



# Don Juan

George Gordon Byron  
(1819-1824)

The poem, an unfinished work which consists of sixteen cantos, is an epic satire in *ottava rima*, where Byron uses his wit to expose the hypocrisy of a rich society, social and sexual conventions, and sentimentalism. His tone is that of the high-spirited observer of the human comedy.

The poem records six major adventures of its hero, opening with a description of his childhood in Spain and his early love affair with Donna Julia, a married friend of his mother's. Then, Don Juan is sent abroad, is shipwrecked in Greece, becomes a slave in Constantinople and a soldier in the army of Catherine of Russia. He is finally sent to England on a political mission, and there he joins

the upper classes of the time. So Byron's hero is not the adult Don Juan, the notorious lover of the famous opera by Mozart (1787); he is a sort of boyish, energetic and impressionable anti-hero, whose adventures provide the author with varied opportunities for satirical comedy.

Byron indulges in repeated digressions, in which he speaks both of love, fame, politics and poetry in a light-hearted, conversational tone. One of his most frequent targets are the Romantic poets of the first generation, whom he criticises not only for their poetic inclinations, but also for having turned away from the political ideals of their youth to support conservative views.



## Don Alfonso and Donna Julia

*The following excerpt tells the story of the love adventures of the famous Spaniard who became the symbol of the womaniser in European literature.*

George Gordon Byron  
*Don Juan*  
(1819-1824)

Canto I, Lines 1081-1160

### CXXXVI

'Twas midnight – Donna Julia was in bed,  
Sleeping, most probably, – when at her door  
Arose a clatter<sup>1</sup> might awake the dead,  
If they had never been awoke before,  
5 And that they have been so we all have read,  
And are to be so, at the least, once more; –  
The door was fastened, but with voice and fist  
First knocks were heard, then 'Madam – Madam – hist<sup>2</sup>!

### CXXXVII

'For God's sake, Madam – Madam – here's my master,  
10 With more than half the city at his back –  
Was ever heard of such a curst<sup>3</sup> disaster!  
'Tis not my fault – I kept good watch – Alack<sup>4</sup>!  
Do pray undo the bolt<sup>5</sup> a little faster –  
They're on the stair just now, and in a crack<sup>6</sup>  
15 Will all be here; perhaps he yet may fly –  
Surely the window's not so very high!'

### CXXXVIII

By this time Don Alfonso was arrived,  
With torches, friends, and servants in great number;  
The major part of them had long been wived<sup>7</sup>,  
20 And therefore paused not to disturb the slumber<sup>8</sup>  
Of any wicked woman, who contrived  
By stealth her husband's temples to encumber<sup>9</sup>:  
Examples of this kind are so contagious,  
Were one not punished, all would be outrageous<sup>10</sup>.

- 1 clatter. Rumore, chiasso.
- 2 hist. Psst (suono usato per attirare l'attenzione o per chiedere di fare silenzio).
- 3 curst. Terribile, maledetto.
- 4 Alack! Ahimè!
- 5 bolt. Chiavistello.
- 6 in a crack. In un baleno.
- 7 wived. Sposati.
- 8 slumber. Sonno.
- 9 contrived ... encumber. Lett.: di nascosto riusciva a 'ingombrare le tempie' del proprio marito (cioè a tradirlo).
- 10 outrageous. Immorali.



## CXXXIX

- 25 I can't tell how, or why, or what **suspicion**  
 Could enter into Don Alfonso's head;  
 But for a cavalier of his condition  
 It surely was exceedingly ill-bred<sup>11</sup>,  
 Without a word of previous admonition,  
 30 To hold a levee<sup>12</sup> round his lady's bed,  
 And summon lackeys<sup>13</sup>, armed with fire and sword,  
 To prove himself the thing he most abhorred.

## CXL

- Poor Donna Julia! starting as from sleep  
 (Mind – that I do not say – she had not slept),  
 35 Began at once to scream, and **yawn**, and weep;  
 Her maid, Antonia, who was an adept,  
 Contrived to **fling** the bed-clothes in a heap,  
 As if she had just now from out them crept:  
 I can't tell why she should take all this trouble  
 40 To prove her mistress had been sleeping double<sup>14</sup>.

