Prometheus

POEM TEXT

Titan! to whose immortal eyes
    The sufferings of mortality,
    Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things that gods despise;
What was thy pity's recompense?
A silent suffering, and intense;
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
All that the proud can feel of pain,
The agony they do not show,
The suffocating sense of woe,
    Which speaks but in its loneliness,
And then is jealous lest the sky
Should have a listener, nor will sigh
    Until its voice is echoless.

Titan! to thee the strife was given
    Between the suffering and the will,
    Which torture where they cannot kill;
And the inexorable Heaven,
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate,
Which for its pleasure doth create
The things it may annihilate,
Refus'd thee even the boon to die:
The wretched gift Eternity
Was thine—and thou hast borne it well.
All that the Thunderer wrung from thee
Was but the menace which flung back
On him the torments of thy rack;
The fate thou didst so well foresee,
But would not to appease him tell;
And in thy Silence was his Sentence,
And in his Soul a vain repentance,
And evil dread so ill dissembled,
That in his hand the lightnings trembled.

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
    To render with thy precepts less
    The sum of human wretchedness,
And strengthen Man with his own mind;
But baffled as thou wert from high,
Still in thy patient energy,
In the endurance, and repulse
    Of thine impenetrable Spirit,
Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,
    A mighty lesson we inherit:
Thou art a symbol and a sign
    To Mortals of their fate and force;
Like thee, Man is in part divine,
    A troubled stream from a pure source;
And Man in portions can foresee
His own funereal destiny;
His wretchedness, and his resistance,
And his sad unallied existence:
To which his Spirit may oppose
Itself—and equal to all woes,
    And a firm will, and a deep sense,
Which even in torture can descry
    Its own concenter'd recompense,
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory.

SUMMARY

Titan! With your undying eyes you saw the misery of human beings, a sad reality which would not typically bother the gods. And how were you repaid for taking pity on mortals? You were subject to a silent, harsh suffering: you were chained to a rock, with a vulture coming every day to eat your liver. You experienced what any proud person would feel of pain: an agony they keep to themselves, a sorrow so intense it makes it difficult to breathe. Such sorrow cannot help but cry out in loneliness, but is careful in case someone is paying attention: it does not make a sound until it knows it will not be overheard.

Titan! You were caught between your pain and your determination, a struggle so terrible it is itself a form of torture. And Zeus—relentless, tyrannical, hateful Zeus, who takes pleasure in creating things just to be able to kill them—did not even grant your request to die. Your awful gift was to live forever—and you have handled it well. All that Zeus got out of you was the very anguish he inflicted on you. You saw the future but refused to tell him what you saw. Your silence would lead to his downfall. Secretly he wished he had never punished you because of the dread you inspired in him, a dread so poorly hidden that his lightning bolts trembled in his hands.

Your Godlike crime was to act with kindness, to, by your example, improve humanity's circumstance, giving them the tools of knowledge and enlightenment that they need to improve themselves. And as bewildered as you were looking down on humankind, it is through the example of your patience, endurance, and the rebellion of your unshakeable spirit that we human beings learn an incredible lesson. You represent, to humans, their destiny as well as their power to change it. Like you, humanity is part godlike, an imperfect stream from a perfect source. And while humans are capable of foreseeing their own miserable fates, they are also capable of resistance. Though it is painful, with firmness of purpose and the power of the human mind, the spirit is capable of catching sight of the very thing for which it suffers. Through the act of resistance the spirit triumphs, turning even death into victory.

THEMES

TYRANNY, REBELLION, AND EMPOWERMENT

The poem honors the rebellious spirit of Prometheus—who, according to Greek mythology, stole fire from the gods and gave it to human beings. Zeus, the most powerful of the Olympian gods, punished Prometheus for this act of defiance by sentencing him to an eternity of being chained to a rock, with a vulture coming every day to eat his liver. The poem casts Zeus as an oppressive tyrant who ruled through fear and enforced ignorance, and uses the mythological figure of Prometheus to celebrate the power of rising up against such tyranny.

The fact that, before stealing fire, Prometheus witnessed "the sufferings of mortality" under the tyrannical rule of the gods reveals that Zeus's reign was hardly a happy one for human beings. Indeed, Zeus is referred to as "inexorable Heaven," "the deaf tyranny of Fate," and "the ruling principle of Hate"—all of which imply his terrifying grip on humanity. He even created things just to enjoy watching them die—something the poem casts as a disturbing display of tyrannical power.

Prometheus is thus a friend to humanity and a traitor to the gods because he helps mortals cast off their oppression. His "crime" was to "strengthen Man with his own mind"—a line that makes sense when considering that fire is usually taken to be a symbol for knowledge and enlightenment. Prometheus's actions thus freed humanity from its ignorance and total subservience to the gods.

Towards the end of the second stanza, the speaker describes a shift in the power dynamic between Zeus and Prometheus. In Prometheus's "Silence" was Zeus's "Sentence"; though Zeus had the power to punish Prometheus, Prometheus's sense of conviction undermined Zeus's power. Zeus felt so threatened by Prometheus's silence that he began to feel "a vain repentance" and "an evil dread" that caused his lightning bolt—the fearsome weapon he used to rule gods and mortals—to tremble in his hand. In other words, Zeus feared the power represented by Prometheus's rebellion so much that his belief in his *own* power began to weaken. The poem thus implies that rebellion *itself* is a form of power; that in the very act of standing up to tyranny and oppression one may crack the foundation of the oppressor.

Finally, in the third stanza, the poem becomes explicit about using the figure of Prometheus as "a symbol and a sign." Though the poem is addressed to Prometheus, it is really meant for the reader, who is supposed to take from the poem a sense of empowerment. Like Prometheus, the speaker claims, human beings are capable of patience, endurance, and of possessing an "impenetrable Spirit." These qualities mean that people do not need to suffer under the rule of tyrannical leaders; they have at their disposal all the necessary tools to fight for their own liberation.

The poem concludes not with an image of Prometheus, but with the human spirit catching sight of the reward for its suffering, "triumphant where it dares defy." Like Prometheus, the poem asserts, human beings are well-equipped to rebel against the "funereal destiny" imposed on them by their oppressors. The poem then ends with the word "Victory," leaving the reader with a sense of empowerment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 18-22
- Line 23
- Lines 31-34
- Lines 35-59

SACRIFICE AND SUFFERING

Prometheus's struggle "between the suffering and the will" speaks to the inner battle everyone must face between choosing what is easy and what is right. As a Titan (that is, one of the gods from Greek mythology who ruled the world before the rise of the Olympians), Prometheus was not *personally* affected by the gods' oppression of human beings; had he not chosen to act on their behalf, his life likely would have gone on much the same as before, and he would not have been subject to the wrath of Zeus. Choosing to fight for the freedom of mortals could not have been an easy choice for him, yet ultimately his will triumphed over his fear; he acted on his principles in full understanding of the price he would pay. The poem praises Prometheus's bravery and promotes the value of individual sacrifice in the fight for collective freedom.

The poem begins with the speaker acknowledging first "the sufferings of mortality" and then "the rock, the vulture, and the

chain" that Prometheus faced as his punishment for standing up for mortals. By juxtaposing these two kinds of suffering—collective (that is, all of humanity's suffering) and individual (Prometheus's)—the poem immediately outlines the choice Prometheus faced: to allow humanity to continue to suffer, or to sacrifice himself in order to help them.

Prometheus acted on principle; he could not sit idly by and watch human beings suffer under "the ruling principle of Hate" when his values compelled him to "render less ... The sum of human wretchedness." He knew it was within his power to make a difference in the lives of human beings; to not act on their behalf would have been a betrayal of everything in which he believed.

