On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year

POEM TEXT

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of Love are gone;
The worm—the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

The fire that on my bosom preys
Is lone as some Volcanic Isle;
No torch is kindled at its blaze
A funeral pile.

The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
The exalted portion of the pain
And power of Love I cannot share,
But wear the chain.

But 'tis not *thus*—and 'tis not *here*
Such thoughts should shake my Soul, nor *now*,
Where Glory decks the hero's bier,
Or binds his brow.

The Sword, the Banner, and the Field,
Glory and Greece around us see!
The Spartan borne upon his shield
Was not more free.

Awake (not Greece—she is awake!)
Awake, my Spirit! Think through *whom*
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake
And then strike home!

Tread those reviving passions down
Unworthy Manhood—unto thee
Indifferent should the smile or frown
Of beauty be.

If thou regret'st thy Youth, *why live*?
The land of honourable Death
Is here:—up to the Field, and give
Away thy breath!

Seek out—less often sought than found—
A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;
Then look around, and choose thy Ground,
And take thy rest.

SUMMARY

It's high time I should stop falling in love, since no one's going to fall in love with me anymore. But though no one can love me back now, I still want to love!

I'm reaching the autumn of my life now. The fruitful springtime of love is over, and decay and pain are all that's left to me.

The fire in my heart is lonely as a remote volcanic island. No one lights a torch at this fire; it's a pyre for a dead body to burn on.

The hopes, fears, jealousy, and all the heightened, glorious pains and powers of love aren't for me anymore; I can only feel love as a chain.

But this isn't the way or place such thoughts should trouble me, nor the time: not here where Glory decorates the hero's resting place, or ties the wreath of victory round his forehead.

The sword, the flag, the battlefield, Glory, and Greece are all around us! The dead Spartan carried on his shield was not more free than I.

Wake up (not Greece—Greece is already awake!)—wake up, my Spirit! Think back to those ancestors from whom your bloodline descends, and then strike a death-blow!

Push down all those stirring wants and desires, of which I am no longer worthy; you should be unmoved by either the love or the disdain of young beauties.

If you look back on your youth with regret, why bother living? This is the land of honorable death: go to the battlefield and die for the cause!

Search for a soldier's death (which is less often searched for than stumbled on), the best kind of death for you; then look around, and choose the spot where you'll fall, and rest.

THEMES

LOVE, AGING, AND MATURITY

The speaker of "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," writing on his birthday, renounces the youthful joys of love for its mature pains. Believing that he's gone past the point of life when he can ever expect to be loved in return, the speaker nevertheless still wants to *feel* love, even if it can only bring him pain. His acceptance of the pain of love without love's pleasures is a sign of a newfound maturity, one that will carry him into a more self-sacrificing phase of his life even as he regrets the springtime of his youth.

In the first half of the poem, the speaker comes to terms with the fact that, though he can no longer enjoy love's pleasures, he's still willing—and even eager—to bear its pains. The speaker feels he has lived too long to expect to be loved back by those he loves: he's moved out of budding youth into the autumn of his life. (Keep in mind that Byron was writing in the early 19th century—36 certainly isn't considered over the hill today!)

His images of worms and decay suggest that he feels death itself is hanging over his shoulder. Requited love, the speaker suggests, belongs only to the spring and summer of life; love naturally fades and withers with age, the poem implies, just as summer turns to autumn.

But he's not giving up altogether. He still wants to feel love, even if he can't "be beloved," and he's willing to "wear the chain" of unrequited love—to carry a weight unrelieved by pleasure. This willingness to suffer for love is both a burden of aging, the poem argues, and a sign of the strength the speaker has gained *through* aging. Love, for him, is no longer about the gratification of being loved back, but the experience of loving in itself, even when it hurts.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

GLORY AND SACRIFICE

As the poem's speaker reaches middle age and turns away from love, he seeks out a new ideal: a glorious death on the battlefield. Comparing himself to an ancient Greek soldier, the speaker imagines giving up his life for a revolutionary cause—and thus entering a grand tradition of heroic warriors. The speaker's choice to embrace self-sacrifice and death is noble, but not completely humble. In seeking such a death, he's also seeking an immortal legacy as a legendary hero. Death, here, becomes not merely the tragic and inevitable end of life, but an opportunity to become an undying part of history.

In the second half of the poem, the speaker turns away from love to embrace death on the battlefield for a revolutionary cause. Not coincidentally, the speaker leaves behind the pleasures of love and moves towards death right at the midpoint of the poem, mirroring his sense that requited love must end at middle age.

This second part of his life will instead be devoted to "Glory," in the form of a self-sacrificing death on the battlefield. This kind of death will make him like a Spartan hero, he thinks: he'll become part of an illustrious ancient Greek tradition. The speaker's embrace of a glorious death thus offers him a new kind of freedom. In sacrificing his life for a greater good, he becomes part of something bigger than himself.

The speaker's association with legendary heroes suggests that part of maturity is seeing oneself as a small piece of a broader history, giving up the small individual pleasures of love in favor of the wider good of a nation or an ideal. Yet while the speaker ends his poem on a quiet note, seeking out "rest" in a common "soldier's grave," his renunciation of his own pleasures isn't itself completely humble. His self-sacrificing embrace of death gives him a new energy and a new beauty, making him part of Greece's grand tradition. In accepting the facts of aging, change, and death, and reaching out to a cause greater than his own personal pleasure, he hopes to gain an immortal legacy, redeeming himself from the indignity of decay.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
Since others it hath ceased to move:
Yet though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!

"On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" begins with a sudden declaration: "'Tis time this heart should be unmoved, / Since others it has ceased to move." Alongside the poem's title, this first line gives the reader a sense that the speaker feels he's moving into a new epoch of his life. Something big is changing.

That big change seems to be both to do with age and with love. This speaker can no longer "move" other hearts: no one, he believes, is going to love him back anymore. To a modern-day reader, the idea of being too old for love at 36 sounds a little silly, but this speaker seems deadly serious: this is a big enough deal that he needs to write a poem to commemorate his life change. (Indeed, this is likely an autobiographical poem; its author, Lord Byron, was a major celebrity and heartbreaker in his day, and as such he might well have felt washed-up as he moved out of full-blown youth. More on that in the "Context"

section.)

But this brooding speaker isn't giving up on love altogether. Rather, he's renouncing being loved *back*. Take a look at the parallel structure in these first lines:

> 'Tis time this heart should be unmoved,
> Since others it hath ceased to move:
> Yet though I cannot be beloved,
> Still let me love!

