

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry: Conflict Collection

The Destruction of Sennacherib - *Lord Byron*

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THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB

Lord Byron

Brief Summary

'The Destruction of Sennacherib' tells the biblical story of the failed Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. Byron explores the idea of religion and its relevance to conflict. He focuses more on the victory of the Jewish people than the suffering and despair that conflict can cause. The poem can be considered as an exploration of the power dynamics within war, as Byron spotlights the supreme power of God in relation to the inferior power of the army.

Synopsis

- The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, launches an attack on Jerusalem
- The 'Angel of Death' appears and kills all of the soldiers.
- Even the horses are destroyed by the angel's arrival.
- A silence takes over the Assyrian camp.
- The silence is broken by the cries of the soldier's wives, as the people of Jerusalem become victorious due to the intervention of God.

Context

Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Byron was a notorious Romantic poet who was frequently embroiled in public scandals: he is considered by many to be the first "celebrity". After apparently having an illegitimate child with his half sister, Byron married Annabella Milbanke. They soon split up and after this Byron engaged in shameful activities such as affairs and getting into debt. He eventually moved to Lake Geneva in 1816 where he spent time with Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Claire Clairmont (Mary Shelley's half sister). He also fathered Clairmont's child. Byron travelled further throughout Europe and eventually died of a fever in modern day Greece.

Literary context

Byron rejected societal convention throughout his life, including in his work. The archetype of the **Byronic hero** was created by Lord Byron. A Byronic hero may possess some of these traits:

- Rejecting of authority
- Sexually attractive
- Self-destructive
- An outsider
- Secretive

These characteristics were based on Byron himself as well as some of his characters.



From 'Hebrew Melodies' (1815)

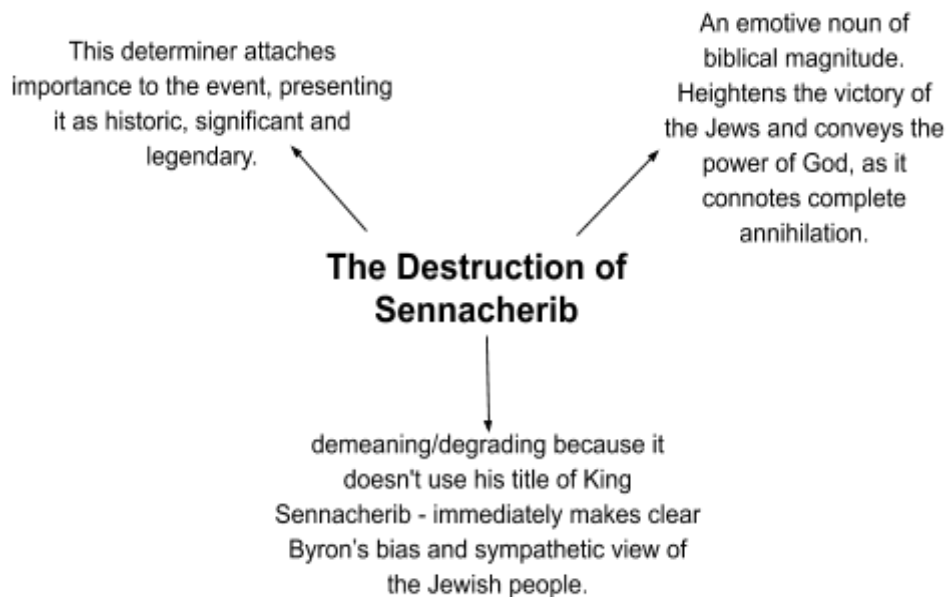
This is a collection of 30 poems by Lord Byron. Despite the title and the fact that many of the poems were centred around Jewish nationalism, many critics claim that the collection does not have a religious focus. Instead they propose the idea that Byron had an interest in the victimised members of society. He had written that "The Greeks [...] have as small a chance of redemption from the Turks as the Jews have from mankind in general" which highlights his sympathetic view towards Jewish people. Therefore, 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' can be seen as an exploration of the oppressed and the conflict that they face.

The Destruction of Sennacherib

The poem retells the biblical story of Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, who was well known for his military prowess. According to the Old Testament's account of the story (other versions of the tale differ greatly) the Assyrian King attempted a siege on Jerusalem, but the king of Judah prayed to God for help. In response, an angel came down and killed the soldiers while they slept, pronouncing the Jews as victorious.