Prometheus also fully understood what the consequences of giving fire to mortals would be; he did not act from a place of naivety, but from a place of forethought. "The fate [he] didst so well foresee" was a future where he was chained to a rock, but mortals were free to "strengthen [themselves] with [their] own mind." He chose to sacrifice himself for the collective good.

And like anyone faced with such a difficult choice, Prometheus struggled between what would have been easy and what was right. The speaker describes Prometheus as "baffled" by the choice before him, looking into a future comprised of "wretchedness," "resistance," and a "sad, unallied existence." He knew that if he chose to help mortals, his own fate would be rendered miserable. And yet, despite his misgivings, Prometheus did indeed choose to help mortals.

Zeus punished Prometheus for his defiance, just as Prometheus knew he would. And though Prometheus suffered, he did not crack under his punishment. He was fortified by "patience," "endurance, "a firm will," and "a deep sense." He was proud of the sacrifice he made; he continued to believe in the value of standing against Zeus's tyrannical rule, and his silence in the face of torture suggests his continued belief in the righteousness of his cause.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-14
- Lines 15-34
- Lines 35-38
- Lines 39-59

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Titan! to whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things that gods despise;

The poem opens with the use of apostrophe. By having the speaker address Prometheus directly, Byron is able to immediately create a sense of closeness between the speaker and Prometheus; though Prometheus is not present, the speaker (and reader) feels an affinity with him.

The apostrophe also emphasizes that Prometheus is not a human being. Instead, he is one of the Titans—in Greek mythology, a race of gods who ruled before the Olympians (Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite, etc.) took over. The reader is thus introduced to a significant aspect of Prometheus's character within the first four lines. If Prometheus is a god, and gods do *not* despise human suffering, then why is Prometheus moved to help humans? Prometheus is at odds with his own kind. There is a dissonance between who he is expected to be and who he actually is.

Thematically, this dissonance upsets the status quo—the status quo being like an equation where on one side there is human suffering, and on the other the gods looking on, unbothered. By caring about the suffering of humans, Prometheus has upset this equation, unbalancing the very reality of the world. Things that were taken for granted as true before may no longer be treated as such.

It's subtle, but the first four lines both establish and undermine the rules of the poem. For example, simply by addressing Prometheus, the speaker has disrupted the norm of the poem's meter: the trochee created by the word "Titan" at the beginning of the poem is in contrast to the iambic tetrameter seen throughout the rest of these four lines (recall that an iamb is a poetic foot with a da DUM rhythm, and tetrameter means there are four of those feet per line).

This happens at the very beginning of the poem, which thrusts the reader into a narrative where Prometheus's rebellion has *already* occurred. Indeed, the story of Prometheus is being told in past tense; the gods' tyrannical reign has already been disrupted. The speaker is recalling it now because it bears significance to what the poem hopes to convey. The reader is made (perhaps subconsciously) aware that the speaker addresses Prometheus as a stand-in for *any* individual who rebels against oppressive norms.

Within the first four lines, the poem also establishes an obvious rhythm. The clear, full end rhymes form a rhyme pattern of ABBA (known as an enclosed rhyme). There is a mirror-like quality to this initial rhyme pattern, the reflection of AB being BA. This is notable as the lines seem to mirror each other *thematically*: the first line addresses Prometheus's "immortal eyes," the second what he is seeing (human suffering); the third line again addresses what he is seeing (the sad reality of humanity), and the fourth again addresses who is seeing this scene, though this time more generally.

This is important as the poem is essentially using Prometheus as a mirror for the "godlike" aspects of the speaker. In

summoning the spirit of Prometheus, the speaker hopes to speak to his own heroic potential, and to that of the reader as well.

LINES 5-10

What was thy pity's recompense?
A silent suffering, and intense;
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
All that the proud can feel of pain,
The agony they do not show,
The suffocating sense of woe,

After briefly introducing the issue at hand (Prometheus's witnessing of oppression), the speaker then poses a question: "What was thy pity's recompense?" This question is posed not because the speaker doesn't know the answer (the poem quickly goes on to provide it), but as a rhetorical expression of doubt which allows the rest of the poem to unfold. This is known as aporia. It is necessary for the speaker to relay the extent to which Prometheus suffered for his rebellion, as the willingness to suffer for the greater good is a major theme of Romanticism (the literary movement of which Byron was a part; more on that in this guide's Context section) and a central concern of the poem.

Lines 6-10 are delivered in almost perfect iambic tetrameter and proceed as tidy rhymed couplets. Take lines 7 and 8:

> The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
> All that the proud can feel of pain,

The effect of this formal perfection is stifling: it coincides with "The suffocating sense of woe" Prometheus feels. It would have been possible for Byron to tell the story of "the rock, the vulture, and the chain" from a greater distance; rather than relying on a *reference* to the story, he might have actually *told* the story of Zeus's wrath and Prometheus's punishment itself—of Prometheus being chained to a rock in the Caucuses for the rest of eternity, a vulture coming every day to eat his liver, said liver regenerating itself by night only so he could suffer again the next day.

But Byron trusted his readers to understand the reference and instead focused the poem's energy on the atmosphere of suffering. Rather than understanding Prometheus's pain intellectually, from a distance, the reader is thrust into it on an emotional level. The relentlessness of the meter and the consistency of rhyme in these lines drives home the *monotony* of suffering: every day Prometheus had ample reason to break. Every day he continued to bear the weight of his choice.

LINES 11-14

Which speaks but in its loneliness,
And then is jealous lest the sky
Should have a listener, nor will sigh
Until its voice is echoless.

The poem takes on a more meditative quality in these lines; the forward motion of the narrative is put on hold as the speaker elaborates on the very nature of woe itself, which is isolating and silencing. The prevalence of /s/ sounds—both through sibilance and consonance, in words like "speaks," "loneliness," "lest," etc.—creates a silkiness one might equate with someone saying "shhhhh," a silencing sound. It also contributes to the poem's sense of rhythm, keeping the meter's regularity noticeably intact.

In these particular lines, silence feels like defeat, a strangling of the will. Yet at the same time, there is a subtle gathering of agency in these lines. Upon closer inspection it is clear that the proud and silent sufferer is someone who has *chosen* to remain silent rather than risk being overheard, implying that the sufferer has a secret, and one worth keeping. The stanza ends in a place of subtle tension: is this a defeated, silenced Prometheus, or a heroic, actively silent Prometheus?

On a formal level, the near-perfect iambic tetrameter continues to be present in lines 11-14. The stanza also closes with a return of the enclosed rhyme scheme that opened the poem (ABBA). There is thus a sense of symmetry between the first lines, where Prometheus witnessed human suffering and felt compelled to act, and the last lines, where Prometheus himself suffers on account of human beings. There is a sense of balance being restored; that is, the oppressive rule of the gods appears to be intact. All Prometheus got for his act of rebellion was to suffer in much the same way as those he was trying to save suffered.

LINES 15-17

Titan! to thee the strife was given
Between the suffering and the will,
Which torture where they cannot kill;

The second stanza opens similarly to the first. For one thing, there is the same opening apostrophe: "Titan!" These lines also return to the enclosed rhyme scheme that opened and closed the first stanza (ABBA). In fact, lines 15-17 seem to be little more than a rephrasing of the dynamic established in the first stanza. Prometheus was caught between his unbearable circumstances and his unshakeable resolve. He suffered terribly. He was too determined to give in to his suffering, yet because of his immortality, he was destined to go on suffering forever.