This stanza is all one sentence, and its grammatical structure reflects back over itself across the central colon. The speaker also uses polyptoton here, repeating the related words "unmoved" and "move," "beloved" and "love." These repetitions, the same gist but slightly different, suggest that this speaker is moving not *away* from love completely, but into a different *experience* of love. He may not be loved back, but he longs to go on loving anyway.

The ABAB rhyme scheme here also supports this idea of an evolving perspective on love. All the end rhymes here are slant, almost matches, but not perfect ones. Again, this reflects the speaker's new experience of love: he's no longer going to find a lover who can provide a perfect match, a perfect rhyme, for his feelings.

This speaker, reaching middle age, thus prepares to renounce an old life, but also to accept—and even embrace—a new one.

LINES 5-8

My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of Love are gone;
The worm—the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!

The speaker elaborates on his new position with vivid metaphors. His middle age, he says, is like autumn—a time when the rich "flowers and fruits" of love's spring and summer are long past and the "yellow leaf" takes over. Autumn is a traditional symbol for aging and mortality. Here, the speaker applies that image not only to his experience of love, but to his failing body. When he imagines "The worm—the canker, and the grief" in line 7, he's picturing not just the metaphorical decay of love with age, but the all-too-physical decay of the flesh. He sees himself withering like a tree and cankering like a diseased plant—and also, eventually, worm-eaten in his grave. (More on this in the "Symbols" section.)

Aging sets the speaker apart, leaving him all alone with his feelings, and the shape of his poem reflects his isolation. Take a look at the way that enjambment works in lines 7-8:

> The worm—the canker, and the grief
> Are mine alone!

A line break interrupts this dramatic statement right in the middle, and—appropriately—leaves the speaker's solitude hanging lonely in a void. The poem's meter also supports this effect. With a little variation, each stanza uses three lines of iambic tetrameter (that is, four da-DUM beats), and caps them with one line of iambic dimeter (two da-DUM beats). Here are lines 7-8 as to illustrate:

> The worm—the canker, and the grief
> Are mine alone!

Isolated and marked out, the last thought in each stanza thus gains special importance. This pattern gives the speaker a reflective air: he keeps working his way up to emphatic conclusions.

This meter also subtly suggests a theme that's going to be important later in the poem: the ideals of ancient Greece. The speaker is using a metrical pattern that resembles (though it doesn't exactly imitate) the Sapphic form, a kind of stanza popularized by the ancient Greek poet Sappho. Sappho's passionate love poetry might have appealed to this speaker for more reasons than one as he wrote this poem; as the reader will soon discover, Greece is much on his mind. (More on this in the "Meter" section.)

LINES 9-12

The fire that on my bosom preys
Is lone as some Volcanic Isle;
No torch is kindled at its blaze
A funeral pile.

Finding more metaphorical inspiration in nature, the speaker pictures his unrequited love as different flavors of fire. Like the autumnal imagery above, the image of fire-as-passion is about as old as metaphor itself. This speaker is touching on deep, ancient images, suggesting that his feelings go right down to the roots of human experience.

The speaker first describes his love as a lonely "Volcanic Isle," an isolated volcano seething with magma. This volcano might be all alone, but it's still a *volcano*—a huge and terrifying force of nature. (Byron knew first-hand what volcanoes can do: he lived through the catastrophic "Year Without Summer" in 1816, when ash from a huge eruption in Indonesia created a chilly worldwide "volcanic winter.") There's a lot of potential energy in this volcanic passion, even if the speaker does experience it alone.

And he does seem to be very alone indeed: no other soul is lighting a "torch" at the "blaze" of this love. Indeed, the fire is a "funeral pile," a cremation bonfire. Again, the speaker finds close links between images of love and death. His very body is consumed by his unrequited love—an image curiously similar to the consummation of the "worm" and the "canker" in the previous stanza. The powerful love he's experiencing—now, in

his middle years, when he's already on his way to the grave—might be the death of him.

These lines are full of consonance. Note the many /l/ sounds in particular in lines 10-12:

> Is lone as some Volcanic Isle;
> No torch is kindled at its blaze
> A funeral pile.

That liquid /l/ slows down the lines, imbuing them with a sense of lethargy or fatigue.

LINES 13-16

The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
The exalted portion of the pain
And power of Love I cannot share,
But wear the chain.

For a moment, the speaker moves away from metaphor and into a plain statement of his emotional experience. This, too, is overwhelming. He reflects on the love he's shared in the past, listing all the feelings one might feel over the course of an affair. Even in the summer of youth, it seems, this speaker has had a tempestuous experience of love. He doesn't remember good times holding hands in the sunshine, but rather "fear," "jealous care," and "pain," alongside hope and exaltation. Take a look at the way the speaker builds up his reminiscences:

> The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
> The exalted portion of the pain
> And power of Love I cannot share,

Those first few lines use asyndeton—a poetic device in which clauses pile up one after the other, without conjunctions—to suggest both the intensity and the frequency of the speaker's past love affairs. The percussive alliteration of "portion," "pain," and "power" adds yet more intensity to the lines. This is a man who's had a *lot* of experience with love, and who has suffered over it deeply even when he has shared it with another.

But now, again, he's all alone. That last line of iambic dimeter ("But wear the chain.") does its usual work, marking out a final, grim thought: the speaker can no longer share love, but must wear its "chain." This is a different kind of metaphor than those that have come before. This chain isn't a natural phenomenon like a volcano or a season, but an image of human-made imprisonment.

This chain, however, contains the seeds of its own undoing. Chains are made to be broken—and this speaker will begin to see his chains differently in the next stanza.

LINES 17-20

But 'tis not
thus
—and 'tis not
here
Such thoughts should shake my Soul, nor
now
,
Where Glory decks the hero's bier,
Or binds his brow.

Having spent the first four stanzas of the poem looking backward, this middle-aged poet reaches the midpoint of his poem, and makes a change. The shape of the poem thus mirrors the shape of his life.

This new phase begins with the important word "But." This is no time for moping over lost love, the speaker tells himself: this is the place and time not for regret, but for "Glory." The speaker has left the part of life when love was his foremost concern. But he's not just moving into a void where love once was. He's moving *toward* a new ideal of heroism, glory, and battle.

A focus on love and a focus on heroism, the speaker seems to suggest, are incompatible. He may still wear the "chain" of unrequited affection, but he's going to have to put that aside to participate in the future that awaits him.

That future glows with big ideals. Here, "Glory" isn't just an idea, but a personified character, capable of draping a dead war hero's body with flowers or crowning him with the laurel wreath of victory. The fight he's about to participate in is more than a matter of life and death: it's a matter of immortality. In personifying "Glory" and evoking the ancient laurel wreath, the speaker suggests a legendary landscape of gods, goddesses, and heroes—a world of undying forces.