Title



The Destruction of Sennacherib

Predatory simile dehumanises King Sennacherib, characterises him and the Assyrian army as villainous.

Parallel syntax highlights the ease with which the army was destroyed as their defeat is shown by changing only a few words.

Plosive sounds to increase the impact of the angel's appearance, presenting it as a powerful and supernatural force.

Semantic field of isolation creates a pause in the action of the poem. Allows readers to witness the destruction of the army.

Comparison to snow is an unusual simile as the battle takes place in the desert setting of Jerusalem. Shows the all-powerful nature of God as it reflects the events of the poem: the powerful army is impossibly destroyed just as snow is an almost impossible occurrence in the desert.

The Assyrian came down like **the wolf** on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in **purple and gold**;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the **Angel of Death** spread his wings on the **blast**,
And **breathed** in the face of the foe as he **passed**;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed **deadly** and chill,
And their hearts **but** once heaved, and forever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider **distorted and pale**,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were **all silent**, the banners **alone**,
The lances **unlifted**, the trumpet **unblown**.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their **wail**,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted **like snow** in the glance of the Lord!

Colours of royalty highlight the power and ungodly extravagance of the army, an arrogance which perhaps foreshadows their downfall.

By introducing this biblical figure, Byron increases the dramatic intensity of the poem, presenting the narrative as almost legendary.

The description of the pale rider juxtaposes the "gleaming" colours of "purple and gold" in the opening stanza. This epitomises the annihilation of the army.

Biblical and theatrical form of grief heightens the emotion of the poem.

exclamation mark creates a climactic finish to the events.



Perspective

Byron uses a **third person objective narrator** (a narrator who observes and describes events) which creates a sense of reliability. This is because there is no obvious reason for bias, causing the reader to view the events as fact. The narrator holds a sympathetic attitude towards the people of Jerusalem, highlighted by their **glorification of God and religious power**.

In some ways the narrator echoes Byron's own views towards the Jews (see 'context' section above), drawing close links between the narrator and the poet. It could therefore be argued that Byron uses the narrator to convey his own opinions about the biblical tale.

The narrative poem is from the perspective of a third person objective narrator who echoes the views of Byron himself. The narrator retells the biblical story with clear bias, emphasising the might of God

The Opening

The opening of the poem is significant as it fulfills two important roles: firstly, it characterises and makes clear both the 'good' and 'bad' groups within the conflict; and secondly, it elevates the villain in preparation for his downfall. Byron achieves these two purposes while also constructing a **strong religious undertone**. This ensures that ideas of God remain prominent, perhaps to make clear that the victory is attributed to divine intervention.

The poem begins **in media res** (in the middle of action) as Byron launches into a description of the attack. This gives the reader little opportunity to question this characterisation. Instead they are likely to simply accept what they are being told, perhaps to reflect the realities of war. He first refers to King Sennacherib as "**the Assyrian**", which can be seen as **derogatory** as he does not use his title nor his name. Byron continues by likening him to a "**wolf on the fold**". Which immediately attributes the role of the villain to King Sennacherib and his army. The **biblical images** of a predatory wolf and innocent sheep (a 'fold' is an enclosure where sheep were kept) mean that in contrast to the Assyrian, the Jewish people of Jerusalem are characterised as innocent and vulnerable.

Byron uses the opening to **elevate King Sennacherib and his army**. He achieves this through the use of **simile**, writing that "**the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea**". This creates a **sinister atmosphere** and presents the Assyrian army as an alarming threat. This is furthered by the **simile "like stars on the sea"**, as it implies that Sennacherib has control over the elements of the universe, heightening his power.

It could be argued that Byron chooses to emphasise the power of the army in order to ultimately elevate the role of God. This is because the more powerful the army appears in the opening, the more shocking and impressive their downfall seems. In this way, Byron



ensures that the victory of the Jewish people is foregrounded, **highlighting the power of the will of God**.

Structure

Rhyme Scheme

Byron uses a regular rhyme scheme of **AABB** which forms **rhyming couplets**. It is interesting to note that this formula is often used in **comic verse**, a seemingly inappropriate structure for a poem which deals with themes of death and the power of God. Byron may have done this to detract from the tragedy of the soldier's death, causing the reader to focus more on the victory of the Jewish people. This allows them to view the situation in a positive light, focusing on the glory of the victory as opposed to the devastation of the Assyrian army.

