

Reading Group and
Teachers' Notes

Ashley Hay's

The Secret

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INTRODUCTION

*“I harm nobody – I make love with but one woman at a time
and as quietly as possible, and they lie through thick and thin and invent
every kind of absurdity.”*

Lord Byron

Everyone wanted to be Lord Byron’s wife: he was London’s most famous poet and its most desirably notorious lover. On January 2, 1815, he married Miss Annabella Milbanke, a young lady with handsome prospects, good connections, and admirable ankles. Fifty-four weeks later, a scant month after the birth of their first child, she left him and his house and went home to her parents. She never saw him again.

At the base of it all was her secret, the hidden and despicable thing that caused her to leave. She never stopped thinking about it, never stopped talking about it, and never revealed the horror and enormity of what it was. It defined her, more than anything else she ever did. And it defined Byron – not as the country’s leading poet, but as someone about whom it was possible to say anything and everything. And have it believed.

Set against the peculiar morals and social constraints of Regency England, *The Secret* is the story of the Byrons’ strange and scandalous marriage, all fifty-four weeks of it, and everything that it was possible to turn it into.

REGENCY ENGLAND

London, in 1812, hovered between a distantly archaic and a familiarly modern place. Geographically, its centre was still small: there were cows in Green Park and Hyde Park, yet both Fortnum and Masons and Hatchards the Booksellers were already open for business on Piccadilly. The Regency had been declared in February 1812 after George III was pronounced insane, and the Prince Regent was living an opulent, excessive life in a series of fabulous houses. Lord Elgin's first shipment of marbles arrived in London from the Parthenon, and the process for canning food had just been invented. Death from starvation was still common in the slums around Westminster and what was to become Trafalgar Square, yet the number of British subjects would double between George III's ascension (in 1760) and his death in 1820 to 13million, and continue to grow.

Westminster might have had its modern gaslight but the pea soup fogs still delivered cubic feet of soot over the entire city. Oxen were driven through the streets on Mondays and Fridays.

In the rest of the world Sydney, the same age as Byron, was only 24 years old – he was its elder by four days. Ludwig Berblinger, a German tailor, had attempted to fly the year before, and failed; Napoleon was preparing to enter Russia – he and his French Revolution had been ruining peoples' travel plans for years

“Routs, riots, balls and boxing-matches, cards and crim. cons., parliamentary discussions, political details, Masquerades, mechanics, Argyle Street Institution and aquatic races, love and lotteries, Brooks's and Buonoparte, opera-singers and oratorios, wine, women, waxwork and weathercocks.”

Lord Byron

Above all this the aristocratic world of London continued as it had for decades. Balls, impractically beautiful gowns, and elegant conversations were the mainstay of that society, seemingly untouched by the affairs of state being enacted outside its parameters. Young girls learnt how to make shoes, not to sell but to fill in time, or sat perfectly still so that artists could paint pictures of their eyes. A lady would make a certain number of calls during the day, but these were never more than 15 minutes long, never moved past the formality of “Lady X” and “Lady Y”, and never filled with conversation about anything more than shopping, theatre, that new poem by the dashing Lord Byron, or that other great mainstay of smalltalk: gossip. (The proof of adultery in any divorce case rested largely on something called “criminal conversation” or “crim. con.”.) Nothing moved beyond the most superficial level: awkward questions, personal questions, could not be asked unless information was offered – and even then, if the person was of a significantly superior social rank, it was almost rude to acknowledge that they'd said anything

notable at all. Although it would give you something naughty and tantalising to drop into the chatter of your social calls the next morning.

The upper class – still dizzying in its separation from the rest of society – was a world of luxury and excess. A hostess who didn't present at least 15 courses for a dinner was thought mean or lazy, and novels of the day wondered how “females, who called themselves *delicate*, could eat of a dozen dishes, applauding each with all the *goût* of epicurism”.

It was the world of Jane Austen's novels.

