British Romantic poet and satirist, Lord Byron captured the imagination of Europe not only with his poetry but also with his life, to the point of becoming the archetype of the Byronic hero, rebellious, impulsive, moody and utterly charming, like the protagonist of his epic poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. 
1788: George Gordon Noel, 6th Baron Byron, was born in London, the son of a Scots heiress and the handsome Captain John ("Mad Jack") Byron, who died in 1791 after squandering most of his wife’s fortune.

1798: after spending his early years at Aberdeen, at age 10, he unexpectedly inherited the title and estates of his great-uncle William, the 5th Baron Byron, and moved to Newstead Abbey, which had been presented to the Byrons by Henry VIII.
Byron had been born with an unknown deformity of his right foot, generally referred to as a “clubfoot”, causing a limp aggravated by painful and pointless medical treatment.

He was extremely self-conscious about this from a young age, nicknaming himself *le diable boiteux* (French for *the lame devil*) (from René Lesage’s 1707 novel).

Although he often wore specially made shoes in an attempt to hide the deformed foot, he refused to wear any type of brace that might improve the limp and as an adult he developed a mode of walking by which his limp was less evident.
Byron had a prestigious education, first at Harrow School, London, and later at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he piled up debts at an alarming rate and indulged in the conventional vices of undergraduates there. He also showed the first signs of his sexual ambivalence.

**1809:** on reaching his majority, Byron took his seat in the House of Lords and then left for a two-year tour of a number of Mediterranean countries with his lifelong friend **John Cam Hobhouse.**

Together they sailed to Lisbon, crossed Spain, proceeded to Greece by Gibraltar and Malta, ventured inland to Albania and then sailed for Costantinople, visited the site of Troy, and swam the Hellespont.
• **1812**: the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* were published and Byron became famous overnight.

The following two years were characterized by love affairs and scandals, one of which was his intimate relations with his half-sister **Augusta** who gave birth to a daughter, almost certainly Byron’s, in 1814.

• **1815**: he married **Annabella Milbanke**, and had a daughter, Ada Lovelace, his only legitimate child, but the couple separated in **1816**.

Wounded by the general moral indignation directed at him, Byron left England, never to return.
G.G. BYRON

He spent the summer of 1816 at Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva with Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife-to-be Mary and Mary’s half sister Claire Clairmont, with whom Byron had a daughter. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was conceived there, during that “year without a summer”!

- **1817**: Byron and Hobhouse departed for Italy where they were to live for more than six years, in Venice, Rome, Ravenna and Pisa involved in numerous love affairs. It was in this period that Byron completed *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and wrote some of his most famous works, including *Don Juan* (1819-1824).
1823: in search of new adventure he left Italy to join the Greek insurgents who were fighting a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire.

He sent £4,000 of his own money to prepare the Greek fleet for sea service and then sailed for Missolonghi to join Prince Aléxandros Mavrokoródatos, leader of the forces in western Greece.

1824: on 19th April he died from fever at Missolonghi, in modern day Greece. Deeply mourned, he became a symbol of disinterested patriotism and a Greek national hero. A statue was erected to his memory in Athens in 1838.
His death was also deeply mourned throughout Britain and his body was brought back to England but it was refused burial in Westminster Abbey! It was placed in the family vault of his ancestral home in Nottinghamshire near Newstead.

Ironically, Byron was finally given a memorial in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey in 1969, one hundred and forty-five years after his death.
FONDNESS for ANIMALS

- Byron was very fond of animals, most notably of a Newfoundland dog named Boatswain, buried at Newstead Abbey. His monument is larger than his master’s!

- Byron also kept a bear while he was a student at Trinity College, reputedly out of resentment of Trinity rules forbidding pet dogs: he suggested that the bear should be allowed to apply for a college fellowship!!!