There is also an undertone, again, of the speaker addressing not just Prometheus, but *anyone* who might find themselves caught "between the suffering and the will." The poem here introduces the struggle of trying to choose between what is easy and what is right. Prometheus could not give up without betraying his ideals. Therefore his own suffering was a necessary sacrifice in the fight against the gods' mistreatment of humans. He "was given" this "strife," this situation, by being born with the gift of

foresight, the strength and cleverness of a god, and the resources to be able to ease human suffering. Here, the classic Byronic hero emerges: solitary in his suffering, defiant, in conflict with his own kind, passionate and bold, willing to sacrifice himself for the liberation of others.

LINES 18-23

And the inexorable Heaven,
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate,
Which for its pleasure doth create
The things it may annihilate,
Refus'd thee even the boon to die:

Now that the poem has established who its hero is, it introduces its villain. "Inexorable Heaven," "deaf tyranny of Fate," "ruling principle of Hate"—these all refer to Zeus, king of the mythical Olympians, under whose rule human beings suffered miserably; Zeus, who for his "pleasure doth create / The things [he] may annihilate." In other words, Zeus is the kind of god who creates things just for the thrill of destroying them. Yet despite his love of destruction, Zeus refuses Prometheus's request to die: he takes even more pleasure in Prometheus's prolonged suffering.

Just as Prometheus is representative of the rebellious spirit, Zeus is representative of oppressive and tyrannical power. But it is worth noting that while Prometheus is named in the title and addressed directly as "Titan," Zeus is evoked only through allusion. This could be interpreted in a couple of different ways.

The most obvious is that Zeus is so powerful, so omnipresent, so revered, that he doesn't need to be explicitly named. The fact that Byron trusted his readers to recognize Zeus's presence speaks to his pervasive presence in the popular imagination.

Alternatively, there is a more subtle reading grounded in the Romantics' interest in individual, heroic figures. While *systems* are oppressively rational and de-humanizing, existing everywhere and nowhere at once, the *individual* is capable of acting from a place of genuine emotion and imagination, the only antidote to corrupt and abusive power. The poem's veneration of Prometheus, coupled with its failure to *name* his oppressor, perhaps implies that history will remember heroism, but the names of tyrants will fade into obscurity.

The relentless, cruel nature of Zeus is manifested in the poem with the rhyme scheme in lines 19-22 (Fate, Hate, create, annihilate). The repetitive use of a single rhyme sound has a deadening effect, imitating the stifling cycle of hate and misery perpetuated by Zeus's reign. The effect of this rhyme in such regularly metered lines is also reminiscent of the sound of machinery, something that was looming large on the Romantic imagination. If the opposite of humanity is industry, it makes sense to associate the latter with the cruel grind of the gods' rule.

Though line 23 seems to be a low point for Prometheus (Zeus refuses his request to die), there is also a palpable sense of relief created by the break in the repetitive rhyme (this line ends with "die"). This break indicates a shift in the poem; though this may be Prometheus's darkest moment, it seems something is about to change. What comes to mind is the old saying "it's always darkest before the dawn."

LINES 23-28

Refus'd thee even the boon to die:
The wretched gift Eternity
Was thine—and thou hast borne it well.
All that the Thunderer wrung from thee
Was but the menace which flung back
On him the torments of thy rack;

The speaker established in lines 18-22 that Zeus was not a very nice god, to say the least; instead, he was the kind of god who found pleasure in destruction. Here, the speaker reveals that Zeus did not even grant the suffering Prometheus the "boon"—or benefit—of dying. Instead, the Titan had to bear his suffering throughout "Eternity," which is described, with irony that approaches the level of oxymoron, as a "wretched" (i.e., miserable) "gift." Gifts are usually happy, pleasurable things, but in this case the ability to live for "Eternity" just prolonged Prometheus's suffering.

Nevertheless, he bore that suffering "well," meaning he took his pain in his stride. No matter what "the Thunderer"—another allusion to Zeus—threw at Prometheus, he could not break Prometheus's will. Indeed, Prometheus's pain was simply "flung back" onto Zeus; in other words, Prometheus's torture revealed *Zeus's* own frustration and anguish.

Lines 23-26 are some of the most irregular in the poem. After breaking from the repetitive rhyme sound of lines 19-22, the poem fails to establish a new rhyme scheme right away. Instead of creating some kind of end rhyme with "die" as the poem has done previously—be it an enclosed rhyme or a couplet—the poem deploys something entirely new: a cross rhyme.

> Refus'd thee even the boon to die:
> The wretched gift EternityWas thine—and thou hast borne it well.

While "die" and "thine" are not a perfect rhyme, the sounds are similar enough (via the assonance of the long /i/) to draw attention to their relationship. The reader is encouraged to emphasize "thine" because of the em dash that follows it. In creating this rhyme, Byron disrupts the rhythm of the poem as the reader has come to know it.

Furthermore, the caesura created by the em dash creates a beat between the seemingly hopeless statement "The wretched gift Eternity/was thine" and the surprisingly upbeat "and thou hast borne it well." There is a giant shift in the tone of

the poem following that em dash, which reflects the shift in the power dynamic between Prometheus and Zeus. Before the em dash, Zeus was in control, humans were suffering, and Prometheus was doomed to suffer right alongside them. After the em dash, Zeus discovers that torturing Prometheus has brought him nothing but the very anguish he had hoped to inflict on Prometheus.

Notably, on the heels of this disruption, line 26 abandons the poem's established meter altogether; rather than iambs (da DUM) it is composed of dactyls (DUM da da):

All that the | Thun der-er | wrung from thee

While the poem quickly re-establishes iambic pentameter in the following lines, the effect of the sudden shift to dactylic meter in line 26 is of destabilization. Again, all Zeus managed to do in torturing Prometheus was to reveal his own anguish.

LINES 29-34

The fate thou didst so well foresee,
But would not to appease him tell;
And in thy Silence was his Sentence,
And in his Soul a vain repentance,
And evil dread so ill dissembled,
That in his hand the lightnings trembled.

The source of Zeus's anguish was a future Prometheus "didst so well foresee" but would not confess to Zeus: Zeus's downfall at the hands of a child Zeus would someday sire. This is an allusion to Heracles (a.k.a. Hercules), a child of Zeus who, in Greek mythology, would go on to eventually free Prometheus from his torture.

In refusing to give in to his torturer (he could have traded his secret for his freedom), Prometheus ensured Zeus's eventual downfall. The longer Prometheus remained silent, the more fearful Zeus became as his tyranny failed to break the Titan down. And the longer this dynamic continued between them, the more flimsy Zeus's power—fueled by fear—became in comparison to Prometheus's power, which found strength in Prometheus conviction that he had done the right thing. By the end of the stanza, Zeus's power is so compromised that his lightning bolts—the fierce weapon with which he reigned—tremble in his hands.

The repetition of "And" at the beginning of lines 31-33, and in particular the parallelism deployed in lines 31-32, creates a sense of snowballing: the consequences of Prometheus's small act of rebellion (not surrendering his secret) become rapidly more important, implying that even the smallest act of defiance can help topple a regime. The notion of cause and consequence is emphasized by the syntax of lines 31-34. "And in thy Silence was his Sentence" sets up an obviously consequential relationship between Prometheus's action and Zeus's fate. This relationship is further underscored by both the alliteration and the capitalization of "Silence" and "Sentence," a relationship which implies one does not exist without the other.

It's notable that the last four lines of the stanza all include an extra syllable. The poem's meter hasn't been abandoned, but it is noticeably imperfect, perhaps a reflection of Zeus's crumbling power.

LINES 35-38

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness,
And strengthen Man with his own mind;

The beginning of the third stanza reiterates Prometheus's motivations for having stolen fire from the gods. Though the word "fire" does not actually appear in the poem, it is invoked by the use of the Prometheus myth in the first place. Prometheus gave fire to human beings; fire is commonly used to symbolize enlightenment, the ability to think and reason and seek knowledge (it also carries associations of passion, boldness, and determination).