The speaker seems inspired and excited by this prospect, but not so much that he can just put aside his previous feelings. He has to exhort himself to turn away from his past: this is no time for sulking, Soul! The sounds of his words suggest just how difficult it is for him to make this change. The percussive alliteration of /b/ sounds in "bier," "binds," and "brow" fall like blows, as if the speaker is pounding his fist on the table, demanding that his lovesick heart pay attention.

LINES 21-24

The Sword, the Banner, and the Field,
Glory and Greece around us see!
The Spartan borne upon his shield
Was not more free.

Caught up in enthusiasm for his ideals, the speaker begins his next stanza with a trumpet-blast of warlike imagery, summoning "The Sword, the Banner, and the Shield"—all synecdoche for war itself.

This is no ordinary war that the speaker will fight, but rather a war deeply connected to history, mythology, and philosophy. As his previous images of laurel wreaths and his use of the Sapphic form have already suggested, he's in Greece, fighting in a war

for independence. Greece isn't just a country to him, but an idea. The alliteration that sonically connects "Glory" and "Greece" reflects this, linking the two terms on the level of sound just as they are linked in the speaker's mind. Ancient Greek philosophy built the foundation for European ideals, and in fighting for Greece, this speaker is also fighting for the very idea of liberty itself.

He's also connecting himself to a tradition of heroism. The "Spartan" that he mentions in this stanza alludes to the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, a place famous for its ferocious warriors. If he's going to be like a Spartan, he's going to be a truly heroic figure, one whose name will be remembered even after death.

Seeking out a glorious death—like a Spartan, who would be carried on his shield only when injured or dead—is this speaker's way of finding redemption from the decay and obsolescence he fears in the first half of the poem. To die honorably for a noble cause is to become "free," not only of that "chain" of love, but of the humiliations of aging and mortality.

The reader who knows a little about Byron will be aware that this poem was composed during the Greek War of Independence, Greece's struggle for liberation from the colonizing Ottoman Empire. (Take a look at the "Context" section for some further background.) Seeking freedom through noble death, the speaker also fights for the idea of freedom itself. The "Banner" of line 21 might be read as the independent Greek flag; it might equally be read as the heraldic symbol of a noble knight, dying for his beliefs.

LINES 25-28

Awake (not Greece—she is awake!)
Awake, my Spirit! Think through
whom
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake
And then strike home!

The speaker's fervor only grows as he works his way deeper into his new ideas. He begins the next stanza with emphatic repetitions, using anaphora and diacope to summon himself to battle:

> Awake (not Greece—she is awake!)
> Awake, my Spirit!

This is a rousing battle-cry, but there's some subtle humor baked into it. In crying "Awake!" and then interrupting himself with a mid-line caesura to add, in parentheses, "not Greece," the speaker both makes the genuine point that Greece is *already* full of revolutionary fervor, and makes himself sound a tiny bit silly. It's as if a personified Greece, startled by his initial shout, has timidly raised its hand and said, "Me?" Again, this hints at the autobiographical nature of this poem. Byron made his name as a comic poet and a satirist, and it's only right that, even in this life-or-death moment, a hint of his characteristic irreverent wit should peek through.

Those repeated cries of "Awake!" do serve a sincere purpose, though. The speaker is inspired by thoughts of war and glory, but his very inspiration suggests a hidden reluctance. He isn't just marching blithely off to battle; he has to encourage his personified "Spirit" to prepare for death.

Here, he does so with an image of his "life-blood" as a river, moving back toward its "parent lake"—that is, connecting with his own Greek ancestry. In this moment, images of nature and history unite. Greek heroism is in the speaker's very blood, as unstoppable and mighty as a river.

LINES 29-32

Tread those reviving passions down
Unworthy Manhood—unto thee
Indifferent should the smile or frown
Of beauty be.

It seems the speaker's personified "Spirit" really needs some encouragement. In this stanza, the speaker goes on telling his spirit what it needs to do: in this instance, to repress the volcanic fires of passion that he lamented in the first part of the poem. This apostrophe may put readers in mind of a time when they've needed to give herself a pep talk: *come on, pull yourself together!* Standing apart from his own "Manhood"—his masculine honor—the speaker talks to himself, which suggests he's still internally divided.

This stanza hearkens back to his earlier resolve to love on alone, but he introduces a little more complexity to the situation here. When he tells his "Manhood" that "unto thee / Indifferent should the smile or frown / Of beauty be," that one word, "should," is pretty telling. If one "should" do something, one probably hasn't done it yet. For all that the speaker imagines himself as a lonely volcano or a teeth-gritting Spartan, it's clear that he's still feeling the smart of rejected love. Even in the midst of his new glory-fever, he has to work to hold back his painful feelings.

That urge to fight for freedom has as much to do with a desire to escape pain as it does to gain honor. While the speaker is in many ways moving toward a new maturity, willing to give up his own life for the sake of a greater good and to bear the pain of love all alone, he's also complex: no untouchable hero, but a still-vulnerable human.

LINES 33-36

If thou regret'st thy Youth,
why live
?
The land of honourable Death
Is here:—up to the Field, and give
Away thy breath!

All the speaker's conflict breaks out at the beginning of this stanza in an anguished rhetorical question: "If thou regret'st thy Youth, *why live*?" The richness of this question is in its ambiguity. The speaker could mean a couple of things here: either "if you regret the *passing* of your youth, why live?" or "if you regret *what you did* in your youth, why live?"

That second meaning points to some of the submerged pain in the earlier part of the poem. When the speaker makes his long list of emotions in lines 13-16 ("the hope [...] the chain."), he hints that he's had some dramatic love affairs in the past. Perhaps, then, some portion of his desire to turn *away* from his fading youth and *towards* a glorious death is a wish to evade guilt and responsibility. He has certainly caused as much pain as he's suffered. But if he can have an "honourable Death," maybe he can redeem himself.

This resolve is mirrored in his language. When he prepares himself to leave for the battlefield, he does so with a dramatic caesura:

> The land of honourable Death
> Is here:—up to the Field, and give
> Away thy breath!

That pronounced pause suggests that he needs to take a minute and a deep breath to collect himself. If he's going to "give away" his "breath"—that is, to make the ultimate sacrifice—it's going to take some serious internal preparation!

LINES 37-40

> *Seek out—less often sought than found—*
> *A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best;*
> *Then look around, and choose thy Ground,*
> *And take thy rest.*

The speaker's impassioned apostrophe to his own soul carries him right to the end of the poem. His last instruction to himself is to "[s]eek out [... a] Soldier's Grave"—though, as he wryly remarks, fewer people look for this grave than find it, whether they wanted to or not. There, his spirit can at last "take thy rest."

