



## George Gordon Byron: Cain

(1821)

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Genre: Play. Country: England.

This verse drama is Byron's retelling of the Genesis story but with Cain as its hero, both in the sense of the play's main character, and also as a version of what Byron himself admired and indeed constructed — “the Byronic hero”, which here reaches the final stage of its development. Like his other plays, *Cain* was a closet drama not intended for the stage, a type of romantic poem-drama like Goethe's *Faust* or, later, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. In fact it has since been performed, for example, by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican Pit in 1995, in a successful production directed by John Barton.

The play is subtitled *A Mystery*, by which Byron signals not a whodunit but a type of medieval drama illustrating stories from the Bible. As in Genesis 4:2 Abel is “a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground”. The play caused great controversy when it first appeared, largely for its blasphemy, its overt hostility to the Christian God, but in more recent times it has been evaluated for its literary qualities (and sometimes for its lack of them, as when told that death is the prelude to further visions Cain replies, collapsing into clunky prose, “Then I dread it less, / Now that I know it leads to something definite”, II.ii.412–13). The play was published in 1821 by John Murray along with two of Byron's historical dramas, *Sardanapalus* and *The Two Foscari*.

Byron termed this and his other non-historical dramas like *Manfred* “metaphysical”, by which he seems to have meant a philosophical work about celestial or infernal beings, containing supernatural elements and such items as a flight among the stars to a realm of giant phantoms, and in which even the biblical ingredients (in this case a column of fire, annihilating flood, whirlwind) take on colossal proportions. The bulk of the play is taken up by a long dialogue with Lucifer, who is obviously meant to recall Milton's Satan but who denies that he inspired the serpent of Genesis to tempt Eve. The snake was just a snake. Lucifer has an intellectual sympathy for the young Cain to the extent of saying that, if he had been the Creator, he “would not have made thee what thou art”, but Cain's questions about his lovelessness put him on the defensive. The plot of the play is constructed so as to come to the well-known climax of the story, Cain's murder of his brother Abel, but only near the end. It is thus a play about how death came to be: the mystery of what death might be is Cain's constant preoccupation. He questions why he should be punished for something his parents did before he was born. In addition, he cannot understand why a God who has the power for good should set things up so that mankind would fall and be forced from Eden, sentenced to till the earth and be subject to death.

### Summary and analysis

The play has three Acts. It begins with Adam, Eve, Abel, Zillah, and Adah praying to God, while Cain stands

sullenly by. Byron explains in the Preface that he has changed the names of the brothers' wives, calling them "Adah" and "Zillah", the earliest female names in Genesis, though there they are the wives of Lamech. The wives of Cain and Abel are not named in Genesis.

Cain's father asks why he is silent, and immediately the witty, sardonic aspect of Cain's role is apparent: "*Cain*: Why should I speak? *Adam*: To pray. *Cain*: Have ye not prayed? / *Adam*: We have, most fervently. *Cain*: And loudly: I / Have heard you." He complains that he has nothing to pray for because he must die, to which Eve immediately comments: "Alas! The fruit of our forbidden tree begins / To fall." When Adam asks why God planted the tree of knowledge, Cain tells his father he should also have plucked from the tree of life also: "Ye might then have defied him. *Adam*: Oh! My son, / Blaspheme not: these are serpent's words. *Cain*: Why not? / The snake spoke *truth*; it *was* the tree of knowledge; / It *was* the tree of life; knowledge is good, / And life is good; how can both be evil?" (I.20-38). And so begins the constant questioning of received orthodoxies.

Abel, Adah, and Zillah urge him to cast off his melancholy and join them in tending the fields. Alone, Cain deplores his worldly toil. He is no longer sure that God is good. At the conception of this thought, Lucifer appears, "a shape like to the angels, / Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect" (I.80-81), to explain that Cain will live forever even after death. Cain's response exposes the kind of intellectual and psychological contradiction he will carry through the play. Driven by instinct to cling to life, at the same time he despises this instinct as "loathsome". Lucifer admits that he, too, is unhappy in spite of his immortality, which God wills simply in order to torture him and the other fallen spirits. God is a tyrant sitting alone in his misery, creating new worlds because his eternity is otherwise a burden and boring to him. These words echo Cain's own thoughts, which emerge suddenly all in a turmoil. He has long pitied his relatives for toiling so hard.