Therefore Prometheus didn't so much steal a *resource* from the gods so much as he stole *resourcefulness itself*—his goal being to "strengthen Man with his own mind." Prometheus, known for being a trickster god, would have understood the power of resourcefulness. Prometheus understood that the "force" of humanity lies in the ability to think for oneself and improve upon any given situation—particularly in regards to oppression and tyrannical power—with imagination and bold action.

The poem also continues to examine what it means for Prometheus to break from his kind. "Thy Godlike crime" can be interpreted two ways: first, his action was criminal among the gods because it was not according to how the gods would act; therefore, it was a "crime" because it was not Godlike. The second way it can be interpreted is that his crime *was* in fact Godlike—Godlike as in having the ability to imagine something into existence. Prometheus imagined a future where human beings would have the resources to improve themselves, and then he acted to bring this imagined future to life. The line is interesting *because* of its ambiguity: it seems to suggest that one cannot exist without the other, that in order to change the course of fate, one must defy reality.

LINES 39-44

But baffled as thou wert from high,
Still in thy patient energy,
In the endurance, and repulse
Of thine impenetrable Spirit,
Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,
A mighty lesson we inherit:

In lines 39-44, the speaker illuminates Prometheus's admirable qualities which culminate in "a mighty lesson" to human beings. Though admittedly "baffled," Prometheus found a way to act

with patience and endurance, and nothing could keep him from doing what he believed to be right.

In these lines the speaker is less interested in Prometheus's actions themselves than the spirit in which those actions occurred. The qualities the poem speaks to are states of mind more than anything else. Unlike the body, the spirit is "impenetrable," or impossible to enter. In other words, it is like a fortress, something that Zeus's bodily torture cannot break through.

At this point, the speaker moves away from telling the story of Prometheus to explaining *why* this story is important, and what the purpose of its telling is within the world of the poem. The speaker recognizes the inspirational value of Prometheus's story in a world where injustice and oppression continue to prevail. Prometheus's story offers a "might lesson" for human beings.

As the speaker moves toward a more symbolic treatment of Prometheus, the poem introduces a new rhyme scheme: an alternating rhyme. In this rhyme scheme, every other line is rhymed, creating an ABAB pattern ("repulse" and "convulse," "Spirit" and "inherit"). This could be a reflection of the speaker's movement between Prometheus *himself* and what Prometheus *represents*, a kind of sonic (and visual, as every other line is also indented) aide.

LINES 45-48

Thou art a symbol and a sign
To Mortals of their fate and force;
Like thee, Man is in part divine,
A troubled stream from a pure source;

The poem becomes explicit about its symbolic treatment of Prometheus in lines 45-48. "Thou art a symbol and a sign," the speaker declares. The alliteration makes this line memorable, and also draws attention to the relationship between words. "Symbol" and "sign" are essentially the same thing: they both point to the fact that Prometheus is *representative of* an individual's capacity to impact a given course of events.

In the following line, Byron again uses alliteration to form a relationship between words, and to emphasize both: "To Mortals of their fate and force." Just as, earlier in the poem, Zeus's fate was caught up in Prometheus's refusal to give away his secret, the fate and force of humanity is intertwined. For human beings to not use what they've been given (that is, fire, which again is representative of knowledge) is to accept the fate assigned them: a miserable, lonely existence. But by acknowledging their own power, by imagining a future that is different from the one they've been told exists, humans are capable of discovering that their fate has always been theirs to decide.

Lines 47-48 are two of the most ambiguous lines in the poem. The speaker claims that human beings, like Prometheus, are "in part divine." This would seem to indicate that Prometheus is not fully a god, but it actually points more to the fact that he turned against his own kind in order to help those in need. By defying Zeus and the status quo of the gods, he made himself less godlike—and more human.

Likewise, the speaker goes on, drawing out the comparison, human beings are "a troubled stream from a pure source." Again, this line is not initially all that clear. A reader might expect the "pure source" to be an essentially good thing, and a "troubled" stream to be a complication of the essentially good thing, and therefore not so good. But if the "pure source" is divinity, and divinity in this poem is the tyrannical reign of the gods, then it is actually with a note of *pride* that the speaker acknowledges the "troubled" nature of human beings: it is the troubled individual who acts, who does not accept things as they are.

LINES 49-54

And Man in portions can foresee
His own funereal destiny;
His wretchedness, and his resistance,
And his sad unallied existence:
To which his Spirit may oppose
Itself—

At this point, the speaker has fully launched into the impetus that is driving the poem. Prometheus himself is no longer foregrounded; readers will understand that the story of Prometheus was a bridge which allowed them to arrive at a clearer understanding of themselves ("Man").

The speaker acknowledges the seemingly hopeless situation of human beings, who can, in part, see their "funereal destiny," their "wretchedness," and their "sad, unallied existence." But even in the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation, the poem argues, the human spirit is capable of resistance.

The poem is interested in the intersection of pain and determination. Just as Prometheus persevered in the face of torture, human beings are capable of opposing the very circumstances which make up their reality. And just as Prometheus was at his most miserable just before the power dynamic between him and Zeus began to shift, human beings may find hope in the very moment hope seems to have stopped existing altogether.

Line 54 employs an em dash caesura in much the same way that line 25 deployed it earlier: it indicates a breaking point, on the other side of which a shift occurs. Before the em dash there is a piling up of pain and suffering and struggle. It is important that the em dash occurs in a moment of struggle, implying that whatever comes after it will be the result of this act of opposition.

LINES 54-59

—and equal to all woes,

And a firm will, and a deep sense,
Which even in torture can descry
Its own concenter'd recompense,
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory.

After the em dash, line 54 takes a sharp turn. No matter how bad things get, the poem argues, the human spirit is "equal to" it. Human beings are capable of rising to the occasion, even when the occasion is bleak. All that's required is "a firm will, and a deep sense."

The word "sense" here is packed with possible interpretations. It is important to keep in mind that as a Romantic poet, Byron was part of a tradition that sought to legitimize feelings, expressions of emotion, and imagination. So it is safe to assume that "sense" here applies not only to the mind's ability to perceive and decide, but also to notions of intuition, passion, and creativeness. In fact, one might argue that in this line lies the crux of the poem. A "firm will" and a "deep sense" are the only real tools at humanity's disposal; nothing can be accomplished, changed, or improved without them.

The meter of this line emphasizes how important these concepts are:

And a firm will, and a deep sense

"Firm will" and "deep sense" are the only words in the line that are stressed. Because of this, and because of the parallel syntax between these two clauses (both begin with the phrase "and a"), they linger in the mind long after the conclusion of the poem. It's also worth noting that this is the only line in the poem made up entirely of single syllable words. The effect is a simplicity which stands out amidst all the complexities and rich language that surrounds it.

There is also a return of the alternating rhyme scheme (ABAB) in lines 55-58. This echoes the lines from earlier in the stanza where the speaker made explicit the representative nature of Prometheus. As human beings assume the mantle modeled by Prometheus, the poem leaves behind the rhyme schemes that were in place earlier in the poem. In the very last line, the poem seems to possibly break away from a rhyme scheme altogether, as "Victory" does not fully rhyme with any of the preceding lines. It does, however, hearken back to the word "destiny" in line 50, leaving an association between those two words in the mind of the reader.

The poem concludes with a kind of reiteration of its central concerns. "Even in torture," the speaker claims, the human spirit may catch sight of "its own concenter'd recompense." Recall that "recompense" basically means reward or compensation. The question posed early in the poem ("What was thy pity's recompense?") has resurfaced here, but this time the answer goes beyond pain and suffering. Amidst that pain and suffering, there is something else: the satisfaction of knowing one has done the right thing. The last two lines of the poem are thus celebratory: the defiant person is ultimately triumphant. Not even death can diminish what they've achieved.