This is a strangely humble and peaceful image, considering everything that's led up to it. A restful "Soldier's Grave" isn't quite the same thing as a flowery bier decorated by the goddess of Glory, or a Spartan's bloodstained shield. It's a much gentler and a much less heroic resting place. The mellow internal rhyme he uses to describe it ("Then look around, and choose thy Ground") suggests that such a death will be peaceful and fitting, just as the slant rhyme in the first stanza evoked the painful mismatch of unrequited love.

The speaker thus comes to a place of resignation. While he hopes for glory and triumph and an immortal name, he also understands that earning such trophies requires an acceptance of the normal old "Ground" to which every dead body must return.

In the end, then, this is a poem both of mature resignation and youthful idealism—fitting for a man poised between youth and old age. Motivated by dreams of eternal freedom, heroic martyrdom, and agonized love, the speaker nonetheless comes to terms with the irreducible fact: to be alive means, one day, to be dead. The transcendent choice is to use one's death for good.

SYMBOLS

AUTUMN

Autumn, here, represents the speaker's own middle age, and the bodily and emotional decay that comes with it. Having in his youth experienced plenty of the "flowers and fruits of Love," he now feels himself to have moved into the time of "the yellow leaf," when the landscape of love begins to falter and wither. This image suggests not only the fading of possibilities for love, but also the fading of the body. When the speaker describes the "worm—the canker, and the grief" of unrequited love, he also evokes the physical degradation of age, or even the decay of the grave. These images prepare the speaker's later embrace of a heroic death; if he's got to go out, he's going to go out with a bang.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** " My days are in the yellow leaf; / The flowers and fruits of Love are gone; / The worm—the canker, and the grief / Are mine alone!"

FIRE

Fire is often used as a symbol for love—think of people who say their hearts are on fire. Here, the fires of love are complicated by their links to death. The speaker seems to have been embroiled in some shared love-fires in his past. Now, his feelings burn dramatically, but all alone, like the magma of an isolated volcano. The image of the volcano also suggests that those feelings might have to burst out somewhere, even if they can't be consummated in shared love. The volcanic fire might be remote, but it's also powerful.

The speaker's comparison between the blaze of his love and a "funeral pile," a pyre upon which a body is burned, also suggests that the painful love he feels will be his last. This love will be the death of him, and the death of love for him.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** " The fire that on my bosom preys / Is

lone as some Volcanic Isle; / No torch is kindled at its blaze / A funeral pile."

CHAINS

The "chain" the speaker refers to here is a symbol of the entangling heaviness of unrequited love. The speaker willingly accepts this chain, glad to carry the weight of love even if he can't take part in its "exalted" pleasures. But it's worth noting that he's also come to Greece specifically to fight against another kind of symbolic "chain": the chains of political oppression. Chains are made to be broken; they're an image of imprisonment, but also of potential liberation. Like the earlier volcano (see the Symbols entry on "Fire"), these chains carry a lot of potential energy: the speaker, in turning from love as an outlet, will instead devote his passion to a grander cause.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-16:** " The exalted portion of the pain / And power of Love I cannot share, / But wear the chain."

THE SPARTAN

Sparta was a Greek city-state famous for its unbeatable warriors, and the Spartan who appears here symbolizes warlike Greek virtue itself. The speaker associates himself with this Spartan, who has died dramatically on the battlefield—and become "free" in doing so. The dead Spartan's prowess, independence, and self-sacrifice stand for all the virtues the speaker reaches out for, having turned at last from the pleasures of love.

The Spartan also suggests how the speaker's resolve to die for Greek independence might connect him to the broader sweep of time. Spartans are not merely historical, but almost legendary. The speaker, in following this Spartan, wishes his death to be more than useful. He wants glory, and the Spartan provides an example and an image of just that.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "The Spartan borne upon his shield / Was not more free."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is one of the most common devices in poetry. Alliteration often helps a poem to sound elevated and *poetic*, different from and more musical than everyday speech. It can also subtly support a poem's themes, as it does here.

For a good example, take a look at the alliteration on /b/ sounds in lines 19-20:

> Where Glory decks the hero's bier,
> Or binds his brow.

That repeating /b/ is a strong, percussive sound, and it links significant words at an important moment. In this stanza, the speaker is turning away from rueful thoughts of love and moving toward the glory of war. Discouraging himself from brooding on the death of romance, he uses those forceful /b/s to think of both death and glory: a "bier" is a platform for a dead body to lie on, and Glory might "bind" a heroic "brow" with the laurel wreath of victory. The connected sounds help the reader to feel the import of these ideas. The thought of death and glory intertwined makes a big impression on the speaker—an impression that might strike him with a thump, like a blow.

Alliteration links important words in similar ways all through the poem; many examples are highlighted here. For example, the hard /g/ of "Glory" and "Greece" in line 22 reflects the fact that these two things are closely connected in the speaker's mind; to him, Greece represents glory itself.

At its end, the poem also uses sibilance to come to a rest: the softer /s/s of "seek out," "sought," and "Soldier" suggest the eventual quiet of death after the noisy glory of battle.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "be beloved"
- **Line 4:** "let," "love"
- **Line 6:** "flowers," "fruits"
- **Line 14:** "portion," "pain"
- **Line 15:** "power"
- **Line 18:** "should shake," "nor"
- **Lines 18-18:** " / now"
- **Line 19:** "bier"
- **Line 20:** "binds," "brow"
- **Line 22:** "Glory," "Greece"
- **Line 27:** "life-blood," "lake"
- **Line 32:** "beauty be"
- **Line 37:** "Seek," "sought"
- **Line 38:** "Soldier's"

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions to classical Greek tradition place the reader in a Greece that isn't just political, but legendary.

The ease of the speaker's allusions strengthens one of his big underlying points: ancient Greece built the foundation for many of his ideas of liberty, independence, and honor, and its ideas were right there in the mind of all of Byron's contemporary readers. When the speaker imagines, in lines

19-20, a personified Glory decking out a bier in flowers or binding a hero's brow, he's alluding not only to a Greek mythological system in which Glory could be a goddess, but also to the Greek tradition of awarding heroes with laurel-leaf crowns symbolizing triumph. He expects his reader to simply know about this—and a contemporary of Byron's certainly would. Ancient Greek tradition is fundamental to European thought, and the speaker's allusions here make it clear that he's giving his life not just for the freedom of a modern country, but for a deep-rooted ideal shared across nations and times.