Lucifer urges Cain in Miltonic or Faustian vein to resist his fate since "Nothing can / Quench the mind, if the mind will be itself" (I.213-14). He also explains that the tempting serpent had not been a disguise for himself (as later generations will imagine); the snake was merely a snake. Cain's anxiety over his mortality is heightened by the fact that he does not know what death is. Cain asks his mentor to reveal the nature of death, which holds great terrors for him: "Could I wrestle with him? / I wrestled with the lion, when a boy, / In play, till he ran roaring from my gripe" (I.259-61). Lucifer cannot tell him, since he knows not death himself. In the most Faustian moment in the play, he promises like Mephistopheles to teach Cain true knowledge if Cain will worship him. He then explains that even if he refuses to fall down and worship him, by refusing to worship God, he in fact worships Lucifer.

Adah, Cain's wife, re-enters the scene and asks him to leave with her, but he claims that he must stay with Lucifer, who speaks like a god. At first she suggests they invite the angel to "share our hour of rest—he is welcome" (I.341-42), a moment that echoes the invitation of Milton's Adam to Raphael, but quickly she sees he is threatening to take Cain away. Adah reminds Cain that the lying serpent, too, had spoken like a god. Adah begs Cain to stay with her and there follows a brief dialogue about love with the angel in which he says that their descendants, even Enoch and his unnamed sister, will not be able to love as they do, incestuously, by "a sin which is not sin in itself". Adah bewails that kind of future, in which their children cannot "love and bring forth things that love / Out of their love? (I.368-69)", comments which we must read in the light of Byron's own incest with his half-sister Augusta. Among other things Byron is exploring whether it is really our selves we love when we love another. In a moving speech Adah acknowledges that the demons who now surround them, after their exclusion from Eden, "tempt us with our own / Dissatisfied and curious thoughts" (I.402-403). She also admits that Lucifer attracts her, and begs Cain to save her (413).

Lucifer says he will take Cain with him for an hour, time enough to show him the whole of life and death. "With us acts are exempt from time, and we / Can crowd eternity into an hour, / Or stretch an hour into eternity" (I.535-37). Though these lines sound like an allusion to William Blake's famous opening to "Auguries of Innocence", especially "Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour", Byron could not have

known them: this must be a coincidence.

Act II is broken into two scenes. In the first we discover "*The Abyss of Space*". Cain travels with Lucifer through the air, a sequence which borrows from Eve's dream of flying in Milton, which in turn made some use of the tradition of witches' flight, yet transformed into a great though terrifying adventure. Cain watches with ecstasy the beauty below him, including "Yon small blue circle, swinging in far ether, / With an inferior circlet near it still" (II.i.29–30). He addresses the "blue wilderness of interminable/ Air" and asks if it rolls along as he has seen leaves on a stream, "Through an aerial universe of endless/ Expansion—at which my soul aches to think— / Intoxicated with eternity?" (II.i.102–109). He insists upon viewing the mystery of death, which is uppermost in his mind, so Lucifer leads him first to see the "phantasm of the world; of which thy world is but the wreck" (152–53), to view many previous worlds, and then at last to a place where "it grows dark, and dark—the stars are gone" (176). All here, says Cain, "seems dark and dreadful" (189).

In scene two, the setting is Hades itself, and Cain again curses "He who invented life that leads to death!" (II.ii.19–20). He sees in previous worlds predecessors of mankind, though no actual men. He sees a catastrophic vision of the Earth's natural history, complete with spirits of extinct life forms like the mammoth. He asks to stay in Hades, but has to return, via the gates of death, to earth. He complains that the tree of knowledge was lying, since not only the hopeless wretches he sees around him but "*we know nothing*" (II.ii.161). "The tree was true, though deadly", Lucifer tells him.

It is here that Byron has his characters anticipate certain scientific discoveries, referring, for example, to the world as having been created ages before the world that was created by God in Genesis. In a letter to his friend and fellow poet Thomas Moore of September 19, 1821, Byron identifies the creatures that Cain sees in act 2, scene 2 as "rational Preadamites, beings endowed with a higher intelligence than man, but totally unlike him in form" (8.216). The idea that there were beings on Earth before Adam had been a common although heretical concept since the seventeenth century, but Byron derives it directly from his reading of Baron Cuvier, as he explains in the Preface. The whole journey takes Cain into "deep time", a discovery of 18th-century geologists, and so into the burden of history.