SYMBOLS

THE VULTURE

According to different tellings of the Prometheus myth, Prometheus is visited each day by either a vulture or an eagle (there is some ambiguity depending on source text, translation, etc.) which eats Prometheus's liver. In Greek mythology the eagle was commonly used as a symbol for Zeus, and due to this context the vulture in the poem is more or less representative of Zeus as well.

However it is worth considering why Byron chose to invoke the *vulture* rather than the eagle; vultures are famously scavengers and, it follows, commonly symbolize death, decay, and unscrupulous greed. As such, they do not carry the same symbolic weight as an eagle, which has associations of majesty and strength.

On the one hand, the vulture, because of the context of the myth, still represents Zeus; but it indicates the poem's *attitude* toward Zeus and the oppressive rulership Zeus represents. Byron's Zeus does not inspire veneration or loyalty or fear, as an eagle might; there is nothing majestic about his form of power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "the vulture"

PROMETHEUS

By the end of the poem, Prometheus *himself* has been turned into a symbol of rebellion, resistance against tyranny, and sacrifice. He is not just a heroic character but a *symbol* of heroism itself—as well as of the heroic capacities that exist in *everyone*. Byron wanted his readers to understand that they did not have to wait for a hero to come along and represent them, that each and every person is capable of heroic action by recognizing "the divine" in themselves—and then using it to fight against "human wretchedness."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Titan"
- **Line 15:** "Titan"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The poem's use of apostrophe makes it feel more urgent and immediate. Through this apostrophe, which begins each stanza, Byron brings the myth of Prometheus into the present, making a centuries-old mythological hero relevant to the socio-political concerns of Byron's own time. Even now, two centuries after Byron wrote it, the poem retains its relevancy. And part of what makes the poem feel so urgent is that Byron's speaker is addressing not just Prometheus, but the characteristics *symbolized* by Prometheus—characteristics the speaker reveres and wishes to see embraced and enacted by other human beings.

The use of apostrophe also has the effect of summoning the divine aspects of the speaker as well as of the reader. When the speaker exclaims "Titan!" at the beginning of a stanza, it is easy to imagine that he is calling upon his own, inner Prometheus—a part of himself which is powerful and enlightened and will not stand for injustice. This is a reminder of the poem's core argument, which is that *anyone* is capable of standing up to tyranny and, in so doing, emulating Prometheus's "impenetrable Spirit."

The use of apostrophe throughout the poem also allows the poem to be written in the second person; rather than a poem *about* Prometheus, it is a poem *to* Prometheus that eventually reads as a poem *to* the reader. The reader gets drawn in more intimately than they might otherwise be; their own identity becomes conflated with Prometheus's. This is a useful tool in a poem that is meant to stir the emotions and imagination of its reader into action.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Titan!"
- **Line 5:** "thy"
- **Line 15:** "Titan!," "thee"
- **Line 23:** "thee"
- **Line 25:** "thine," "thou"
- **Line 26:** "thee "
- **Line 28:** "thy"
- **Line 29:** "thou"
- **Line 31:** "thy"
- **Line 35:** "Thy"
- **Line 39:** "thou"
- **Line 40:** "thy"
- **Line 42:** "thine"
- **Line 45:** "Thou"
- **Line 47:** "thee"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Prometheus" utilizes a mixture of end-stopped and enjambed lines. Sonically, the end-stopped lines aid the rhythmic quality created by the regularity of the poem's meter. There are enough end-stopped lines throughout the poem that the reader begins to anticipate being able to take a breath at the end of a line, but not *so* many of them that the poem becomes dull, plodding, or predictable. The end-stopped lines regulate the poem's pace while enjambment pushes things forward; the mix of the two allows for an ebb and flow between narrative and emotion. End-stopped lines are highly digestible, allowing the reader to process the narrative in small chunks before moving forward.

The mixture of end-stopped and enjambed lines also helps keep the tension of the poem alive. The movement back and forth between these types of lines mimics the movement between different rhyme schemes in the poem; this movement forces the reader to pay close attention, and adapt to the changing rhythms of the poem. It makes sense that a poem concerned with the strength of the human mind in pushing back against tyranny would utilize a myriad of tools to keep the reader engaged and attentive. It also reinforces the notion of a struggle between one thing and the other: end-stopped versus enjambed, suffering versus the will, Prometheus versus Zeus, human beings versus the gods, the oppressed versus the oppressor.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "mortality,"
- **Line 3:** "reality,"
- **Line 4:** "despise;"
- **Line 5:** "recompense?"
- **Line 6:** " intense; "
- **Line 7:** "chain, "
- **Line 8:** "pain, "
- **Line 9:** "show, "
- **Line 10:** "woe, "
- **Line 11:** "loneliness, "
- **Line 14:** "echoless. "
- **Line 16:** "will, "
- **Line 17:** "kill; "
- **Line 18:** "Heaven, "
- **Line 19:** "Fate, "
- **Line 22:** "annihilate, "
- **Line 23:** "die: "
- **Line 25:** "well. "
- **Line 28:** "rack; "
- **Line 30:** "tell; "
- **Line 31:** "Sentence, "
- **Line 32:** "repentance, "
- **Line 34:** "trembled. "
- **Line 35:** " kind, "
- **Line 37:** "wretchedness, "
- **Line 38:** "mind; "

- **Line 39:** "high, "
- **Line 40:** "energy, "
- **Line 42:** "Spirit, "
- **Line 43:** "convulse, "
- **Line 44:** " inherit: "
- **Line 46:** "force; "
- **Line 47:** "divine, "
- **Line 48:** "source; "
- **Line 50:** "destiny; "
- **Line 51:** "resistance, "
- **Line 52:** "existence: "
- **Line 54:** "woes, "
- **Line 55:** "sense, "
- **Line 57:** "recompense, "
- **Line 58:** "defy, "
- **Line 59:** "Victory. "

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment almost as frequently as it does end-stopped lines. Where end-stopped lines help maintain the rhythm established by the use of a regular meter, enjambed lines have the opposite effect: they *complicate* the rhythm, forcing the reader to speed up or skip a breath or emphasize a different word than they would if the line were end-stopped. For example, take lines 53-54:

> To which his Spirit may oppose
> Itself—and equal to all woes,

The most obvious effect of enjambment here is the maintaining of the meter: "Itself" couldn't fit on the first line. But the more important effect is the tension created by separating "Spirit" from "Itself." The enjambment *enacts* what is happening in the poem: it puts two things which should occupy the same line on two different lines, creating a sense of uneasiness which serves what the poem is talking about.

In many cases, enjambment takes the emphasis off of a rhyme and puts it somewhere else—for instance, in these same two lines, "oppose" and "woes" are rhymed, but sonically the emphasis falls on "Itself" rather than "oppose" because of the enjambment. In places like these, the enjambment encourages the reader to pay closer attention to what is happening in the middle of the line as opposed to what is happening at the end of it.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "eyes / The"
- **Lines 12-13:** "sky / Should"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sigh / Until"
- **Lines 15-16:** "given / Between"
- **Lines 21-22:** "create / The"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Eternity / Was"
- **Lines 26-27:** "thee / Was"
- **Lines 27-28:** "back / On"
- **Lines 36-37:** "less / The"
- **Lines 41-42:** "repulse / Of"
- **Lines 45-46:** "sign / To"
- **Lines 49-50:** "foresee / His"
- **Lines 53-54:** "oppose / Itself"
- **Lines 56-57:** "descry / Its"

APORIA

Byron uses aporia in line 5 when the speaker asks, "What was thy pity's recompense?" In other words, what did Prometheus get in return for pitying humans and giving them fire? The speaker already knows the answer to this question—in return for his pity, Prometheus was sentenced to eternal torture—but asks it anyway. The question, then, is not really a question at all, but rather a foundation on which to build the rest of the poem. By feigning ignorance of Prometheus's recompense (that is, what he got in return for his actions), the speaker is able to relate the severity of Prometheus's punishment. The poem needs to do this in order to explore *why* Prometheus rebelled, and why it *matters* that he rebelled in the face of certain punishment.

