic Hero. They also tend to remain abstract, without offering practical cultural insights. Finally, this paper suggests a new path: examining romantic nihilism in Byron's

Don Juan and Nietzsche's Dionysian vision, where love, desire, and meaning collapse, and where new models of living may emerge.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Comparative studies between Lord Byron and Friedrich Nietzsche have a long history. Scholars have often noticed that both figures struggled with nihilism and embodied a rebellious spirit that challenged conventional morality.

Bertrand Russell, writing in 1957, was perhaps the first to compare Byron and Nietzsche explicitly. In History of Western Philosophy [4], he described Byron as an "aristocratic rebel" and a "titan at war with himself," while Nietzsche imagined himself godlike. Russell emphasized Byron's fierce passion and refusal to repent, traits that resemble Nietzsche's will to power, though Byron remained demonic rather than divine.

A decade later, in 1969, John L. Summers, in his thesis Lord Byron and Modern Existentialism [5], traced Byron's existential questioning in Don Juan. He noted Byron's awareness of futility, his embrace of mutability, and his call to live in the present. Summers argued that Byron offers hope grounded in earthly life, a stance close to Nietzsche's amor fati.

Around the same period, The Norton Anthology of English Literature [6] offered a broader cultural framing. Romanticism was described there as a movement against rationalism, emphasizing instinct, imagination, and the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Byron, as the prototype of Romanticism, exemplifies this Dionysian spirit. His Byronic Hero, moody, passionate, and unrepentant, shows traits of active nihilism, resisting social norms and creating his own values.

Moving into the 1980s, David S. Thatcher [7] examined Nietzsche's youthful admiration for Byron and Shelley, analyzing Byron's work in relation to Nietzsche's personal psychology. His study highlights how Nietzsche's early readings shaped his later philosophical concerns.

In 1987, Susan J. Wolfson [8] published an influential article in ELH analyzing cross-dressing and the politics of gender in Don Juan. She showed how Byron challenged boundaries of desire and power, offering a cultural lens that complements philosophical readings.

Albert Camus, in The Myth of Sisyphus (1991) [9], however, was not directly concerned with Byron's Don Juan; his analysis focused on Molière's version of the character as part of his broader reflection on absurdity and the value of life. Yet his interpretation of Don Juan as a figure of awareness and fidelity to the earth resonates with Nietzsche's active nihilist. Camus warned of the eventual fatigue of such a lifestyle, a theme echoed in Byron's later boredom with love.

Later scholarship continued to deepen this dialogue. In 2001, Robert Luyster [10] distinguished ecstatic, heroic, and monstrous forms of Dionysus in the Journal of Nietzsche Studies. His typology provides a useful framework for understanding Nietzsche's archetype and helps shape our analysis of Byron's Dionysian traits. Importantly, Luyster's categories allow us to see Byron not only as a Romantic rebel but as a figure who embodies multiple Dionysian modes, from ecstatic passion to tragic melancholy.

In 2009, Till Kinzel [11] argued that suffering and knowledge in Byron's Manfred anticipate Nietzsche's "fatal truth," highlighting the philosophical depth of Byron's drama. Kinzel's reading emphasizes how Byron dramatizes the tension between human striving and inevitable limits, a theme that resonates strongly with Nietzsche's tragic vision of wisdom.

Four years later, in 2013, Nic Panagopoulos [12] compared the Byronic Hero with Nietzsche's Übermensch, emphasizing their shared aristocratic anarchism and resistance to modern erosion. He also pointed out the despair that follows when human limits cannot be overcome. His analysis underscores the paradox of heroic rebellion: it inspires self-overcoming, but risks collapse when transcendence proves impossible.

In 2014, Justin Keena [13] offered a critical comparison of Byron's Manfred and Nietzsche's Overman. He noted that Byron's hero remains trapped in pessimism, unlike Nietzsche's figure of

affirmation. Keena's study highlights the contrast between Byron's tragic resignation and Nietzsche's insistence on creative affirmation, sharpening the distinction between passive and active nihilism.

More recently, in 2024, a publication of Nietzsche's essay On the Dramatic Poems of Byron [14] highlighted Byron's existential angst and freedom from religiosity, underscoring his influence on Nietzsche's early thought. This text is especially valuable because it shows Nietzsche himself grappling with Byron's dramatic imagination, offering direct evidence of Byron's impact on his philosophy.

Finally, Henrieta Krupa's 2025 Lacanian reading of Don Juan [15] argued that Byron subverts orientalist fantasies by portraying women as unattainable, a gesture of respect that complicates traditional erotic readings. Her work situates Byron within psychoanalytic and cultural theory, showing how his treatment of desire destabilizes conventional narratives and opens new ways of reading nihilism in love.

3. CONCLUSION

Previous scholarship on Byron and Nietzsche has offered valuable insights, but it has also shown clear limitations. Most studies have focused on Nietzsche's own comments about Byron, or on Byron's Manfred as a counterpart to the Übermensch. In doing so, they have often neglected the deeper problem of nihilism itself, and their conclusions have remained abstract, without offering practical cultural insights.

This paper argues that a new direction is needed. Instead of repeating Nietzsche's perspective on Byron, we should place nihilism at the center of the discussion. Nietzsche defined nihilism as the collapse of values, and he offered strategies such as the will to power, amor fati, and the figure of Dionysus [1] and [2]. Byron, in his personal life and in Don Juan, shows striking parallels. His passionate relationships, his fearless pursuit of forbidden experiences, and his fidelity to the earth all resemble the Dionysian spirit.

This approach also shifts the focus from the Byronic hero in Manfred to the Don Juan type in Byron's poetry and biography. Don Juan embodies what may be called "romantic nihilism": the collapse of sacred, Platonic love into earthly passion. In this collapse, Byron dramatizes both the danger and the possibility of resistance. His Don Juan, like Nietzsche's Dionysus, teaches us how to live meaningfully in the midst of meaninglessness.

Future research should therefore explore Byron's Don Juan alongside Nietzsche's Dionysus, not only as abstract figures but as cultural models for confronting romantic nihilism today. Such studies could show how literature, more than philosophy, speaks to ordinary readers and offers practical guidance for living. Just as past generations learned devotion from Layla and Majnun, perhaps our own age can learn courage and vitality from Byron. In this way, meaning can emerge within meaninglessness, and literature can become a quiet teacher of existential resistance.

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