“The London ‘season’ corresponded roughly with the time that Parliament was in session, and the time when there were no animals or birds to be pursued across the countryside. It closed, officially, on August 12, when the grouse season opened. It was a glancing, abbreviated world, restricted by a series of incontrovertible codes about who could say what to whom, in what order, when, and for how long ... Its purpose was the speedy transformation of girls in their late teens from children sequestered with governesses into young ladies capable of navigating the etiquette of dinner parties, dances, conversations and a presentation to the monarch at St James' Palace. Capable of achieving, moreover, the ultimate goal of acquiring a husband. And this quest for matrimonial success was made easier by the fact that everyone with the right sort of pedigree was corralled into one confined space in London between at least Easter and late summer, proceeding through the same gamut of social occasions. If someone smiled sweetly at you on Wednesday evening, you were bound to run into them again by the following Tuesday. In the face of this, young ladies had, at the most, two or three seasons to secure a husband or be considered failures.”

LORD BYRON

In a lot of ways, George Gordon, the sixth Lord Byron, was one of the first celebrities in the true, yellow, tabloidy sense of the word. Even the year he was born (1788, as the First Fleet neared Sydney) saw the definition of the word “glamour” change from something to do with witchery and spells to that sexy, charismatic, irresistible meaning it still carries today. And with that came the full swag of rumour and innuendo and newspaper attention that we think of now.

For someone who had, as he put it, woken up to find himself famous, this was always going to be disconcerting. Fame came so quickly: he always carried an awareness of its fragility, of the knowledge that it could become infamy – or obscurity – in precisely the same short moment.

“It was a dreary thing to be twenty-three, your big adventure over, and nothing to look forward to. Lord Byron, being a lord, was marked down for a dull life, trying to keep himself amused – as a gentleman he didn’t need a profession, as long as he could keep up some sort of style of life without, vulgar, displaying any means of support.

He arrived in London with luggage that included four Athenian skulls, a phial of poison, the manuscript for his poem, and several live tortoises. This poem – a heady mix of travelogue, philosophising, and reminiscences about lost and unrequited love – cut a swathe through London’s highest circles within a fortnight of his return.”

ANNABELLA MILBANKE

Annabella Milbanke was born in 1792, the only child of two older, well-to-do and slightly provincial parents. An earnest and studious child, she grew into a strong-willed young woman who was more interested in fulfilling what she prescribed as her own religious duty, than playing in the social circles that her position gave her access to. She was known as a prim, highly moral and quite cold young woman who had a strong sense of her superiority and intelligence in the face of the licentiousness which was common in her society.

“There should have been no reason to suspect that Byron’s writing would impact on Annabella Milbanke, with her loud and often-proclaimed distaste for fashionable society and its darlings – a mindset more likely in an elderly spinster aunt – and no interest in the world of flirting, of coquettish behaviour, or of seduction. Still, even Annabella had to confess to her mother, as she sat writing about her first sighting of Byron, that while she would not seek an introduction to him, she would not turn one down if it came her way.”

THE MARRIAGE

Annabella Milbanke married Lord Byron on January 2, 1815. For all the information and correspondence that charted both their courtship and what came after the engagement, there is a void of contemporaneous primary material for the period of slightly more than a year which was the Byrons' marriage. All his life, Byron had fed the rumours of his much-discussed exploits, and made his persona as dark, mysterious and romantic as any audience wanted it to be. When his morally and socially exemplary wife left him, this meant that all the London gossips had a fabulous body of possibilities to draw on in their hunt for her reasons for going.

I was thought a devil because Lady Byron was allowed to be an angel, and that formed a pretty antithesis.

Lord Byron

Even the truth wasn't good enough: it was true that Lord Byron had had a brief affair with a chorus girl – no, said the newspapers, that can't be right. He must have had a liaison with *London's Leading Actress*, not some nobody-wannabe. And then that wasn't enough – and London said that *surely* he had taken her home and slept with her *in Lady Byron's own house*. That was the sort of outrageous and scandalous thing that you could expect of such a man – not a quick shag in a nondescript house with someone from the back row of the chorus.