Anaphora

The **conjunction "and"** is repeated at the start of the vast majority of verses, a technique which is referred to as **anaphora**. This echoes the language of the Bible which foregrounds the religious theme as the very structure of the poem is a testament to the power of God.

Byron also uses **anaphora** to **increase the pace** of the poem and **alter the tone**. By using a **coordinating conjunction** at the start of the stanzas, Byron creates a sense of intensity as the events seem to be building on each other in quick succession. This serves to **heighten the glory** of the poem, as the reader is quickly pushed towards the victory of the people of Jerusalem.

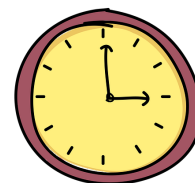
ANAPHORA | A word which refers to a previously used word in the text.

Extended Metaphor

Byron makes use of an **extended metaphor** through his references to the sea. In the opening stanza, he refers to the Assyrian army as a **"blue wave"**, spotlighting their **destructive power and force**. As the poem continues he **repeats the image**, but this time with regards to the power of God. Byron increases the strength of the **metaphor**, describing the **"cold...spray"** of the **"rock-beating surf"** when he details the death of the horses. The significant increase in the force of the metaphor makes clear that the Assyrians are powerless before the might of God, an assertion which reflects the religious themes that the poet explores.

Time Scheme

Byron creates an **unrealistic time scheme** within the poem, which is established through his **references to the different seasons**. He begins by comparing the army to **"Summer"** leaves but quickly moves on to describe them as **"Autumn"** foliage, finishing with a reference to **"snow"** in order to allude to the season of winter. This is furthered when he details the **"rust"** on the armour of the soldier, despite the fact that the army has only just been destroyed. In this way, Byron creates a **supernatural undertone to the events**, highlighting the exceptional power of



God. He therefore intensifies the consequences of the siege, elevating the story to greater heights.

Volta

The first six stanzas of the poem **spotlight the power of the Assyrian army**, however, in the seventh verse Byron disrupts this majesty by including a **volta** (turn of events). The volta is emphasised by altering the comparison of the army to summer **“leaves”**. He **repeats the simile** but writes that the army is now like the leaves that **“Autumn hath blown”**, highlighting their weakness and defeat.

The **volta splits the poem into two unequal sections** - the first six lines which explore Assyrian’s power, and the subsequent eighteen which evidence the power of God. The fact that there are significantly more lines which convey the power of God is significant, as it furthers the idea of **omnipotence** and **religious supremacy** over the Assyrians.

Form

Genre

‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ is widely regarded as a **narrative poem**. This form allows Byron to present the account of the siege as an important story which should be celebrated. This in some ways **glorifies conflict** as it focuses on the positive, honourable side of war and dismisses the tragedy of the Assyrian army.

The poem is arranged into **six equal quatrains** which conform to a **strict rhyme scheme**. This may reflect the uniformity of the army, spotlighting their initial strength and power. Alternatively, it may reflect the control and power of God, suggesting that religion is supreme and God is omnipotent. This causes the victory over the Assyrian army to appear morally correct, as it is seemingly supported by God which allows the reader to again dismiss the suffering of war and celebrate the victory.

Meter

Byron uses **anapestic tetrameter** to create a distinctive rhythm to the poem. This means each verse has the pattern of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (**anapestic**). This is repeated four times in every verse (**tetrameter**), creating a total of twelve syllables per verse. This is highlighted in the example stanza below (dashes used to show syllables):

The Assyr-i-an came **down** like the **wolf** on the **fold**,
And his **co**-horts were **glea**-ming in **pur**-ple and **gold**;
And the **sheen** of their **spears** was like **stars** on the **sea**,
When the **blue** wave rolls **night**-ly on **deep** Ga-li-lee.



This type of **meter**, like the rhyme scheme, is most often used to create the rhythm for **comic verse**, as it **emphasises the melodic nature of poetry**. In 'The Destruction of Sennacherib', the meter drastically increases the pace, perhaps to influence the reader to **focus on the glory of God rather than make them sympathise with the fallen soldiers**.