- At other times in his life, he kept a fox, monkeys, a parrot, cats, an eagle, a crow, a crocodile, a falcon, peacocks, guinea hens, an Egyptian crane, a badger, geese, and a heron!
THE BYRONIC HERO

- The figure of the Byronic hero pervades much of his work, and Byron himself is considered to epitomise many of the characteristics of this literary figure, i.e. a man with
  - a lack of respect for rank and privilege, despite possessing both;
  - a distaste for society and social institutions;
  - an unsavoury secret past;
  - great talent and great passion;
  - rebelliousness and arrogance;
  - overconfidence or lack of foresight;
  - a self-destructive manner.
Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage

A visual intro to the poem
Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage is a lengthy poem of four cantos, or sections, that Byron began after he had travelled to Portugal and other European countries during a particularly trying period of his life.

The poem is written in Spenserian stanzas made up of eight iambic pentameters + an alexandrine, i.e. a 12-syllable iambic line. The rhyme pattern is ABABBCBCC.

After publishing the first two cantos, Byron woke to find himself famous. He would eventually finish the poem in 1818.
The poem describes the travels and reflections of a young man who, disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry, looks for distraction in foreign lands.

Besides furnishing a travelogue of Byron’s own wanderings through the Mediterranean, the cantos express

- the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars;
- the vanity of ambition;
- the transitory nature of pleasure;
- the futility of the search for perfection

in the course of a “pilgrimage” through Europe.
Canto I

- In the **first canto**, Byron tells us a bit about Childe Harold although it is really his journeys that retain the primary focus of the canto.

- He describes Portugal against which the British held a certain prejudice: he notes the contrast of squalor and poverty with the beauty of the country itself.
Canto II

- **Canto two** brings Byron to Greece, where he begins by mourning the loss of Greece’s glory days as he observes the ruins in Athens.

- As he sits on the ruins, he thinks of the Greek gods of old. He notes the contrast of this diminished land which used to rule the world with Great Britain.
Canto III

- Byron wrote his third canto of Childe Harold as he travelled through Belgium and up the Rhine to Switzerland, having left England under a cloud of public disapproval.

- The theme of rejection and failure, and the poet’s reactions to these, are a strong theme running through the work: he leaves England keenly feeling his separation from his muse and daughter.
Canto IV (1)

- The **fourth canto** continues the poet’s journey into Italy: Venice, Arquà, Ferrara, Florence, and Rome. Again the narrator laments the fall of older civilizations—this time the subject is Venice.

- Depicted as a cultural ghost town, it is peopled by the “mighty shadows” of literary giants such as Shakespeare: literature is more enduring than the cultures which produce it.
Canto IV (2)

- Childe Harold visits Arquà, home of the famous poet Petrarch. Here, at least, the people of the city maintain Petrarch’s tomb and even his home.
Canto IV (3)

- In Ferrara, beloved town of the poet Tasso, Byron pays homage to the mind of his fellow poet.
After considering Italy’s history of carnage, Byron turns to Florence, where he pays homage to the great men buried in the Basilica of Santa Croce. The poet expresses outrage that Dante, who was exiled, was therefore not buried in “ungrateful Florence” nor was the great poet Boccaccio.
Finally, the narrator reaches Rome and spends time listing and describing the various dictators from ancient times until the recent past.

In this context he compares Napoleon to “a kind / Of bastard Caesar,” once again returning to his theme of liberty’s struggle against tyrants.
Canto IV (6)

- The canto ends at the ocean, harking once again to Nature as an image of freedom and sublimity in its “eloquent proportions.” Yet Byron encourages us not to surrender to the overwhelming power of the great and sublime but instead to visit great places and try to understand them.

- The ocean also serves as a contrast to the lost civilizations Byron has visited.
Childe Harold is long gone, transcended, and in this sense the pilgrimage is complete. Byron bids us farewell, encouraging us to leave Harold’s pain behind and move forward with the lessons gleaned from his travels: even the mightiest of empires eventually falls.

The work of human hands and that of human political institutions are ephemeral: Byron finds permanence and stability elsewhere, particularly in Nature with which the poem concludes. Manmade beauty is a great and everlasting thing, but it is Nature which holds the highest place in his admiring heart.
Apostrophe to the Ocean

- An apostrophe is a form of figurative language in which the speaker addresses an inanimate object or abstract concept as if it were an actual present character.