“It's a hard thing, in the moment of not knowing whether you should fight to hold someone or run away very quickly and never look back, to reconcile the information you have about them to fit both possibilities.”

It is Annabella's story that runs on like a line of hardened obsession – partially because Byron lived only eight years after their separation. But he carried an awareness of her to his deathbed (just before dying he called for her, for his daughter, for his sister). And, in the awareness of him that she carried for another thirty-six years beyond that, she gave him a different sort of immortality. She had always said she was fighting for the salvation of his soul, and his place in a religious eternity. In telling and retelling and revising the story of their time as Lord and Lady Byron together, she guaranteed him a temporal one.

SECRETS AND THE NATURE OF BIOGRAPHY

“It’s an aggravating fact that no one ever has the foresight to write down absolutely everything they said or thought or did, precisely and contemporaneously, with an eye to the various well-intentioned and muck-raking biographers who will plod along years later, trying to make sense of those sporadically shining spots of life.”

The story of Byron and Annabella is a story about darkness, rumour and supposition, the way we try to pin something down as the truth of a moment – whether it’s a moment in our own lives, or a moment for someone else’s biography. Impossible enough to do for yourself five minutes after something has happened to you, it’s made so much harder by the sheer number of possibilities of versions of Byron’s life (there were more than 5,000 books, theses, chapters and articles written on him in the twenty years from 1973 alone – and he’d been dead almost 150 years by then) and by the different motives and agendas both he and Lady Byron used to get through their marriage and its disintegration.

“That’s the wonderful thing about secrets. They will always be the worst thing that you can imagine them to be. You will go into the deepest part of yourself, find the most unspeakable darkness there, and assume that this is the hidden thing in somebody else’s life, somebody else’s marriage.”

And so the story can still change over time: find your own secret, the taboo that you carry hidden at the centre of yourself, and there will be enough evidence – or at least enough suggestion – to make it possible that it is the hidden thing, too, at the centre of the Byrons’ short, sharp marriage.

Slices of those fifty-four weeks turn up in the biographies of both Lord and Lady Byron – but Byron’s story usually spins out to look at his life in Europe after 1816, and Lady Byron’s (told much less frequently) goes on to her work in the anti-slavery movement, the prison reform movement, and the establishment of schools. *The Secret* tries to strip the story out of the two lives it took hold of, to look at it as a whole itself. It’s a story began in a very short period of time and then ran on and on, through almost two centuries and counting. As interested in the way we tell stories – and the way that changes with what is taken to be the truth – as it is in the story it is telling, *The Secret* is an attempt to explain that most inexplicable thing: the disintegration of a relationship.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Why are biographies and non-fiction narratives about other people's lives so fascinating?
2. Is it ever possible for biography to come up with an objective and true version of a life someone has already lived? Does it matter either way?
3. It's easy to read both Byron and Annabella as quite modern characters. Byron's celebrity was that of a glamorous popstar – his neuroses might have been those of a manic depressive bulimic. Annabella's decision to leave him, to raise their child and to run her life as a young single mother was a very big step to take in Regency England. How much should you read more modern motivations and behaviour into the lives of people who died more than a century ago?
4. The rapid fire exchange of letters between them, between the time of Byron's first and second proposal, allowed each to create both a version of themselves and of the other person that was whole, pleasing, and entirely fantastic. In some ways, the speed and revelation of their messages resemble email messages now, shot back and forth with the safety of both distance and immediacy. Does this resemblance make it easier for people at the beginning of the 21st century to identify with the games Byron and Annabella were playing for each other?
5. At what point do you think the marriage was doomed, leaving neither Byron nor Annabella the opportunity of trying to sort out their mess?
6. What was Augusta Leigh's role in the last weeks of the Byrons' marriage?
7. Are there modern equivalents for this story – the reckless husband, the saintly wife, the third person in the marriage?
8. Byron's and Annabella's daughter, Ada, grew up to be a gifted mathematician, working with Charles Babbage on one of the first computer programmers. She also displayed a lot of her father's character traits: drunkenness, flirtatiousness, delusions of grandeur, a tendency to run up debt. Yet Annabella found excuses – and forbearance – for all this behaviour in her daughter, where she had left her husband and tried to have him diagnosed insane for the same reasons. Why do you think this is?
9. Do you think Lady Annabella Byron's continuing campaign against her husband's name – and her sister-in-law's peace – was driven by regret, by a conviction that she was right, by revenge, or just by whatever impetus you take up to try to make sense of a relationship that has disintegrated around you?
10. What do you think the secret is?

