

Psychology of imprisonment in "the prisoner of chillon"



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Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon"[1], a dramatic monologue narrated by a prisoner, Francois de Bonnivard, was written immediately after the poet's famous sailing expedition on Lake Geneva with Percy Shelley. When visiting the thirteenth-century Castle of Chillon, Byron must have heard of and felt a great interest in the pathetic story of the Genevan patriot. He celebrates the "Eternal spirit of the chainless mind" in his prefatory "Sonnet on Chillon" [2], which lets us see that the poet regards Chillon as the symbol of political liberalism. Unlike "Sonnet on Chillon," which was added later to the poem, "The Prisoner of Chillon" does not deal with the specific historical facts about Bonnivard as such critics as William H. Marshall, Robert F. Gleckner, Jerome J. McGann and Newey Vincent aptly point out [3]. In the narrative verse, Byron mainly presents the psychological condition of an individual mind in confinement. In the first three stanzas, a detailed account of his incarceration is given. Owing to the "Persecution's rage" (20), the prisoner and his brothers are imprisoned. But we are also told in the same stanzas that they are "Fettered in hand, but pined in heart" (55). That is to say, the life in a dungeon itself is not a painful experience for the speaker. It is rather the death of his brothers that gives a blow to his mind. Being suppressed by loss - not by confinement - he turns into a "wreck" (26). Hence loneliness and despair are depicted in the following stanzas, where the speaker retells the gradual decline and death of his two brothers. Here, for example, are a few lines from the ninth stanza: I had no thought, no feeling - none - Among the stones I stood a stone, And was, scarce conscious what I wist, As shrubless crags within the mist;... (253-8)The speaker, whose "faith" (229) forbids "a selfish death" (230), is now a living dead. Isolation brought about by the death of his kinsmen completely overwhelms him and drives him into

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" A sea of stagnant idleness, / Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless" (249-50). Still, the prisoner is resilient enough to come to terms with his confinement. The tenth stanza tells that he is visited by " a lovely bird, with azure wings" (268) and that he expects the bird to give him some kind of consolation: And it was come to love me when None lived to love me so again, And cheering from my dungeon's brink, Had brought me back to feel and think. (275-8) What he seeks here is a Wordsworthian relationship between his mind and the natural world: he tries to revive himself with the help of the bird, a thing of nature. Against his wishes, however, the bird flies away in the end, failing to endow him with consolation. He is forced to remember that "'twas mortal" (290). The speaker is, in this manner, thrust back into the dark reality of his own fate. He is again " Lone - as the corse within its shroud, / Lone - as a solitary cloud" (293-4). In his essay on Byron's view of nature, Edward E. Bostetter maintains that " Byron's reaction to his [external] world is ambiguous, often contradictory... [4]. This holds true for " The Prisoner of Chillon," too. Namely, the poet repeatedly lets his hero explore an interaction between human beings and nature, but the exploration does not work. Even though a bird, as we have seen, cannot be a restorative for him, the prisoner does not give up finding comfort in nature. When unchained and permitted to move around in the dungeon, the prisoner looks out of the window so that he may establish a new relationship with the surrounding world. Mountains, snow, the Rhone, a little isle - all these natural things, which are observed from the dungeon, catch his eyes as if they had a power to restore him to life. And yet unlike Childe Harold, who finds a transient solace in the tranquility of Lake Lemman [6], the prisoner cannot get " a rest" (365) in nature: A small green isle... And on it there were

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young flowers growing, Of gentle breath and hue. The fish swam by the castle wall, And they seemed joyous each and all; The eagle rode the rising blast, Methought he never flew so fast As then to me he seemed to fly, And then new tears came in my eye, And I felt troubled - and would fain I had not left my recent chain... (344, 349-358) The prisoner feels that there is no chance for him to participate in the joyful natural world. He gives up a Wordsworthian faith in the restorative effects of nature; the universe spreading before him turns into a thoroughly indifferent world. And the speaker goes back to a state of death-in-life without experiencing renewal - even momentarily. The point to note, however, is that the speaker oddly begins to feel at home in the dungeon after his failure in responding to nature. He makes friends with spiders and mice. And the eventual release from the dungeon does not delight him: My very chains and I grew friends, So much a long communion tends To make us what we are: - even I Regained my freedom with a sigh. (389-92). These lines do not represent the speaker's capacity for adjusting himself to the imprisonment; on the contrary, we may say that they reveal the extremity of his despair. Imprisonment kills his brothers; their death plunges the speaker into the depths of hopelessness, and he can never recover his inner resources. Consequently, his humanity is devastated and he is reluctant to force himself to regain freedom. Now this psychodrama of confinement reaches its climax - climax which declares the incapability of the prisoner's restoration: " It was at length the same to me, / Fettered or fetterless to be, / I learned to love despair" (372-4). He is indeed a complete " wreck." It is apparent, in this manner, that " The Prisoner of Chillon" gives us a piteous picture of a man whose humanity is destroyed by imprisonment. A psychological investigation of the individual mind is what <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-of-imprisonment-in-the-prisoner-of-chillon/>

the poem concentrates on. NOTES[1] Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry*, Rev. ed. (New York: Octagon, 1966) 13 vols, IV, 13-28. All quotations of "The Prisoner of Chillon" are from this edition and will be cited by line number parenthetically in the text.[2] *Ibid.*, 7.[3] See William H. Marshall, *The Structure of Byron's Major Poems* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1962) 82; Robert F. Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1967) 191-2; Jerome J. McGann, *Fierly Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968) 167; and Newey Vincent, "Byron's 'Prisoner of Chillon': The Poetry of Being and the Poetry of Belief," *The Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 35 (1984): 54.[5] Edward E. Bostetter, "Masses and Solids: Byron's View of the External World," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 258.[6] See *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III, stanzas 85-91 in *Byron: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 129-31.