The fact that line 5 is posed as a question also directs attention inward, toward the notion of recompense itself, as it is the only line in the poem to end in a question mark. This marks it as having central importance to the poem, and indeed, while the speaker ostensibly answers the question immediately ("thy pity's recompense" being "a silent suffering," "the rock, the vulture, and the chain," and so on), the poem ultimately returns to the question of recompense in lines 56-57:

> Which even in torture can descry
> Its own concenter'd recompense,

This perhaps proves the initial rhetorical question to be not so feigned after all, the most *obvious* answer (that is, that Prometheus received torture in return for his pity) to it not being the *best* answer, as it turns out. Instead, the poem ultimately suggests that the reward for this "pity" is the strength of will offered by the assurance that Prometheus did the right thing.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "What was thy pity's recompense?"

ALLUSION

Byron trusted that his reader knew Greek mythology well

enough that he didn't need to explain the Prometheus myth outright; instead, he relies on allusion. For instance, rather than spelling out Prometheus's punishment, Byron simply writes "The rock, the vulture, and the chain." There is an entire story contained in that line, but Byron assumes his reader already knows it: in return for giving human beings fire, Prometheus was chained to a rock. A vulture would come by every day to eat the Titan's liver, which would then regenerate overnight only to be eaten again the next day.

There are several allusions to Zeus throughout the poem as well, the most obvious being "The Thunderer." In addition to being the king of the Olympian gods in Greek myth, Zeus was also the god of the sky, thunder, and lightning (hence why he is often depicted with a lightning bolt in his hand—a fact alluded to in line 34, with "in his hand the lightnings trembled"). "Inexorable Heaven," "the deaf tyranny of Fate," and "the ruling principle of Hate" are also all allusions to Zeus: it is Zeus who creates for the pleasure of killing, and it is Zeus who refuses Prometheus's request to die.

The use of allusion here is a little more complicated however: it has the effect of obscuring who is really responsible for Prometheus's prolonged suffering. Rather than just naming Zeus outright, the poem seems to point in multiple different directions, implicating Heaven and Fate and Hate—in other words, abstracting Zeus, making him harder to pin down. This emphasizes the fact that circumstances that often feel out of human control—circumstances humans might chalk up to Heaven or Fate—are often less abstract than they seem. Systems of power and oppression exist because the people who benefit from them often manage to obscure themselves behind abstract ideas. It's thus notable that Zeus is never named in this poem, despite being *referred to* again and again.

Strangely enough, the absence of Zeus's name throughout the poem also creates the exact opposite effect at the same time: after all, once the reader has finished the poem, it is Prometheus's name, not Zeus's, that stays with them. This underscores Prometheus's heroism. Zeus may have the power to torment Prometheus, but he cannot destroy the beacon of Prometheus's spirit.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "The rock, the vulture, and the chain, "
- **Lines 18-20:** "And the inexorable Heaven, / And the deaf tyranny of Fate, / The ruling principle of Hate, "
- **Line 26:** "the Thunderer"
- **Line 34:** "in his hand the lightnings trembled"

ALLITERATION

Byron uses alliteration to draw attention to certain words, and particularly to alert the reader to pay attention to the *relationship between* specific words. For example, in line 31, there is a consequential relationship between Prometheus's "Silence" and Zeus's "Sentence" that is emphasized by the repetition of the /s/ sound. Their two fates are bound together, as are the words associated with them.

The relationship between words created by alliteration is not always the same. The coupling of "symbol" and "sign" in line 45 and of "fate" and "force" in line 46 are similar sonically, which is part of the point, but upon closer examination they serve different functions. "Symbol" and "sign" are almost synonymous; the function of alliteration in this case is to emphasize what purpose the Prometheus myth is meant to serve, i.e., a representative one. "Fate" and "force," however, share a complex relationship: fate refers to what's been decided by the gods, while force refers to humanity's ability to resist such decisions. These words could be read as being in conflict with one another, but because of the precedent set in the previous line, they can also be read as working together: i.e., perhaps the fate of mortals is in their own hands.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "t"
- **Line 2:** "s"
- **Line 3:** "S," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 8:** "p," "p"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s," "w"
- **Line 11:** "W," "s," "l"
- **Line 12:** "l"
- **Line 13:** "l"
- **Line 15:** "T," "t," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "w"
- **Line 17:** "W," "c," "k"
- **Line 25:** "th," "th"
- **Line 26:** "th," "th," "Th," "th"
- **Line 29:** "f," "f"
- **Line 31:** "S," "S"
- **Line 32:** "S"
- **Line 33:** "d," "d"
- **Line 34:** "h," "h"
- **Line 35:** "c," "k"
- **Line 38:** "M," "m"
- **Line 39:** "B," "b"
- **Line 43:** "c," "c"
- **Line 45:** "s," "s"
- **Line 46:** "f," "f"
- **Line 48:** "s," "s"
- **Line 49:** "f"
- **Line 50:** "f"
- **Line 51:** "r," "r"
- **Line 55:** "d"
- **Line 56:** "d"
- **Line 58:** "d," "d"

- **Line 59:** "D"

SIBILANCE

Byron employs a great deal of sibilance in the first stanza of "Prometheus." This coincides with the stanza's narrative, wherein Prometheus suffers silently for his transgression. This is particularly clear in lines 13-14, the sibilance of which creates a hushed tone reflective of the silence being described:

> Should have a listener, nor will sigh
> Until its voice is echoless.

Sibilance does a similar thing later on in line 31, with "Silence was his Sentence."

The sounds throughout the first stanza also have a sameness to them that is evocative of the *repetitiveness* of his suffering, which in Prometheus's case is meant to last for all eternity. What's more, sibilance can also often connote a hissing, spitting tone, which might be fitting for this initial stanza: the many /s/ sounds suggest a sense of bitterness as the speaker recounts the "recompense" Prometheus received for daring to help out human beings.

The abundance of /s/ sounds also forces the reader to enunciate every syllable, which makes for a slower, more attentive reading of the poem. It is particularly effective when read aloud, especially when considering the additional and complementary consonance of /z/ and /sh/ sounds (which are also often characterized as being sibilant).

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "S," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "sh"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "s," "ss"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "Sh," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "c," "s," "ss"
- **Line 29:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 30:** "s"
- **Line 31:** "S," "c," "s," "S," "c"
- **Line 32:** "S," "c"
- **Line 33:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 36:** "c," "s," "ss"
- **Line 37:** "s," "ss"
- **Line 38:** "s"
- **Line 45:** "s," "s"
- **Line 48:** "s," "s"
- **Line 51:** "s," "ss," "s," "s," "s," "c"
- **Line 52:** "s," "s," "x," "s," "c"
- **Line 53:** "s," "S," "s"
- **Line 54:** "s"
- **Line 55:** "s," "s"
- **Line 56:** "s"
- **Line 57:** "s," "c," "s"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism occurs in several instances throughout the poem. In each of these instances, it is used in roughly the same way: to emphasize a relationship between words or ideas, and to create a sense of momentum in the narrative and/or rhythm of the poem.