Similarly, his allusion to "the Spartan borne upon his shield" in line 23 evokes a specific *kind* of ancient Greek hero. Spartans (citizens of Sparta, an ancient Greek city-state) were legendary for their prowess in war. For this Spartan to be "borne upon his shield," carried injured or dead off the battlefield on his own gear, underlines that point. Linking himself to a famously warlike hero, the speaker makes himself part of a grand (and bloody) tradition.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 19-20:** "Where Glory decks the hero's bier, / Or binds his brow."
- **Lines 23-24:** "The Spartan borne upon his shield / Was not more free."

APOSTROPHE

The last four stanzas of the poem take the form of an apostrophe: the speaker directly addresses his own "Spirit" like it's a separate person, telling it to straighten up, fly right, abandon love, awaken its courage, and march out to a glorious death.

The speaker's choice to separate himself from his spirit this way suggests the genuine difficulty of his situation. Readers may remember a time when they've had to give themselves a pep talk: *come on, pull yourself together, get out there!* The speaker here is about to make a brave decision, putting his life on the line—but it's not an easy decision, and he has to make a serious effort to abandon a life of love for a life of war. The energy of apostrophe makes that effort clear on the page.

Addressing the "Spirit" as a separate entity also suggests the speaker's hope for enduring glory. The spirit here is connected to its Greek ancestors, and it has the capacity to override emotional "passions" for the sake of a greater good. Sure, it may need a little encouraging, but it's also the part of the speaker with the energy to do what's right and to carry him past his own individual life into the life of legend.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-40:** " Awake (not Greece—she is awake!) / Awake, my Spirit! Think through / whom / Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake / And then strike home! / Tread those reviving passions down / Unworthy Manhood—unto thee / Indifferent should the smile or frown / Of beauty be. / If thou regret'st thy Youth, / why live / ? / The land of honourable Death / Is here:—up to the Field, and give / Away thy breath! / Seek out—less often sought than found— / A Soldier's Grave, for thee the best; / Then look around, and choose thy Ground, / And take thy rest."

ASSONANCE

Assonance works must like its cousins alliteration and consonance. In weaving together internal vowel sounds, it often simply makes poems *sound* better, more musical and euphonious than normal everyday speech. Assonance can also subtly support meaning, drawing connections between words and evoking a certain tone in a poem.

For instance, take a look at lines 15-16. Here, there's assonance between the /a/ vowel sounds of "care," "share" and "wear" (there's internal rhyme between "wear" and the two line-ending words, too). The linkage of *sounds* here also links *meanings*. While the speaker can no longer "share" the "hope, the fear, the jealous care" of love, he is still *connected* to love: to "wear the chain" is to stay involved with love, even if one isn't loved back. The links between the sounds here make that connection audible; the "chain" of sounds is like the "chain" of love.

Assonance on the long /ee/ of "hero's bier" in line 19 similarly suggests that there's a pretty intimate connection between being a hero and lying on one's bier, or deathbed. The /or/ sounds of "Sword," "Glory," and "borne" in lines 21-23 make yet another series of links between warfare, death, and honor: the Spartan "borne" upon his shield is dead or injured, but he's still honorable, connected to the glory of the sword.

Assonance thus helps to highlight the speaker's difficult connections between a painful, frightening fate and the glory that might result from it—as well as between the persistence of love even when there's no hope of being loved back.

Note that assonance in this poem plays into the rhyme scheme as well, which we discuss in depth in the corresponding section of this guide. Here, we've mapped the moments of assonance separate from/in support of that scheme.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "care"
- **Line 15:** "share"
- **Line 16:** "wear"
- **Line 19:** "Glory," "hero's," "bier"
- **Line 20:** "Or"

- **Line 21:** “Sword,” “Field”
- **Line 22:** “Glory,” “Greece,” “see”
- **Line 23:** “borne,” “shield”
- **Line 26:** “Spirit! Think”
- **Line 27:** “Thy life”
- **Line 30:** “Unworthy,” “unto”
- **Line 33:** “thy,” “why”
- **Line 35:** “here,” “Field”
- **Line 37:** “often sought”
- **Line 39:** “around,” “Ground”
- **Line 40:** “take”

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton, in which clauses in a sentence that might normally be connected with a conjunction instead travel alone, helps to develop the power of the speaker's memories of love in lines 13-15. In these lines, the speaker makes a long list of everything that he can no longer get out of love:

> The hope, the fear, the jealous care,
> The exalted portion of the pain

The lack of conjunctions here means this list feels overwhelming: it's a big pile-up, one thing after another, too many losses for the speaker to handle.

That pile-up adds to the power of the speaker's realization at the end of this stanza. After his long asyndetonic list, he concludes that all he can do now is "wear the chain" of love, bearing that "portion of the pain" that's definitely *not* exalted. There's no fun in the kind of unrequited love that's left to the speaker in his middle age. His list of the qualities of love, presented in a rush, doesn't just suggest all the pleasures he's lost: it hints that he's had a passionate love-life in the past, and experienced plenty of those hopes and fears and cares in his younger days.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** “ The hope, the fear, the jealous care, / The exalted portion of the pain”

CAESURA

The caesuras in this poem reflect the movement of the speaker's thoughts. Caesura can suggest the intrusion of a new idea, the accumulation of images, or a reflective pause, and they serve all those purposes here. Consider some of the most striking caesuras in the poem: the parentheses and dash in line 25 and the exclamation point in line 26:

> Awake (not Greece—she is awake!)
> Awake, my Spirit!

The intrusion of those parentheses tells the reader a lot about the speaker's frame of mind. There's a hint of humor here in the idea of the speaker dramatically crying, "Awake!" and then having to add, *"No, not you, Greece"*—before going back to clarify: "Awake, my Spirit!" This is a dramatic moment, but it's also subtly funny at its speaker's own expense. The exclamation points bring the drama, but the parentheses bring the personality. Even approaching his own glorious death, this speaker retains a touch of arch wit.

But caesura also marks some of the speaker's gloomier moments, as in the vivid images of decay in lines 7-8:

> The worm—the canker, and the grief
> Are mine alone!

The dash between "the worm" and "the canker" gives a little extra space to both of these unsettling physical images. The caesura here, directing the reader to pause and think about these visions of rot, might also keep those visions in the reader's mind later when the speaker sings of the glory of a heroic death. Glorious though death for a cause may be, it also still demands a reckoning with decay.

The many caesuras in the poem's final stanzas suggest that, even as the speaker goes boldly toward his own demise, he also struggles with his fear. He writes:

> The land of honourable Death
> Is here:—up to the Field, and give
> Away thy breath!