## CXLI

- But Julia mistress, and Antonia maid,  
 Appeared like two poor **harmless** women, who  
 Of goblins<sup>15</sup>, but still more of men afraid,  
 Had thought one man might be deterred<sup>16</sup> by two,  
 45 And therefore side by side were gently laid,  
 Until the hours of absence should run through,  
 And truant<sup>17</sup> husband should return, and say,  
 'My dear, I was the first who came away.'

## CXLII

- Now Julia found at length a voice, and cried,  
 50 'In heaven's name, Don Alfonso, what d'ye mean?  
 Has madness seized<sup>18</sup> you? would that I had died  
 Ere<sup>19</sup> such a monster's victim I had been!  
 What may this midnight violence betide<sup>20</sup>,  
 A sudden fit of drunkenness or spleen<sup>21</sup>?  
 55 Dare you suspect me, whom the thought would kill?  
 Search, then, the room!' – Alfonso said, 'I will.'

## CXLIII

- He searched, they searched, and rummaged<sup>22</sup> everywhere,*  
**Close** and clothes-press, chest and window-seat,  
 And found much **linen**, **lace**, and several pair  
 60 Of stockings, slippers, brushes, combs, complete,  
 With other articles of ladies fair,  
 To keep them beautiful, or leave them neat<sup>23</sup>:  
 Arras<sup>24</sup> they pricked and curtains with their swords,  
 And wounded several **shutters**, and some boards.

## CXLIV

- 65 Under the bed they searched, and there they found –  
 No matter what – it was not that they sought<sup>25</sup>;  
 They opened windows, **gazing** if the ground

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11 ill-bred. Maleducato.

12 levee. Arc.: udienza mattutina.

13 summon lackeys. Radunare valletti.

14 double. Profondamente.

15 goblins. Folletti.

16 deterred. Scoraggiato.

17 truant. Assente.

18 Has ... seized. La pazzia si è impossessata di.

19 Ere. Arc.: prima che.

20 betide. Presagire.

21 spleen. Malumore.

22 rummaged. Frugarono.

23 neat. Eleganti, pulite.

24 Arras. Arazzo.

25 that they sought. Quello che cercavano.



Had signs or footmarks, but the earth said nought<sup>26</sup>;  
 And then they stared each other's faces round:  
 70 'Tis odd, not one of all these seekers thought,  
 And seems to me almost a sort of blunder<sup>27</sup>,  
 Of looking in the bed as well as under.

## CXLV

During this inquisition Julia's tongue  
 Was not asleep – 'Yes, search and search,' she cried,  
 75 'Insult on insult heap, and wrong on wrong!  
 It was for this that I became a bride!  
 For this in silence I have suffered long  
 A husband like Alfonso at my side;  
 But now I'll bear no more, nor here remain,  
 80 If there be law or lawyers in all Spain.

## CLXXX

Alfonso closed his speech, and begged her pardon,  
 Which Julia half withheld<sup>28</sup>, and then half granted,  
 And laid conditions, he thought very hard on,  
 Denying several little things he wanted:  
 85 He stood like Adam lingering<sup>29</sup> near his garden,  
 With useless penitence perplexed and haunted,  
 Beseeching<sup>30</sup> she no further would refuse,  
 When, lo<sup>31</sup>! he stumbled o'er a pair of shoes.

## CLXXXI

A pair of shoes! – what then? not much, if they  
 90 Are such as fit with ladies' feet, but these  
 (No one can tell how much I grieve to say)  
 Were masculine; to see them, and to seize,  
 Was but a moment's act. – Ah! well-a-day<sup>32</sup>!  
 My teeth begin to chatter, my veins freeze –  
 95 Alfonso first examined well their fashion,  
 And then flew out into another passion<sup>33</sup>.