In lines 18-19, the parallelism occurs between one line and the next:

> And the inexorable Heaven,
> And the deaf tyranny of Fate,

The repetition of "And the" at the beginning of both lines (also an example of anaphora) sets up an expectation of further repetition, a continuation of the hideous cycle perpetuated by Zeus. It also creates a sense of momentum which continues to pick up speed with the arrival of the monorhyme (that is, the repeated "-ate" sound rhyme that marks the end of lines 19-22). There is also parallelism between lines 19 and 20:

> And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
> The ruling principle of Hate,

Though there is no "And" present at the beginning of the second line, the structure of the two lines is very nearly the same: "the" followed by an adjective followed by a noun followed by the preposition "of" followed by a capitalized noun. Both of these latter clauses are allusions to Zeus.

The last example of parallelism in the poem occurs in a single line:

> And a firm will, and a deep sense,

The parallelism in this instance, coupled with the disruption of the meter (the expected iamb here is replaced with two unstressed feet followed by two stressed feet, and then repeated; "And a firm will, and a deep sense,"), draws attention to two characteristics the poem is deeply interested in, and which the poem seems to imply go hand in hand.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "And the inexorable Heaven, / And the deaf tyranny of Fate, "
- **Line 20:** "The ruling principle of Hate, "
- **Lines 31-32:** "And in thy Silence was his Sentence, / And in his Soul a vain repentance, "
- **Lines 51-52:** "and his resistance, / And his sad unallied existence:"
- **Line 55:** "And a firm will, and a deep sense, "

CAESURA

There is a caesura after the first word in the poem: the exclamation mark after "Titan." This insists upon a pause after this word, and draws the reader's attention to the epic figure being addressed. Most instances of caesura in "Prometheus," however, only indicate a very small pause—whenever a comma appears within a line, for example. These instances of caesura instruct the reader in terms of pacing. "The rock, the vulture, and the chain," for example, refers to one event, but is divided up into chunks so that the reader is forced to slow down and think about each element of Prometheus's punishment.

The caesuras created by commas can also give the reader a chance to breathe before launching into an enjambed line, and can shift where the emphasis of the line falls. For example, in line 13, the caesura places emphasis on the word "listener," and allows the rest of the line (which is enjambed) to be read in the same breath as the following line:

> Should have a listener, nor will sigh
> Until its voice is echoless.

Moments like these keep the rhythm of the poem from becoming too predictable, which could otherwise have a deadening effect on the poem.

The most notable instances of caesura here are created by the use of the em dash. In line 25 ("Was thine—and thou hast borne it well.") the em dash separates two opposing statements: before the em dash, it seems Zeus has broken Prometheus. After the em dash, it becomes apparent that in fact it is Zeus whose power has been diminished. The pause in between those two statements is dramatic and effective: it's the moment right before one spies a light at the end of a tunnel.

There is a similar move in line 54; again there is a significant pause created by the use of an em dash ("Itself—and equal to all woes,"). The caesura here is an echo of the earlier one; rather than wondering whether Prometheus is broken, here the reader is left to wonder for the space of a breath whether a human spirit can survive being in opposition to itself. Then the line continues, arguing that with "a firm will, and a deep sense" the human spirit can rise to any occasion, is equal to any sorrow. Again, the effect is very dramatic: a moment of prolonged darkness, and then the arrival of light.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "! "
- **Line 6:** "" "
- **Line 7:** " , " " , "
- **Line 13:** " , "
- **Line 25:** "—"
- **Line 41:** " , "
- **Line 47:** " , "
- **Line 51:** " , "
- **Line 54:** "—"
- **Line 55:** " , "

VOCABULARY

Prometheus () - Prometheus is a character from Greek mythology known for stealing fire from the gods to give to humanity, a tool which allowed mortals to resist the tyranny of the gods. His name is usually thought to have Greek origins, and possibly means "forethought," though it has also been suggested it comes from the Vedic (and early form of Sanskrit) *pra math:* "to steal."

Titan (Line 1, Line 15) - In Greek mythology, Titans were a race of gods who ruled the earth up until the rise of the Olympians.

Recompense (Line 5, Line 57) - As a noun, "recompense" means compensation, reimbursement, repayment, or even reward. Usually it implies that the person being compensated suffered some kind of harm or loss; recompense is meant to make up for it.This is no longer true today, but in Greek times "recompense" could be used negatively as well as positively—in other words, it could refer to punishment or payback for an action as well as compensation or reward. Byron, well-versed in Greek literature, would have been aware of this more archaic use of the word. In "Prometheus" it shows up both ways: the first time negatively (How were you repaid for your trespass? You were punished.), the second time positively (through the act of resistance, the spirit finds its reward for having suffered).

The rock, the vulture, and the chain (Line 7) - This is an allusion to Prometheus's punishment; Zeus sentenced him to an eternity of being chained to a rock, a vulture (also sometimes depicted as an eagle) coming every day to eat his liver. Every night his liver would grow back so that the torture could continue.

Lest (Line 12) - "Lest" means "just in case," as in trying to avoid or prevent something.

inexorable (Line 18) - "Inexorable" means relentless, impossible to stop.

Boon (Line 23) - Here, "boon" means a request. It is a more archaic usage of a word which now generally just means

something helpful or beneficial.

The Thunderer (Line 26) - "The Thunderer" is a reference to Zeus, Greek god of the sky, lightning, and thunder, who is king of the Olympians. He is often depicted as wielding a thunderbolt.

Rack (Line 28) - "Rack" is pain, agony, or torment.

Dissembled (Line 33) - This means disguised or concealed.

Precepts (Line 36) - "Precepts" are principles, rules, or guidelines meant to dictate behavior or thought.

Funereal (Line 50) - "Funereal" means solemn, mournful, having to do with a funeral.

Sense (Line 55) - "Sense" has many different layers of meaning, all having to do with a body or mind's ability to perceive. It can refer to the body's senses—sight, sound, smell, hearing, touch—as well as the mind's ability to observe, discern, notice, feel, or comprehend. In this context, it is likely that Byron is trying to summon all of these different layers—thus the adjective "deep" which precedes "sense"—thereby pointing to all the aspects of human consciousness that make it, and us, so powerful.

Descry (Line 56) - "Descry" means to catch sight of, to glimpse. It implies that the object of observation is unclear or difficult to perceive.

Concenter'd (Line 57) - "Concentered" (Byron replaced the last "e" of "concentered" with an apostrophe to maintain the meter of the line) in this context means coming into focus, converging.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Prometheus" consists of three stanzas of varying lengths, adding up to a total of 59 lines. None of the stanzas follow a specific form—such as that seen in the sonnet, for example—but the way the poem is structured is evocative nevertheless.

Each of these three stanzas helps to develop the poem's attitude toward the myth of Prometheus. The first stanza relates the myth the most straightforwardly. It moves forward in a linear way, beginning with Prometheus witnessing *humanity's* suffering and going on to describe his *own* suffering. This stanza also employs the poem's most consistent use of meter and rhyme.

In the second stanza, Prometheus, though he is being tortured, continues to stand against the tyranny of Zeus. By not giving in to his pain and suffering, he begins to shift the power dynamic between Zeus and himself. The shift in the poem's rhyme scheme reflects this change, and the longer length of the stanza (20 lines as opposed to 14) seems to make room for the gathering force represented by Prometheus, as well as the poem's shifting gears into not just relating Prometheus's struggle, but interpreting it and assigning it human value.

The third stanza is the longest, as well as the most complicated and unpredictable. Rhyme is present, but the rules seem to be constantly shifting (more on this in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide). This seems indicative of where the poem has arrived in the third stanza: a place of struggle and of resistance.

