***The Destruction of Sennacherib* by Lord Byron** (cf OCR Anthology *Opening Lines - The Charge of the Light Brigade* page 36)

**Biographical, Historical and Literary Context**

Byron was one of the leading poets of a group known as the Romantics. Romanticism was a general artistic movement (literature, music, the visual arts, etc.) which dominated European culture from the last part of the 18th century until the mid-19th century. Romanticism had many key features which are included in the poem:

* an interest in the cultures and history of the Middle East and Far East
* the importance of liberty and freedom
* a fascination with mystical and supernatural events

The poem was originally published as part of a collection called *Hebrew Melodies* in April 1815. This was a time when the subject of war was of great concern throughout Europe. The wars against Napoleon had been going on for sixteen years and were quickly reaching a climax. The Battle of Waterloo, which ended the war, took place just two months after the poem’s publication. Just like Sennacherib and the Assyrians in the poem, Napoleon and the French had carved out a huge empire and nothing seemed capable of stopping them. It is estimated that the war resulted in approximately 3.5-5 million casualties. It must have seemed to Byron’s original readers that only a miracle could stop the destruction. The poem is based on a brief story in 2 Chronicles 32:21 that records in one sentence the defeat of the Assyrians by God’s Angel of Death. Byron uses similes based on natural processes—summer turning to fall, snow melting, armour rusting—to suggest the transitory nature of all life.

**Themes**

**Death:** war always brings death and destruction. The planned Assyrian attack is halted by the death of the soldiers and their horses.

*‘And the* ***widows*** *of Ashur are loud in their wail.’*

The effects of death are ongoing. In the Assyrian capital Ashur, the wives of the soldiers mourn the loss of their husbands.

**God’s power:** God is shown to have the power to protect his chosen people at a specific time of need. His ongoing power is demonstrated through the references to nature.

*‘And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,/ Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!’*

The Assyrian’s aggressive ‘*might’* is nothing compared to God’s power. God merely has to *‘glance’* at the enemy to destroy them. **‘***Melted like snow’* is used to highlight how easily this destruction is achieved.

**Interpretation of the whole poem**

The reader may sympathise with the people of Jerusalem.

The attackers are compared to a wolf hunting its innocent prey and the ‘fold’ refers to an enclosure in which sheep would be kept.

The reader is meant to sympathise with the Assyrians.

So many Assyrians are killed that we are meant to be horrified by what has happened to them. We also learn about their grieving widows.

**Interpretation of the lines:** *‘And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;/ And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,’*

The Assyrian soldiers are described as powerful and strong.

This is emphasised by the bold colours of their uniforms and the sheer number of their weapons.

The Assyrian soldiers are not as strong and powerful as they appear.

The words ‘gleaming’ and ‘sheen’ hint that the Assyrian army is all about flashy showmanship and that they are not quite as powerful as they think they are.

# Form

The Destruction of Sennacherib is written in **quatrains** using a very distinctive rhythm. The effect is of a lively, vibrant poem but this is at odds with the tragic subject. This is where the power of the poem lies for many readers – the contradiction of the form and content can be seen as echoing the contrast between the might of a great army and the tragedy of war.

# Structure

The poem has six **stanzas**. Each stanza consists of a pair of **rhyming couplets** in the regular repeated pattern **aabb**. This helps to drive the **narrative** forward in quite a simple format.

The rhythm of the poem is also straightforward and regular which makes it very easy to read, though not necessarily to understand. The poem uses **anapaestic tetrameter**, which subtly evokes the rhythm of a horse’s gallop, fitting given its martial subject matter. This particular rhythm is often used in comic and light verse, so the fact Byron chose it for a poem about war and death is striking. The regular rhythm of the poem is further emphasised by the fact that each line is **end stopped** and that about half of the lines start with the word 'and'. The use of ‘and’ in this way serves to drive the story forward in the same way the mounted soldiers are charging.

The poem benefits from being read/heard aloud.

# Language

The Assyrian army are compared to elements of nature

Some of the vocabulary is deliberately **archaic** (eg 'strown', 'wax’d') and some of the word order also seems old-fashioned (eg 'their hearts but once heaved' rather than ‘their hearts heaved once’). This echoes the **syntax** found in the original Biblical story and thereby suggests a particular time and a place.

Much use is made of **similes** particularly in the early part of the poem (eg 'the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea'). In the descriptions of the Assyrian army (both alive and dead) they are compared to elements of nature such as forest leaves or the surf of the waves. This is highly-effective and suggests that while mankind can easily be destroyed, nature will endure.

Byron also makes good use of **alliteration**, for example:

* 'the **s**heen of their **s**pears was like **s**tars on the **s**ea' – the hissing of the ‘s’ sounds brings a suggestion of evil
* 'their **h**earts but once **h**eaved' – the repetition of the ‘h’ sound slows our reading down for the moment as death occurs.