## CLXXXII

He left the room for his relinquished<sup>34</sup> sword,  
 And Julia instant to the closet flew.  
 'Fly, Juan, fly! for heaven's sake – not a word –  
 100 The door is open – you may yet slip through  
 The passage you so often have explored –  
 Here is the garden-key – Fly – fly – Adieu!  
 Haste – haste! I hear Alfonso's hurrying feet –  
 Day has not broke – there's no one in the street.'

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26 **nought**. Niente.

27 **blunder**. Errore grossolano.

28 **withheld**. Rifiutò.

29 **lingering**. Indugiando.

30 **Beseeching**. Implorando.

31 **lo**. Arc.: ecco.

32 **well-a-day!** Ahimè!

33 **passion**. Eccesso di rabbia.

34 **relinquished**. Che aveva abbandonato.

**LITERARY COMPETENCE****> VOCABULARY****1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.**

- |   |                     |    |                                  |
|---|---------------------|----|----------------------------------|
| 1 | armadio .....       | 9  | innocue .....                    |
| 2 | gettare .....       | 10 | colpa .....                      |
| 3 | sospetto .....      | 11 | pizzo .....                      |
| 4 | battere .....       | 12 | guardando .....                  |
| 5 | malvagia .....      | 13 | chiusa con il chiavistello ..... |
| 6 | pugno .....         | 14 | sbadigliare .....                |
| 7 | biancheria .....    | 15 | ante .....                       |
| 8 | scivolare via ..... |    |                                  |

**> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT****2 READ the first four stanzas and make notes about the following.**

- 1 Time;
- 2 place;
- 3 characters involved;
- 4 characters' relationships;
- 5 situation.

**3 READ the next five stanzas and answer the following questions.**

- 1 Who tried to help Donna Julia? How?
- 2 What did the women look like?
- 3 What did Donna Julia suggest that her husband should do?
- 4 What did the men find?
- 5 Was there a place they did not search?

**4 READ the text to the end and explain**

- 1 Donna Julia's behaviour;
- 2 her husband's response;
- 3 what happens unexpectedly;
- 4 Don Alfonso's reaction;
- 5 Don Juan's hiding place;
- 6 how he leaves the house.

**> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT****5 WORK out the features of *ottava rima*, the metric form used by Byron in the poem.**

- 1 Rhyme scheme;
- 2 number of lines in the stanza;
- 3 number of syllables in each line;
- 4 number of stresses in each line;
- 5 stress pattern.



**6 CONSIDER** the use of rhyme, especially in the final couplet. What effect does the poet want to achieve?

- A He wants to conclude an argument.
- B He wants to obtain a comic effect.
- C He wants to stress words which are important to the meaning of the poem.

**7 FOCUS** on the figure of the narrator.

- 1 Who is he?
- 2 The narrator can be considered obtrusive, since he is always present to make sarcastic or ironical comments on the characters or the situation. Underline examples of the obtrusive narrator in the text.

**8 READ** what Byron says in Canto XV of *Don Juan*.

'And never straining hard to versify  
I rattle on exactly as I'd talk  
with anybody in a ride or walk'

How does this quotation apply to the narrator's attitude in this extract? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ He sharply attacks the customs of his society.
- ☐ He chats in a friendly, rambling way with an imaginary audience.

**9 DEFINE** the tone of the poem. Choose from the list below.

cynical	burlesque	bitter	moralistic	tolerant
amused	annoyed	ironical	humorous	scornful

**10 DISCUSS** Byron's use of humour in this extract. Humour can be conveyed through the language and the behaviour of the characters or the situation itself. Provide examples.

**11 SUMMARISE** what these stanzas suggest about Byron's view on marriage and adultery.

## ➤ COMPETENCE: FINDING AND UNDERSTANDING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

**12 COMPARE** *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (→ T51) and *Don Juan* using the table below.

	<i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i>	<i>Don Juan</i>
Setting		
Protagonist		
Narrator		
Tone		
Language		
Style		
Themes		

**13 PICK** out from the extracts you have read those features which either mark Byron as Romantic or as Neoclassical.