In further dialogue as they travel on, Lucifer asks Cain what is more beautiful than all these "beauteous things remote", to which he replies "My sister Adah." And follows with a speech about how none of the stars, the moon, the sun itself, or the bird's voice that sings of love "as the day closes over Eden's walls — / All these are nothing, to my eyes and heart,/ Like Adah's face: I turn from earth and heaven/ To gaze on it" (II.ii.266–69). The speech borrows its ideas and structure from the beautiful lyric Milton's Eve addresses to Adam at *Paradise Lost* IV.641–56, beginning "Sweet is the breath of morn". Cain's expression of deepest love for his sister/wife, even though he admits she does not understand "the mind which overwhelms me" (I.189), contrasts immediately with Lucifer's wretchedness in loving nothing. "I pity thee who lovest what must perish", he announces, to which Cain pointedly replies "And I thee, who lovest nothing".

As Cain questions why this is so, Lucifer leads him gradually to mention his brother, and thence to his agitation as he admits he has noticed how Jehovah and the angels favour Abel. Lucifer then explains how, just as they are brothers, so are God and he. In this Manichean vein he says "We both reign". Cain wants to see both realms of this cosmic dualism, but Lucifer sneers saying to see either would be for him to perish. After another brief Manichean flourish—"Evil and good are things in their own essence", Lucifer then takes him back to earth.

Act III begins with Adam warning Cain to tread softly lest he wake the sleeping baby Enoch. As they talk Adah realizes the spirit who guided him through Act II has done him evil, yet she forgives him since he has brought Cain back after scarce two hours, though he thinks it was years. He immediately feels his littleness again. "Well said the spirit,/ That I was nothing!" (III.68–9). This leads him to question again the justice of their punishment for the first sin: "What is that/ To us? *Let them die!*" language which Adah realizes is not his, but that of the

spirit who was with him.

He then comes upon the two altars which Abel had made during Cain's absence and which are to be the setting for the final action. Cain's indignation at the sweat he expends in producing their food starts to well up and he threatens in biblical language (Psalm 137) to dash the child against the rocks rather than let him live on to eternal misery. Adah protests and he reassures her he would not harm the baby.

Abel enters and welcomes his brother back. He tells Adah to leave as they plan a sacrifice at the altars. Cain tries to convince his brother to leave him, or to perform his sacrifice alone. Abel refuses, and kneels as he calls for a blessing on their offering, but Cain stands while he contrasts his brother's bloody offering with his own, "the sweet and blooming fruits of earth" (259). His speech grows increasingly agitated as he asks to be stricken if he is evil. Suddenly the fire upon the altar of Abel kindles into a column and rises to heaven, while a whirlwind throws down the altar of Cain. Abel urges him to try again, but Cain refuses and they struggle as Cain angrily tries to get at Abel's altar. Abel defends it and Cain strikes him on the temple with a brand that he snatches from the altar. Thus the actual killing, the whole point of the Genesis story, is not here deliberate: by an obvious irony, Cain is offended by the blood in Abel's sacrifice, yet is the first to spill it.

Abel lies dying and gives Cain his hand. After a pause and looking round him, "in stupefaction", Cain cannot believe what he has done. He feels the blood on his head. Their sister and Abel's wife Zillah enters, sees what has happened and exits calling her parents. "Death is in the world" (370). Cain, alone, wails that "I — who abhor/ The name of Death so deeply, that the thought/ Em poisoned all my life, before I knew / His aspects— I have led him here". The others enter and Eve quickly sees that it was Cain, hanging his head in shame, who killed his brother. She begs the serpent's curse on him, echoing a tradition that he was the devil's child: "For he was fitter for his seed than ours". She wishes further curses on him, that "his agonies / Drive him forth o'er the wilderness, like us/ From Eden".

Adah refuses to leave him till the voice of an angel calls him, like "the Lord" in Genesis, and asks "Where is thy brother Abel?" to which Cain replies: "Am I then my brother's keeper?" Reprising now the Genesis story, Cain is told he is to be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth. The angel sets a mark on Cain so that any who kills him will suffer sevenfold vengeance. Clasp ing his brother's corpse, he bewails his fate. Adah leaves with him as Cain says: "Eastward from Eden will we take our way". Abel, he says, was childless. Children "might have graced this stern blood of mine". Adah says over Abel's corpse "Peace be with him!" Cain adds "But with *me!*" and so on that ambiguous note the play ends.

## The Story Before Byron

Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, found the city in general to have been the product of a curse on Cain. In his allegorical reading of the Genesis story, Philo Judaeus, followed by Augustine, made the story into a dualistic allegory of a spiritual battle always being enacted.