His emphatic caesura between "here" and "up to the Field" give the reader the sense that he might have to take a deep breath before he heads out to that fateful "Field."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “worm—the canker, and”
- **Line 13:** “hope, the fear, the”
- **Lines 17-17:** “thus / —and”
- **Line 21:** “Sword, the Banner, and”
- **Line 25:** “Awake (not ”
- **Line 26:** “Awake, my Spirit! Think”
- **Line 30:** “Manhood—unto”
- **Lines 33-33:** “Youth, / why”
- **Line 35:** “here:—up”
- **Line 37:** “out—less”
- **Line 38:** “Grave, for”
- **Line 39:** “around, and”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment tends to create momentum, moving the reader swiftly on. Here, though, enjambment often does something a

little more tricky.

There are many enjambed lines in this poem, and a lot of them come at the ends of stanzas, when the speaker moves from iambic tetrameter (four da-DUM beats) to the closing line of iambic dimeter (two da-DUM beats). The metrical change means that there's an inevitable pause between these third and fourth lines of each stanza. Even as enjambment rushes the speaker's thought along, the movement from tetrameter to dimeter means the reader feels a gap, and the last part of the sentence lands with more weight than the first part.

For an example, consider the poem's first enjambment in lines 7-8:

> The worm—the canker, and the grief
> Are mine alone!

Here, the enjambment cuts off the two-beat end of the sentence, leaving it isolated both visually (by all that empty space) and metrically: the idea of isolation is, appropriately, left hanging all alone. Similar effects at the end of stanzas all across the poem provide a feeling of thoughtfulness; the speaker is turning these new ideas over in his head, and sometimes pausing to lament what he's losing.

But enjambment also plays its more usual role in creating momentum. Enjambments occur more and more often in the more energetic second half of the poem. For instance, lines 29-32—a whole stanza—are all enjambed, speeding the speaker along as he exhorts his "Manhood" to "tread those reviving passions down." Here, the onward pull of enjambment mimics the onward pull of a new enthusiasm for death and glory. (Perhaps, though, the speaker is also rushing himself a little, working hard to move past those passions he still feels so strongly.)

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "grief / Are"
- **Lines 9-10:** "preys / Is"
- **Lines 11-12:** "blaze / A"
- **Lines 14-15:** "pain / And"
- **Lines 17-18:** "here / Such"
- **Lines 23-24:** "shield / Was"
- **Lines 26-27:** "whom / Thy"
- **Lines 27-28:** "lake / And"
- **Lines 29-30:** "down / Unworthy"
- **Lines 30-31:** "thee / Indifferent"
- **Lines 31-32:** "frown / Of"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Death / Is"
- **Lines 35-36:** "give / Away"

JUXTAPOSITION

There are plenty of striking juxtapositions in "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," both within stanzas and across the whole poem. Juxtaposition emphasizes this poem's major contrasts: love versus war, youth versus age.

For example, take a look at lines 5-8. Here, the "yellow leaf" of the speaker's middle age is juxtaposed with the "flowers and fruits" of young love. This is a classic seasonal metaphor, and its sensuous images help the reader to really feel the speaker's sense of decay and decline.

But there's also a bigger juxtaposition here, spanning the whole poem. The poem splits into three parts: the first four stanzas, in which the speaker laments aging out of romance, the fifth stanza, in which he wrenches his attention away from love and turns it towards war, and the final five stanzas, in which he encourages himself to embrace death and glory. (See the "Form" section for more on this.) This neat division encourages the reader to consider the connections and the separation between love and death. While there are obvious differences—the speaker's lost love was self-indulgent, war is self-sacrificing—there's also a strange linkage here. The fiery, volcanic passion of love is still present with the speaker, even though he feels he can never be loved back now—and it's that passionate energy that he now intends to turn to the greater good.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** " My days are in the yellow leaf; / The flowers and fruits of Love are gone; / The worm—the canker, and the grief / Are mine alone!"
- **Lines 9-10:** " The fire that on my bosom preys / Is lone as some Volcanic Isle;"
- **Lines 21-24:** " The Sword, the Banner, and the Field, / Glory and Greece around us see! / The Spartan borne upon his shield / Was not more free."

METAPHOR

This poem is rich in metaphor: from autumn as an image of middle age to chains as an image of love's pain to volcanoes as an image of passion. This speaker, a poet to the core, loves to see inner experience in terms of the outside world.

The first part of the poem draws many of its metaphors from nature. The speaker follows in an old tradition in imagining middle age and mortality as autumnal (Shakespeare and Keats, among many others, would agree). His images here are uncomfortably specific; he doesn't just imagine the "yellow leaf," but the "worm—the canker," images of physical decay that suggest he's thinking not just of the end of love, but the decline of his body.

Though the speaker may be fading on the outside, he still feels lively on the inside. The "Volcanic Isle" of his passions may be isolated and remote, but it's still a volcano; its "blaze" may be a "funeral pile," but it's still blazing away. These metaphors

suggest the tension and contrast in this speaker's heart. He knows he's past requited love, but he's not altogether done with the emotion. His idea of the love he still carries as a "chain" makes it clear that he's not shaking off love and skipping cheerfully off to his new life as a warrior.

This speaker's love of metaphor also manifests in personification. Glory, the Spirit, and Manhood all step up as characters in this poem. This, too, is in an old poetic tradition, and that's exactly the point. In a poem about joining an immortal crew of Greek heroes, it makes sense that the speaker should address ideals as people: it makes them rather like Greek gods.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** " My days are in the yellow leaf; / The flowers and fruits of Love are gone; / The worm—the canker, and the grief / Are mine alone!"
- **Lines 9-12:** " The fire that on my bosom preys / Is lone as some Volcanic Isle; / No torch is kindled at its blaze / A funeral pile."
- **Line 16:** " But wear the chain."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Where Glory decks the hero's bier, / Or binds his brow."
- **Line 26:** " Awake, my Spirit!"
- **Lines 26-27:** "Think through / whom / Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake"
- **Lines 29-30:** " Tread those reviving passions down / Unworthy Manhood"
- **Lines 35-36:** "give / Away thy breath!"
- **Lines 39-40:** "choose thy Ground, / And take thy rest."

SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche here helps to emphasize the epic, archetypal forces of war. When the speaker refers to "The Sword, the Banner, and the Field" in line 21, he's using physical elements of warfare to refer to war as a whole. But he's doing so in a highly specific way that connects him to *the whole history* of war, rather than a single particular war.