- The last seven stanzas of the poem are one long apostrophe to the ocean in which the speaker praises it as if it were a real person who can listen to his words: he remarks on its beauty and even its dangers and its terrors.

- It is because the ocean is full of such beauty, mystery, and danger that the speaker loves it.
There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, 
There is a rapture on the lonely shore, 
There is society, where none intrudes, 
By the deep sea, and music in its roar; 
I love not man the less, but nature more, 
From these our interviews, in which I steal 
From all I may be, or have been before, 
To mingle with the universe, and feel 
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all 
conceal.

C'è un immenso benessere nei boschi senza sentieri, c'è estasi sulla spiaggia solitaria, c'è una quantità di forme di vita, dove nessuno interferisce, là nel mare profondo e c'è musica nel suo rombo. Io non amo di meno l'uomo, ma di più la natura; dai nostri dialoghi scappo di nascosto, da tutto ciò che posso essere o che sono mai stato, per mescolarmi con l'universo e per sentire ciò che non potrà mai esprimere ma che tuttavia non posso nascondere.
Analysis

- We can find here the description of a friendly nature, which has a relationship with the poet. He only can understand it. So he escapes from ordinary life to mingle with the universe, where he perceives pleasure and the sublime.

- The poet loves society but he loves nature more because, through contact with it, he discovers something about himself, he becomes simpler and he finds his place this universe.

- In opening the poem with a tricolon parallelism (There is...), the speaker is establishing himself as being at one with his subject matter, i.e. the ocean.
Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean - roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin - his control
Stops with the shore - upon the watery plain
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan -
Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.
Analysis

• The poet turns to the ocean as if they were relatives but their relationship is a complex one: **man cannot control a powerful and violent Nature, which destroys him during wrecks**, as a reaction to his efforts to exploit its riches.

• His control stops where the seashore begins. **The Ocean rebels against man’s attempt to impose his own power over it**, turning into a terrifying deathtrap, sinking him into its depths, and leaving him without a grave as a humiliating punishment.

• The **simile** (*like a drop of rain*) and the **assonances** (*un-...*) at the end of the last line highlight man’s insignificance while adding musicality to the stanza.
His steps are not upon thy paths - thy fields
Are not a spoil for him - thou dost arise
And shake him from thee; the vile strength
he wields
For earth's destruction thou dost all despise,
Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies,
And send'st him, shivering in thy playful spray
And howling, to his gods, where haply lies
His petty hope in some near port or bay,
And dashest him again to earth; there let him
lay.

Stanza 180

Lui non ti cammina sopra, i tuoi campi non
sono il suo terreno di conquista; tu ti ergi e
te lo scrolli di dosso; lui brandisce la sua
umile forza per la distruzione della terra. Tu
con disprezzo lo lanci dal tuo grembo verso
il cielo e lo scagli mentre rabbividisce tra i
tuoi spruzzi giocosi e grida ai suoi dei, nei
quali forse ripone la meschina speranza (di
trovare) qualche porto o baia. E poi lo
scaraventi ancora per terra e lo fai giacere
là.
Analysis

• Again we find man’s difficulty to rule the Ocean. On the contrary he’s treated like a puppet by the ocean, which seems to hate him.

• Man cannot decide his own destiny, which instead is led by Nature, seen as a cruel deity, powerful and unpredictable.

• The numerous alliterations (destruction / dost / despise – spurning / skies / send’st / spray – howling / haply) call attention to the words adding to the mood of the poem.
The armaments which thunderstrike the walls
Of rock built cities, bidding nations quake
And monarchs tremble in their capitals.
The oak leviathans, whose huge ribs make
Their clay creator the vain title take
Of lord of thee, and arbiter of war -
These are thy toys, and as the snowy flake,
They melt into thy yeast of waves, which mar
Alike the Armada's pride, or spoils of Trafalgar.
We find again a Nature which judges man, who is subdued by his sense of inferiority.

Here Byron, in front of a society that rejects him, mirrors and identifies himself with the ocean, wishing to fight against society’s restrictive rules (“arbiter of war”).