Cain and Abel were early blended with Esau-Jacob. Thus the story picked up the reference to two nations or peoples in Rebecca's womb (Gen. 25:23). Philo shows Cain's egotism, his human-centred rather than God-centred vision. Abel, by contrast, knows that "he is a stranger and a sojourner among earthly things". In Augustine's teacher Ambrose the distinction between two peoples is extended in a momentous and sinister direction: Cain becomes the prototype of the Synagogue, "the parricidal people of the Jews", whereas Abel is "the Christian who cleaves to God".

The references to Cain in the New Testament, especially the ones in John, are to be explained by the Jewish myth, to be found both in the Targum and in Gnostic sources, that Cain's true father was the devil, not Adam, the result of Eve's seduction by the serpent-devil (often known as Sammael) in Eden. The myth lends added

point to the dualistic myth elaborated by Philo and Augustine. In some contexts, for example in another of the Church Fathers, Lactantius, the Cain-Abel/Esau-Jacob myth even affected the idea of the devil, who was conceived as an elder brother to Christ. Augustine extended the brothers myth to all humanity, noting the parallel with Rome in the Romulus-Remus story: “Primus itaque fuit terrenae civitatis conditor fratricida” (*City of God* 15.5). But Augustine distinguished the two myths as well, since whereas both Roman brothers desired the same thing--the goods of the earthly city, Abel was separate, radically different, from Cain, and this brotherly difference remained central to the subsequent development of the myth. It is Abel, in fact, who often becomes the type of the medieval wanderer (and thence to be ultimately redeemed), while his brother, founder of the first city, becomes a passive stay-at-home. The reversal of parts is nearly total. For Augustine, Abel was the quester, the dissatisfied sojourner upon earth, the militant seeking to transcend the civilized virtues of the tired pagan world, and the pilgrim longing for the heavenly city. Cain only desires the goods of the earthly city; he envies Abel simply because of Abel’s spiritual innocence, and he is the prototype for all those who are committed to violence and murder. All of this Byron certainly knew, and consciously inverts or reinvents.

In the Middle Ages, though Byron may not have known much about this, Cain became a Monster or sire of monsters, as in *Beowulf*, where a precarious material culture lives in dread of the banished other, represented by Grendel and his dam, or mother. These monstrous descendants of Cain are definitely outsiders. The creation-lay that the envious Grendel hears coming from within the meadhall of Heorot refers not to Adam and Eve, but to Cain’s murder of his brother, and so to a feud based on envy, as the ruination of the world. So although the monsters may be represented as outsiders, their origins and their disruptive effects mark them as symbolic of strife within the community, whether human or divine.

A Papal letter of 1208 by Innocent III makes explicit the identification of Jews with their ancestor Cain by citing the words of Jesus’ denunciation of the Jews from John’s gospel: “ye are of your father the devil and the lusts of your father ye will do” (John 8. 41–44, elaborated in 1 John 3.8–14, and linked with Cain’s parentage). We find here the unpleasant beginnings of the legend of the Wandering Jew as a double of the wandering Cain figure. At the same time, there also arose an association between Cain and blackness through confusion with Ham, spelled Cham in the Middle Ages, while Cain can be spelled Chaym. In *Beowulf*, in fact Ham’s name slipped in for Cain’s at one point (line 107) and appears to have been corrected.

Although Abel becomes insignificant in *Beowulf*, in the Corpus Christi cycle of mystery plays his role is very important in that he becomes a type of Christ. Cain also takes on a new role, that of tax-dodger. In the mystery plays, Cain refuses to pay his tithes. One might perhaps see here the beginnings of the later shift towards sympathy with Cain. Certainly in the fourteenth century one finds Cain as a figure of the new homo economicus and on the stage he becomes a focus for some very appealing “upstart comic audacity”. Byron may have known some of this (at *Complete Poetical Works* 6.653 the editors note that the Chester and Coventry cycles had already been published, but he had more likely read about them in Warton’s *History of English Poetry* or Dodsley’s *A Select Collection of Old Plays*. See Martin 165).