THE AUTHOR

Ashley Hay lived in England for three years. She became interested in Annabella Milbanke and the story of the Byrons marriage after reading the entry on Byron in the *Dictionary of National Biography* which said that Lady Byron had left her husband because he wouldn't eat meals with her, and wrote nicer poems about his sister than about her. Ashley has previously worked as a journalist and written short stories. *The Secret* is her first longer work, and she was intrigued by the biographical examples set in the Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* and *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes. Below, she discusses the book.

Why write a book about Byron?

If you want to start telling stories about someone you haven't made up, or who isn't yourself, then Byron is a great person to pick. Because any story that you want to tell – character as casanova, character as lusty bastard, character as god, character as hero, character as villain, character as person who wrote poetry sometimes, character as first modern celebrity, character as vampire, character as person who was kind to animals – you will be able to find wrapped around him. And I don't know whether it's because he is truly the most seductive man who ever lived, or because if you spend enough time inhabiting anyone's life you'll build up a fondness for them (or an obsession with them), but he's been an interesting person to carry around – you get animal stories and disastrous love stories and funny stories and potentially glorious stories and small emotive stories. All in one portable poet-sized parcel.

He sounds like quite a charmer but his wife didn't seem to think so – what was she like?

She was an earnest, quite religious woman who did lots of good, big things and probably should never have gone anywhere near Byron. He was someone who liked to shock people by saying outlandish things – and she was someone who took anything anyone said quite literally. She was an only child, used to getting her own way; she reacted quite vehemently to things but thought she was always completely in control. And when she took control of the marriage – and left it – she did something quite extraordinary for the times. But she never let Byron go: he was lodged at the centre of her, and she carried him with her for the rest of her very long life.

The story has a real dramatic flair that reads almost as fiction. Is any of it made up?

No. The dialogue and thoughts are taken from letters, diaries and journals – and from Lady Byron's enormous archive of writing which makes up the Lovelace Papers which are kept in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Obviously there are some gaps in the story which you bridge, drawing on what you know was happening and what you know the

people were thinking – and there were so many suppositions and accusations being made by different people that you do sometimes have to choose one version over another. They were very generous in the amount they left behind them and the number of words they generated about each other and their marriage. I'm sure they probably made things about each other – neither partner in a disintegrating relationship tells the absolute truth about the other person or what was going on. But the shape of the story – what happened when, who did what, who said what – that's taken from the accounts that were left behind.

Why, as a new author, did you choose to write in the genre of non-fiction?

It's an interesting thing to take a story that already has a shape – a beginning, a middle and an end – and still be able to play with it creatively. Especially when the story that you're writing (all the different versions of who Byron was and what terrible things went on in his marriage) is about different ways of telling stories in the first place. It's probably the biography of a marriage – and no biography is ever entirely free from subjectivity, selection or even smoothing invention. It just goes by other names. Besides, writing non-fiction is also a very handy way of throwing people who look for autobiographical parallels in a first book off the scent ...

What are your two favourite pieces of information about Byron?

I love the fact that serious academic debate about this man reached the point of two people discussing whether he had really seen a hippopotamus or not – decades after he died. And that the vicar who snuck a look into his coffin in 1938 seemed entirely unperturbed by the fact that one of Byron's feet was detached from its leg. He generates the best anecdotes, the most bizarre facts and strange moments. Which is why he's been fun to play with.