

The Gothic Tendency

The vampiric allure of pale young men of indeterminate sexuality

British male style icons – actors, singers and models – often tend to the androgynous. Hollow-eyed, brooding, skinny and sexually ambiguous, these men are infinitely desirable to their female audience whilst simultaneously repelling and even offending many heterosexual men. Their looks, combined with a certain Byronic appeal, form what could be termed a particularly British gothic tendency.

The Byronic hero first appeared in Lord Byron's 1818 semi-autobiographical poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Historian and critic Lord Macaulay described him as 'a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection'. The birth of the dream-realising medium of film, supercharged the desirability of the dark and troubled hero by combining the attractions of a real actor with the fictional attributes of the characters they portray. A cocktail that produces someone who is more than a mere human. Gothic heroes or 'Princes of Darkness' as David Pirie notes, 'cannot emerge directly from life – they were (and still are) a fusion of dream, desire and dread, of myth and urban legend, an amalgam of the supernatural, the forbidden and the real!'

Britain's first screen romance was with Ivor Novello, a man dubbed Britain's 'handsomest screen actor'.² 'The problem was to find someone as beautiful as Ivor to play opposite him,' said Adrian Brunel, who directed Novello in *The Man Without Desire* (1923). 'With just a glance he could set hearts a-flutter. His gracious smile, yearning gaze, and flashing eyes were irresistible to his legions of fans... He was a dreamer who chose to live in a world apart from the everyday banal existence that most of us call life. His vivid, artistic portrayals provided movie-goers with a glimpse of another realm - one of poetry, imagination and emotion.'³

In the 1970s we fell in love with a thin white duke, whose skinny frame and hollow eyes were the opposite of the wholesome good looks of America's poster boys. David Bowie's androgenous, floppy haired alien in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg, 1976) spawned numerous fashion imitators.

Jane Campion's 2009 film *Bright Star*, about the poet John Keats, features Ben Whishaw as the romantic poet who dies of tuberculosis. Whishaw was described in an interview as 'slightly built, with a gentle, sincere manner. He looks sensitive, and his default facial expression is faintly melancholic.'⁴ In 2014 Whishaw played the psychotic Baby in the West End play *Mojo*. 'Baby radiates a toxic stillness', bringing 'drop dead arrogance' to the gold jacketed, hip swivelling character said the reviewers.

Robert Pattinson (apologies to Leonard Whiting & Tom Hughes, I ran out of room) came to prominence as the vampire Edward Cullen in *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008). His cut glass British accent and angular other-worldly face with 'jaw and cheekbones as finely sculpted as monumental masonry'⁵ create a 'death warmed up... dark-eyed charm.'⁶ Despite becoming 'a conduit for the traditional sublimated rage, lust, frustration and fantasy of a billion bedroom-bound teenage girls... the first genuine www.heart-throb.com,⁷ Pattinson's rebel masculinity, 'simultaneously melancholy and moralistic... might articulate the sensibility of a generation that wants more than just more technology.'⁸ The Byronic appeal is, it seems, as relevant as ever.

1 David Pirie, 'Princes of Darkness' in *Gothic, The Dark Heart of Film* (BFI, 2013)

2 Geoffrey Macnab, *Homme Fatale*, *The Guardian*, 10.01.2014

3 Gilda Tabarez, *Ivor Novello: The Last Great Romantic*, *The Silents Majority* website, 1996

4 David Gritten, *Ben Whishaw interview for Bright Star*, *Daily Telegraph*, 02.11.09

5 Michael Bracewell, *Idol Talk*, *GQ Style*, Issue 3, Autumn/Winter 2009/10

6 John Naughton, *The Deathless Appeal of R-Pattz*, *GQ*, 28.06.2010

7 *ibid*

8 Michael Bracewell, *Idol Talk*, *GQ Style*, Issue 3, Autumn/Winter 2009/10