"The Sword" and "The Banner" feel a bit archaic (that is, old-fashioned) as images of a 19th-century war (though "the Field," the battlefield, is relevant wherever people meet to kill each other). These images evoke older traditions: not just the ancient Greek warfare of the "Spartan" the speaker associates himself with, but also perhaps a mythical medieval world of knights and chivalry. The "Banner," in particular, suggests a knight's heraldic flag as much as it suggests the flag of a free Greece. In using these *particular* parts to represent a whole, the speaker links himself to old and idealized traditions of courage.

In going to "the Field," then, the speaker hopes to meet with a glorious destiny, rather than just an undignified and painful death in the mud. Synecdoche tells readers not just that the speaker is going to war, but that he sees his self-sacrificing act through a legendary lens.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** " The Sword, the Banner, and the Field,"
- **Line 35:** "Field"

REPETITION

This poem uses many types of repetition to shape its themes. Repetition often has an insistent or a reflective tone, and these moods are both important to this poem's speaker as he broods on lost love and spurs himself to a new height of glorious heroism.

There's a rich example in the very first stanza:

> 'Tis time this heart should be **unmoved**,
> Since others it hath ceased to **move**:
> Yet though I cannot be **beloved**,
> Still let me **love**!

Here, the speaker uses two kinds of repetition. The two halves of this stanza use parallelism: the stanza is one long sentence, and the grammatical structure of its second half echoes the grammatical structure of its first half. There's also polyptoton in the connections between "unmoved" and "move" and between "beloved" and "love." These repetitions and connections reflect the speaker's thoughts. As he thinks about being unable to expect requited love—but wishing to love anyway—his changing repetitions hint at how he is no longer perfectly "matched" with his beloved, but will carry on loving anyway, though it won't feel the same.

Parallelism again pops up in line 17:

> But 'tis not *thus*—and 'tis not *here*

The repetitive language and grammatical structure of these two phrases adds emphasis to the speaker's claim: that this is not the place nor the time to be thinking about things like love, and that, instead, the speaker should be focused on the glory of battle.

Later, diacope and anaphora add an insistent punch to the speaker's cry: "**Awake** (not Greece—she is **awake**!) / **Awake**, my Spirit!" (25-26). Here, repetition evokes the speaker's energy, but also suggests the real effort he has to make in order to enter his new life of glorious self-sacrifice.

Finally, polyptoton again appears in line 37 with the repetition of "seek" and "sought." The speaker is being wryly funny and ironic here, saying that even as he looks for (or "seek[s] out") death in battle, this is actually something people usually find without looking for, or seeking, it. That is, most people don't go

into battle seeking to *die*; "A Soldier's Grave" is something they find without looking for it.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "unmoved"
- **Line 2:** "move"
- **Line 3:** "beloved"
- **Line 4:** "love"
- **Line 13:** "The," "the," "the"
- **Line 14:** "The"
- **Lines 17-17:** "'tis not / thus / —and 'tis not / here"
- **Line 25:** "Awake," "awake"
- **Line 26:** "Awake"
- **Line 37:** "Seek," "sought"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There's one big rhetorical question in this poem, and it comes near the very end, in line 33:

> If thou regret'st thy Youth, *why live*?

A rhetorical question doesn't wait for an answer. In fact, it provides its own sort of internal answer. Here, the speaker poses his question for effect. And it's a strong effect, emphasized further by the speaker's italics.

But it's also a complex question, with a couple of potential meanings. "Regret'st" could here mean that the speaker regrets the *passing* of his youth and the end of his potential for love (as the first part of the poem suggests). But it could also mean that he's feeling regret about the *actions* of his youth.

This is a heavily Byronic moment. The "Byronic hero," a type inspired by this poem's author (who was a big celebrity in his time—see the "Context" section for more on this), is a Romantic figure torn between idealism and self-destruction, the sublime and the degraded, love and despair. The ambiguity in this speaker's rhetorical question suggests that his idealistic march toward a hero's death is also motivated by more than a little self-destructive anguish—and perhaps remorse over the people he himself has hurt in his passionate youth.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 33-33:** " If thou regret'st thy Youth, / why live / ?"

VOCABULARY

Beloved (Line 3) - Loved.

Canker (Line 7) - An ulcerous decay.

Bosom (Line 9) - Literally, the chest; figuratively, the emotions.

Lone (Line 10) - Isolated and remote.

Kindled (Line 11) - Lit; ignited.

Funeral pile (Line 12) - A bonfire on which a body is cremated.

Exalted (Line 14) - Lofty and glorious.

'Tis (Line 17) - It is.

Thus (Line 17) - How.

Bier (Line 19) - A display platform on which a corpse is laid out.

Spartan (Line 23) - A citizen of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta—a place known for producing fearless soldiers.

Borne (Line 23) - Carried.

Thee, thou, thy (Line 27, Line 30, Line 33, Line 39) - "Thee" and "thou" are old-fashioned ways of saying "you" ("thee" is the object form, "thou" the subject form). "Thy" thus means "your."

Indifferent (Line 31) - Meaningless, neutral, unaffecting.

Regret'st (Line 33) - An old-fashioned way of saying "regret"—so the full line here would mean, "If you regret your youth, why live?"

Sought (Line 37) - Looked for.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" is made up of 10 quatrains (four-line stanzas). This shape gives the poem's ideas room to build up. In the morose first four stanzas, the speaker laments his lost youth and the end of love. Then, right at the middle of the poem, he pointedly turns from these concerns, moving his attention from love to war. The last five stanzas gain energy and zeal as the speaker explores his new commitment to glory, honor, and self-sacrifice on the battlefield.

There's something poignant about the way this poem moves. The speaker feels he has reached middle age, and the shape of the poem, breaking in the middle, suggests the way that he's given the first half of his life to love. The second part of his poem is longer than the first; the second part of his life, however, seems likely to be considerably shorter. If all goes as he expects it to, his thirty-sixth year will be his last. Thus, this poem might be considered an elegy of a sort: a lament for a great man dead too soon, written by the man himself.

METER

Each stanza of "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" uses a pattern of three lines of iambic tetrameter, ending in a line of iambic dimeter. An iamb is the metrical foot that goes da-DUM; tetrameter means there are four da-DUM beats per line, and dimeter means there are two. Here's how that looks in context in the first stanza:

'Tis time | this heart | should be | unmoved,
Since oth- | ers it | hath ceased | to move:
Yet though | I can- | not be | beloved,
Still let | me love!

