

Don Juan (1820) – A Synopsis

The Argument: The story, told in seventeen cantos, begins with the birth of Don Juan. As a young man he is precocious sexually, and has an affair with a friend of his mother. The husband finds out, and Don Juan is sent away to Cadiz. On the way, he is shipwrecked, survives, and meets the daughter of a pirate, whose men sell Don Juan as a slave. A young woman who is a member of a Sultan's harem, sees that this slave is purchased. She disguises him as a girl and sneaks him into her chambers. Don Juan escapes, joins the Russian army, and rescues a Muslim girl named Leila. Don Juan meets Catherine the Great, who asks him to join her court. Don Juan becomes sick, is sent to England, where he finds someone to watch over the young girl, Leila. Next, a few adventures involving the aristocracy of Britain ensue. The poem ends with Canto XVII.

Canto I: Don Juan lives in Seville with his father José and his mother Donna Inez. Donna Julia, 23 years old and married to Don Alfonso, begins to desire Don Juan when he is 16 years old. Despite her attempt to resist, Julia falls in love with Juan and sleeps with him. Don Alfonso, suspecting that his wife may be having an affair, bursts into their bedroom followed by a "posse concomitant" but Juan is hiding in the bed and they find nothing suspicious in the room. Later, however, when Alfonso returns and comes across Juan's shoes, a fight ensues and Juan escapes. In order to avoid the rumours and ill-repute that her son has brought upon himself, Donna Inez sends him away to travel in the hopes that he may develop better morals while Julia is sent to a nunnery (as you do with badly behaved young women).

Canto II relates how Juan—still in love with Julia—sails out from Cadiz with his servants and his tutor Pedrillo. After a period of seasickness a storm blows up and sinks the ship. The crew climb into a long boat but soon run out of food, whereupon they draw lots to determine which of them will be eaten by the others. After Juan's dog has also been eaten by the others, the lot turns to his tutor Pedrillo. Nature is just, however, and those who eat him go mad and die. Thus Juan becomes the sole survivor and eventually makes it onto land at Cyclades in the Aegean. There a certain Haidée and her maid Zoe discover him and nurse him back to health in a cave by the beach. Haidée's is the daughter of a "fisherman" called Lambro who actually lives by capturing sailors to sell as slaves. Despite the fact that neither can understand each other's language she falls in love with the handsome stranger and a marriage is planned.

Canto III is essentially a long digression from the main plot. In it Byron describes Haidée and Don Juan's nuptials in the style of an epic catalogue. The islanders believe Haidée's father has died but he returns from a mysterious journey to witness the marriage revels. Towards the end of the canto, Byron devotes some space to the amusement of insulting his senior contemporaries, especially Wordsworth, Coleridge ("I wish he would explain his Explanation"), and Robert Southey—to whom, however, the poem is dedicated. In this canto we also find a section called "The Isles of Greece" which is numbered differently from the rest and uses a different stanza and verse-form. Here Byron sets out his views on Greece's modern status as a "slave" of the Ottoman Empire and thus the reasons for his own commitment to it.

Canto IV: Haidée and Juan wake to discover that her father has returned. Lambro confronts Juan and sets upon him physically with the help of his pirate-friends. Haidée despairs at losing her lover and eventually dies of a broken heart with her unborn child still in her womb while Juan is sent away on shipboard and ends up at a slave market in Constantinople.

Canto V: Juan meets a fellow-Englishman called John at the slave-market. He speaks to him about his lost love and hears in return that the other was fleeing his third wife before he was enslaved. Next Baba, a black eunuch, purchases Juan and John and brings them to the Sultan's palace. It seems that the Sultana has spotted our hero at the market and fallen in love with him. Baba disguises Juan as a woman, threatening to castrate him if he refuses, and brings him to meet Gulbeyaz, the sultan's fourth wife, a 26-year old beauty and his favourite. Juan professes his love for Haidée and refuses to abase himself as required. When she throws herself upon his breast he spurns her advances saying, "The prisoned eagle will not pair, nor I / Serve a sultana's sensual phantasy"—words which make her think of beheading him before she breaks down in tears. Baba now rushes in to announce the advent of Sultan who arrives with a procession of women, eunuchs, and retainers. The Sultan is struck by Juan's beauty (in female guise) and Byron enlarges on the nature for *seraglias* [harems] in lands where "wedlock and a padlock mean the same."

Further cantos trace Juan's adventures in Russia and back to Britain in the same irreverent and digressive spirit.

[... ; based on "Don Juan" in *Wikipedia*.]

Byron wrote to his friend the Irish poet Thomas Moore: "I have finished the first canto [...] of a poem in the style and manner of *Beppo*, encouraged by the good success of the same. It is meant to be a little quietly facetious upon everything. But I doubt whether it is not—at least as far as it has gone—too free for these very modest days." (Letter of 19 Sept. 1818.) He always professed to his publisher John Murray that the poem was neither poetry nor serious and really had no plan. It is clear that he intended to make it