In Dante Cain’s monstrosity becomes allied with the horror of civil war, while Abel, not ignored as in *Beowulf*, represents the possibility for the just few of escape from the corrupt city into exile or pilgrimage. The murder of Buondelmonte on Easter Sunday 1215 initiates the civil war for which Dante uses the Cain-Abel story as figure. Dante presents the murder as an enactment of an ancient ritual, a victim offered to the god of war, so it is not surprising, in Dante’s ironic commentary, that war follows. Machiavelli further brought the theme into history: his vision of power is exclusive, requiring that one brother be discarded. In Shakespeare’s history cycles with their theme of civil war, Cain and Abel are mentioned once only, in *Richard II*, at the important moment where the deposition of Richard is the “dark event” which precipitates the series of battles and the crisis in history. The rivalry of Hal and Hotspur, and then Octavian’s address to Antony as “my brother, my competitor”, may well also be read as variants on this pattern (Quinones).

## Byron's Innovations

Among the many changes introduced into the story by Byron, the most significant are:

- The death of the Abel figure is presented as excusable, surrounded by extenuating conditions. Neither in Byron nor in later versions does he plan to kill Abel. He is provoked.
- Abel is demoted to an insignificant role, whereas Cain, as a type of humanity in general, suffers because of a profound spiritual awareness.
- No structure of authority is left, even if the presence of a moral code is weakly insisted on at end.
- The blasting of Cain's offering in the whirlwind gets no explanation.
- The paradox whereby Cain, who abhorred animal sacrifice, was the first murderer.
- In a further paradox he also denounces the pain of mothers in childbirth, but is denounced by his own.
- Lucifer is Cain's double, and appears first as a manifestation of Cain's thoughts. Doubles are a basic ingredient of nineteenth century literature (from Poe to Dostoevsky to Jekyll/Hyde to Dorian Gray to Conrad's Secret Sharer): arguably they begin here.
- Lucifer's intervention allows Cain to explore his troubled consciousness.
- He asks rationalistic questions: why should we suffer for our parents' fault? Why can good emerge only from suffering?
- Cain learns to account for himself as given, since he has not made himself. He originates in the great and eternal cosmic conflict of God and Lucifer. Yet he wishes unity (a typical romantic wish: eg at 2.2.377–79, cf 3.1.556–60, in which he says he wished an heir for Abel who would have united the brothers' families), and is cursed not to have it, to know that division and wandering are for ever.
- What marks *Cain* off from *Manfred* and Byron's other verse-tales is the idyllic tenderness associated with the characters of Cain's wife, Adah, and their child, Enoch.

## Sources

The story of Cain and Abel had intrigued Byron for years. When studying German as a boy of eight in Aberdeen, or so he claimed in conversation with Thomas Medwin, his teacher had read Salomon Gessner's *Der Tod Abels* (1758) to him and though he wept as he read, Byron thought "any other than Cain had hardly committed a crime in ridding the world of so dull a fellow as Gessner made brother Abel".

The influence of other texts is evident, the most obvious of which, apart from the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis, is *Paradise Lost*. In the Preface, Byron claims not to have read Milton since he was twenty, "but I had read him so frequently before that this may make little difference". There are many connections, and some parodies: the dialogue with Lucifer, for example, is reminiscent of Adam's with God in *Paradise Lost* VIII 290-450.

Byron also denies he has read Goethe's *Faust* although he had read Mme de Staël's *De l'Allemagne* in 1813, which contains a detailed account of it, and whom he visited at Coppet, while at the Villa Diodati, Cologne, and

in 1816 he had heard Matthew (“Monk”) Lewis read aloud some of his own translation of Goethe. Nor, he claimed, had he read Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* (letter to John Murray, 12 Oct 1817, *Letters and Journals*, 5:268) though the relation of Lucifer and Cain is so similar to that of Mephistopheles and Faustus that the claim is hard to credit.

A basic text for eighteenth century skepticism, one which Byron had read, was Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1695–97; Eng tr 1734). He stresses several heterodox details of the Christian stories, such as the necessary incest among Adam’s children of which Adah makes so much.

Baron Georges Cuvier (1769–1832), author of *Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe* whom Byron cites in the Preface, was a key figure in the new scientific theory of catastrophic change as progress in both history and science. Lucifer’s explanation of the extinctions of pre-Adamic beings at 2.3.80–84, which Byron claims as a fiction, derives directly from Cuvier.

William Beckford’s Gothic novel *Vathek* (composed in French in 1782, and translated into English in 1786) is a further source for the pre-Adamites. In the Halls of Eblis (the Muslim Satan) the caliph Vathek sees the fleshless and melancholy forms of the pre-Adamite kings, who “still possessed enough life to be conscious of their deplorable condition” (pp. 247-8).

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