The imagery in this stanza is particularly effective: armies which made monarchs tremble, like the Spanish armada, and battles which changed the course of history, like the one fought at Trafalgar, are like toys and snowy flake that melt into ... [the] waves.
Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee - 
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they? 
Thy waters washed them power while they were free, 
And many tyrant since; their shores obey 
The stranger, slave or savage; their decay 
Has dried up realms to deserts - not so thou, 
Unchangeable save to thy wild waves' play 
Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow; 
Such as creation's dawn beheld, thou rollest now.

Le tue coste sono imperi che sono cambiati nel tempo e che ti proteggono. Assiria, Grecia, Roma, Cartagine, che cosa sono? Le tue acque hanno dato loro il potere quando erano liberi e da allora ci sono stati molti tiranni; le loro sponde obbediscono allo straniero, allo schiavo o al selvaggio; il loro decadimento ha ridotto i regni a deserti. Non è così per te, immutabile, che non salvi dai giochi delle tue onde selvagge. Il tempo non disegna nessuna ruga sulla tua fronte azzurra: come ti vide l'alba della creazione, così ondeggi ora.
Analysis

- Everything changes in the world; **empires** reach their power and they can lose it in just one moment. What are they? Tiny and **weak objects of no importance**; they are **meant to decay** because their tyrants are greedy of power.

- The only one who doesn’t change is the Ocean: **he** never gets old although time goes by. There are **no wrinkles** on his **azure brow** because he’s immortal and eternal.

- The **personification** of the ocean allows the poet to bring it to life and to attribute to it characteristics of a living being.
Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form
Glasses itself in tempest; in all time,
Calm or convulsed - in breeze, or gale, or storm,
Icing the pole, or in the torrid clime
Dark-heaving - boundless, endless, and sublime;
The image of eternity, the throne
Of the Invisible; even from out thy slime
The monsters of the deep are made; each zone
Obeys thee; thou goest forth, dread, fathomless, alone
Analysis

- What we have is an ode to the Ocean, identified with an aggressive and violent god, who can express his anger and his power during storms. He’s almighty, without end or bound, eternal, the supreme judge of humanity. He goes on rolling endlessly and, most of all, ALONE.

- We find here a deep sense of solitude, which is a typical feature of the Byronic hero.

- In this stanza sublime imagery is introduced to underscore the supernatural in the natural, the awesome in the beautiful, the formidable in the admirable.
And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breasts to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward; from a boy
I wantoned with thy breakers - they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror - 'twas a pleasing fear,
For I was as it were a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane as I do here

Ed io ti ho amato, Oceano! e la gioia dei
miei sport giovanili era farmi portare sul tuo
petto, come una tua bolla, da ragazzo
facevo il pazzo sui tuoi cavalloni: loro erano
il mio divertimento, e se il mare rinfrescante
era per loro motivo di terrore, era una paura
piacevole. Perché io ero come una tua
creatura e mi fidavo dei tuoi cavalloni, sia
lontano che vicino, e poggiavo la mano sulla
tua criniera come faccio qui.
This stanza summarizes the love the poet feels for the Ocean. He’s speaking while he mingles with Nature and recollects the feelings of his childhood, when he used to play with the waves.

He repeats the same concept of a Nature friendly only to Byron, who is superior to other people and has an exclusive relationship with the Ocean (metaphorically transformed into a wild horse), even if it is so dangerous.

In fact, while the common man is terrified of the Ocean’s power, the poet feels a kind of pleasure in this fear (see the oxymoron a pleasing fear).
LEGACY

• Byron is considered to be the first modern-style celebrity. The fascination that many people have for him and his work is astonishing: today 36 Byron Societies function throughout the world, and an International Conference takes place annually.

• Byron exercised a marked influence on Continental literature and art, and his reputation as a poet is higher in many European countries than in Britain or America, although not as high as in his time, when he was widely thought to be the greatest poet in the world.

• Byron has inspired the works of F. Liszt, H. Berlioz, and G. Verdi.