In addition to this, the **meter mimics the sound of horse's hooves** which adds to the war-like atmosphere of the poem. This allows the reader to appreciate the gravity of the situation and the terrifying reality of conflict. Furthermore, the rhythm creates the impression of advancing forces, establishing a sense of constant threat. This places the reader on edge, reflecting the feelings of the soldiers. This likely causes them to anticipate the climactic victory and therefore celebrate when it is achieved.

Language Techniques

Similes

Byron uses a number of **similes** throughout the poem. These are interesting for two reasons: firstly, they are all in **reference to natural images**; and secondly, they all relate to the Assyrian army, as opposed to God or the angel of death.

It is likely that Byron's interest in **romanticism** (an artistic movement in the 18th century) is what led to his choice to use **natural imagery** in his similes. Romantic poets aimed to restore mankind's relationship with nature and so it is unsurprising that Byron chooses to compare even weapons to the **"stars"** and the dead soldiers to simply **"autumn leaves"**. This **romanticisation of conflict** ignores the destruction that war can cause, instead focusing on the glory of victory.



By choosing to use **similes** only when describing the Assyrian army, Byron suggests that their **power is a facade**. He implies that their weapons are only **"like stars"** and that the king is only **"like the wolf"**, describing their power in relation to other things. This is significant as these **comparisons to nature** undermine their strength, as the natural images are all attributed as creations of God. In this way, Byron presents the idea that God's power is supreme. This is furthered when Byron describes the actions of God, as he uses literal, not figurative, language. This presents the idea that God is omnipotent, as his actions are absolute and definite.

Alliteration

Byron uses **alliteration** to alter the mood and atmosphere of the poem. He uses **sibilance** in the opening stanza to spotlight the sinister intentions of the Assyrian Army (see 'The Opening').

This technique is seen again when he describes the death of the soldiers, writing that their **"hearts but once heaved,"**. The **repetition** of the long 'h' sound forces the reader to pause and lengthen the phrase, increasing its impact. This effect is heightened by the use of **trochaic meter**, as it emphasises the words **"hearts"** and **"heaved"** which causes the



reader to focus on the phrase to a greater extent. Furthermore, Byron follows the phrase with a **caesura**, ensuring that the reader will pause and reflect on the statement. In addition, it could be argued that this spotlights the power of God, as even the rhythm of the poem is interrupted in order to submit to divine orders.

Caesura

CAESURA | A pause between words, for example across lines, with the use of a comma or full stop.

In addition to the above example, Byron uses **caesura** on multiple occasions in order to construct a certain effect. Following the defeat of the army, he uses **commas** after the words: **“silent”** and **“unlifted”**, creating a deliberate pause to reflect the isolation and emptiness of the Assyrian camps.

He utilises the technique again in the final stanza, following the phrase **“the might of the Gentile”**. This ensures another pause, causing the reader to stop and appreciate the victory of the Jewish people. It allows them to reflect on the fact that their triumph seemed impossible at the start of the poem, but that uncertainty and unpredictability is in the very nature of conflict.

Themes and Ideas

Death

On the surface it seems as though Byron largely focuses on the glory of war but **dismisses the tragedy surrounding the death of the soldiers**. This impression is created by the **rhyme scheme** and **meter**, which create a distinct rhythm that prevents the reader from thinking too closely about the soldier's deaths. However, when the poem is examined more closely, it becomes evident that Byron does indeed explore the tragic outcome of the siege. He presents the poignant images of the **“widows of Ashur”** who **“wail”** and mourn following the massacre. Furthermore, while there is little violence in the poem, Byron includes the uncomfortable image of the **“distorted and pale”** rider, highlighting the **negative consequences** of conflict.

It could be speculated that the poem itself acts as a **metaphor for conflict**. Often, the victory of battle overshadows the reality of suffering and death, just as the glory and rhythm of the poem overshadows the suffering of the Assyrian army.



Religion

The theme of religion is **central to the poem**, perhaps due to the story's **biblical origin**. The supreme power of God over the Assyrian army is evident through the use of **language and structure**, as highlighted in the sections above. However, it is also interesting to pay attention to the descriptions of the



Angel of Death. Byron doesn't portray the spirit as violent nor angry. Rather, he presents the angel as somewhat beautiful - a creature that **"spread his wings"** and gently **"pass'd"** through the soldiers, breathing on their faces to send them to death. The common images of violence and gore in battle are not seen here. Instead, the angel's actions are understated and effortless, emphasising the strength of the will of God