This pattern isn't totally regular throughout the poem. Sometimes the second line in a stanza gets a little more complicated, as in line 14, where one of the stresses is submerged: one probably wouldn't say "the exalted portion of the pain," but rather "the exalted portion of the pain." But this is just part of the speaker's conversational rhythm: the slight irregularity allows the line to flow naturally within a pretty rigorous structure. The reader might also see a thematic connection here; just as the speaker redirects the sweeter passion of love into the stern, idealistic passion of war, he fits an intuitive rhythmic pattern into a stylized form.

This poem's metrical scheme is fittingly Greek: it resembles (though it doesn't exactly imitate) the complex Sapphic stanza form, named after the great Greek poet Sappho. Sappho's own intense, passionate love poetry might well have been on Byron's mind as he composed.

RHYME SCHEME

"On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" uses a regular ABAB rhyme scheme throughout. That means that the first line of a stanza always rhymes with the third, and the second line always rhymes with the fourth. This regular, balanced rhyme scheme is musical and propulsive, giving the poem a swinging energy.

But the first two stanzas do something slightly different. Where most of the rest of poem uses perfectly matched rhymes—"preys" and "blaze," "isle" and "pile"—the first two stanzas use slant rhyme. The words' concluding consonant sounds match, but the vowel sounds are different. So, for instance, the speaker pairs the long /oo/ of "move" with the short /uh/ of "love," and the /aw/ of "gone" with the /oh/ of "alone."

This fits right in with the point these first stanzas are making. The speaker finds himself no longer quite "fitted" to his beloved, or to the world of love in general. He can't find a perfect reflection of his love in the world anymore, and his rhymes, reflecting this, fall out of true.

Slant rhyme comes up once more in lines 26 and 28, when the speaker pairs "whom" and "home." Here, again, the slant rhyme thematically fits in with what the speaker is saying. Rousing his spirit to "awake," he connects the "whom" of his ancestry to striking "home"—a complicated relationship. To "strike home" is to strike a death blow, but it could also connect to finding a new kind of "home" in the world as a Greek hero—a role that the speaker doesn't just take on naturally, but has to encourage his "Spirit" to embrace. Here, the slightly mismatched rhyme gives the reader a sense that the speaker is rising to a new and unfamiliar occasion.

SPEAKER

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that this poem's speaker is Byron himself, working out his own thoughts about mortality and love as he prepares to go to war and potentially meet his end. At the very least, this speaker is Byronic: a passionate soul concerned with love, glory, and honor.

Clearly a fellow with more than a few intense love affairs in his past, the speaker is also no longer a young man—feeling no longer worthy of the passions of his youth. He has entered the waning autumn of his life, a time he views as filled with decay. Though he feels himself to no longer be lovable at this point, he still longs to experience love. At the same time, he scolds himself, believing that he should tamp down his passions and lustful desires.

He still feels deeply, however, associating himself with Spartan warriors and volcanic fires. Yet he's not a dreamer lost in images and ideals, but a man of action. The war he's preparing for is very real, and he's courageously committed to the cause of freedom and independence, willing to put his life on the line for his grand principles. This is a person who believes that death in battle is noble and heroic, the kind of thing that casts a favorable glow on one's legacy.

SETTING

This poem doesn't spend too much time evoking its environment, but from its context and references, the reader can establish that it's set in Greece. This Greece isn't merely a country to the speaker, but a land with legendary associations. In comparing himself to a Spartan warrior on an archetypal battlefield, the speaker suggests that Greece carries symbolic weight as a place of individual liberty and bravery—a country for heroes to live (and die) in. The Greece of this poem marries historic grandeur to contemporary revolutionary idealism; its terrain, for this speaker, is both a dreamlike, epic backdrop for his emotional life, and a place for genuine life-or-death courage and sacrifice.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The dashing, mercurial George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) was the very picture of the Romantic hero—though he himself was a reluctant Romantic. Born in the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge, when the poetic winds blew toward introspective soul-searching and quiet contemplation of nature, Byron saw himself as the inheritor of the earlier

Enlightenment-era tradition of Alexander Pope: withering, comic, satirical, and emphatically public. He originated a whole kind of person, the "Byronic hero," a tormented figure, torn between melancholy and passion, idealism and self-destruction. One of Byron's many lovers, Caroline Lamb, famously described him as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know."

Born into a titled family, Byron became a celebrity—indeed, perhaps the first celebrity in the modern sense—through his flamboyant public persona, dramatic love affairs, and scandalous poetry. His best-known work, the long, comic poem *Don Juan*, mocks everyone it can get its hands on, from fellow poets to contemporary politicians to its own author.

But Byron was also a man of conviction. He was good friends with Mary and Percy Shelley, and shared their revolutionary fervor. "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" records a real episode in his life—indeed, its final episode: he went to war at the age of 36, fighting for Greek independence, and died in Greece not long after he wrote this poem.

Wildly famous in his own lifetime, Byron was a major influence on any number of artists who followed him, from Alexander Pushkin to Emily Brontë—and not only writers. Composers like Tchaikovsky and Verdi wrote music, and artists like Turner and Delacroix painted pictures, based on Byron's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" comes straight out of the heart of the Greek War of Independence (1821-1830). This bloody conflict, in which the Greeks successfully took back control of their country from the oppressive Ottoman Empire, was inspired by Enlightenment and Romantic ideals of liberty and democracy, and caught the imagination of many fervent revolutionary thinkers across Europe.

As this poem demonstrates, Greece already played a symbolic role in the European imagination as the cradle of philosophy and classical virtue, and Byron's passionate commitment to the Greek cause was as idealistic as it was practical. Byron's involvement in the War of Independence was a boon to Greece: his fame brought even more attention and sympathy to the fight, and when he died in the war (albeit of a fever rather than on the battlefield), he became a Greek national hero, just as he presages in this final poem.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More of Byron's Poetry — Byron's Poetry Foundation page, including a biography and links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lord-byron)
- Portraits of Byron — Some of the many portraits of Lord Byron, in which he poses as the quintessential Romantic hero: brooding, melancholy, and passionate. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00691/george-gordon-byron-6th-baron-byron)
- A Reading of the Poem — Hear "On this day I complete my thirty-sixth year" performed aloud. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2010/jan/22/reading-day-complete-thirty-sixth-year-lord-byron)
- A Short Introduction to Byron — An overview of Byron's life and works by the scholar Germaine Greer. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/24/lord-byron-germaine-greer)
- The Poem in Manuscript Form — See the poem in Byron's own handwriting. (https://kingscollections.org/exhibitions/specialcollections/byron/greece/on-this-day-i-complete-my-thirty-sixth-year)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- Prometheus
- She Walks in Beauty
- The Destruction of Sennacherib
- When We Two Parted

HOW TO CITE

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Nelson, Kristin. "*On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jul 2020. Web. 23 Sep 2020.

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