METER

The poem is mostly written in iambic tetrameter, which means generally there are four iambs per line. An iamb is a poetic foot comprised of one unstressed and then one stressed syllable. For example, take line 5:

> What was | thy pi- | ty's re- | compense?

Occasionally these lines contain an extra syllable, where one foot is inconsistent with the others in the line. These lines are, for all intents and purposes, often simply maintaining the overall meter of the poem. Line 43 is a perfect example:

> Which Earth | and Hea- | ven could not | Convulse

Here the line contains one extra unstressed syllable, technically making its third foot an anapest. This is a minor blip, the kind of which would be expected in a poem of this length. Because the meter is still mostly intact, readers can just call it an imperfect iambic tetrameter.

In other instances, however, breaks in the meter are more deliberate. Take the first lines of the first and second stanzas, when the speaker addresses Prometheus as "Titan." The unstressed-stressed pattern of the iamb is absent and instead readers see the stressed-unstressed pattern of the trochee. Here's line 1:

> Titan! | to whose | immort- | al eyes

The trochee is significant as it further emphasizes Prometheus's rebellious nature: just by addressing him, the speaker of the poem is disrupting the current order of things (that is, the poem's iambic meter). This disruption is all the more conspicuous because of the exclamation point that follows both instances of "Titan" (an instance of caesura). The exclamation point forces the reader to place full emphasis on the word and then pause, giving the word and—as the word acts as a kind of invocation of Prometheus—Prometheus himself more power.

Notably, there are a couple of places in the poem where the meter breaks down altogether, or is replaced by a different kind of meter. For instance, there is no discernible meter in line 18, and line 26 employs a dactylic meter (a dactyl follows a stressed-unstressed-unstressed pattern):

All that the | Thunderer | wrung from thee

Thematically, this abrupt change in meter signals a shift in the power dynamic between Prometheus and Zeus. It coincides with the reader's dawning realization of Zeus's faltering confidence.

RHYME SCHEME

"Prometheus" does not have a consistent, overarching rhyme scheme. However, it does employ multiple, changing rhyme schemes whose rules are constantly shifting and which are occasionally interrupted altogether.

The first stanza begins and ends with an enclosed rhyme (i.e., ABBA), with three couplets in between:

ABBACCDDEEFGGF

The progression of enclosed rhyme to couplets back to enclosed rhyme feels intentional. It could be said to reflect Prometheus's own trajectory from god witnessing the suffering of humans to god trying to intervene on behalf of humans to god suffering alongside humans.

The second stanza is more complicated. It begins with the same structure as the first stanza; after the first six lines, however, the rhyme scheme begins to change:

ABBACCCC

As is clear from the above, instead of introducing a new rhyming couplet after lines 19-20, the poem continues the *same* rhyme sound for two more lines ("Fate," "Hate," "create," "annihilate"), creating a monorhyme. The monorhyme emphasizes the stifling cycle of hate perpetuated by Zeus. By the time Zeus denies Prometheus's request to die, the break in the monorhyme (in line 23) creates a sense of relief that goes along with the notion that Prometheus is bearing "the wretched gift Eternity ... well." In terms of rhyme, lines 23-26 are the most irregular in the stanza:

DEFE

Rather than an enclosed rhyme or a couplet, there are two alternating lines that don't rhyme ("die"/"well"), and two that do ("Eternity"/"thee"). This sudden irregularity feels welcome after the oppressive monorhyme, and coincides with a shift in the power dynamic between Prometheus and Zeus.

Notable here, too, is a kind of rhyme the poem has not used up until now: a cross rhyme. While "die" appears at first to not rhyme with anything, it becomes apparent upon reading that it is meant to resonate via assonance with "thine," which arrives early in line 25, right before the em dash caesura:

> Refus'd thee even the boon to die:
> The wretched gift Eternity
> Was thine—and thou hast borne it well.

The em dash helps emphasize the rhyme by creating a pause in the natural rhythm of the line. It also emphasizes the juxtaposition between "the wretched gift Eternity" and the way in which Prometheus has handled his punishment, which is with pride and fixity of purpose.

From this point on the poem continues to undergo shifts between various rhyme schemes. These shifts reflect the struggle of the poem, which is an external struggle against tyranny and oppression, as well as an internal struggle against the urge to give up in the face of suffering. These struggles manifest in the poem in various ways, rhyme being perhaps the most visceral.

The other notable rhyme scheme that happens occurs late in the poem, in lines 41-48, and looks like this:

DEDEFGFG

This is called an alternating rhyme scheme. It is important as it shows up late into the poem and in conjunction with the speaker's more explicit treatment of Prometheus as a *symbol* (of the rebellion against tyranny) as opposed to character in the poem. The alternating rhymes mirror the back-and-forth between Prometheus and what Prometheus represents.

SPEAKER

It is safe to say that the speaker of Prometheus overlaps a great deal with Byron himself; Byron is known to have read and been profoundly influenced by *Prometheus Bound*, the Greek Tragedy penned by Aeschylus, when he was quite young. Byron himself wrote of the tragedy's lasting influence on his life and work, and it's not difficult to find parallels between the story of Prometheus and some aspects of Byron's life—his passion for social reform apparent in both his poetry and his political career, and particularly his choice to fight in the Greek War of Independence, which ultimately led to his death.

Regardless of proximity to Byron, it is clear the speaker is someone who greatly admires Prometheus and the values he represents: kindness, patience, endurance, defiance, and an "impenetrable spirit." Prometheus's choice to defy tyranny in favor of alleviating human suffering is a shining example to all humankind of the power at their disposal: the ability to fight for a more equitable world.

The speaker not only admires Prometheus, but identifies with him as well. They are addressing their own struggle, and the struggle of humans generally, "between the suffering and the will"—that is, between doing what is right and doing what is easy. The repetition of the declarative "Titan!" in the first two stanzas is not just a form of address; it is an attempt to summon the very best parts of the speaker's self, as well as the reader's. In other words, it is as if the speaker is not just calling out to Prometheus, but to his own internal spirit of rebellion.

SETTING

"Prometheus" makes use of the mythological setting which contextualizes it: Prometheus was a Titan, one of the Greek gods who ruled the world before the rise of Zeus and his fellow Olympians. By the time Prometheus was driven to steal fire on account of mortals, the Olympians were in power. Prometheus stole fire from Mt. Olympus, home of the Olympians, and gave it to human beings.

Though early tellings of the myth name the Caucuses as the geographic location for the rock to which Prometheus was chained, the poem opts for only a vague gesture toward this physical setting. This may partly be due to the popularity of the myth; Byron trusted his readers to know the reference. But it also underlines the poem's interest in Prometheus's situation; the specifics of his *punishment* are not nearly as important as the specifics of his *character*.

Towards the end of the poem, as the speaker draws connections between the myth of Prometheus and what it may symbolize to the reader, the setting becomes less and less important: the value of Prometheus's story is not bound to a particular time or place, and the lesson the reader may take from it is just as valid today as it would have been in 1816, when the poem was first published, or in antiquity, when the myth of Prometheus first came into being. The incorporeal setting lends itself to the timelessness of the poem's message, and its call for a strong spirit to triumph over the tortured body.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of the most famous of the English Romantic poets, one cannot overstate how influential Lord Byron was in his own time, and he remains widely read to this day. Literature and film have Byron to thank for the archetype of the "Byronic hero," named after Byron as a tribute to perceptions of his own character as well as the characters he brought to life in his poems. One of the most famous of these characters, Harolde from his epic poem *Childe Harolde's Pilgrimage*, was described by British historian and essayist Lord Macaulay 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." Such is the Byronic hero, a character Byron himself was inspired to emulate after having read Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* early in his life. The character of Prometheus deeply influenced his life's work not only as a poet, but also as a politician and later a revolutionary in the Greek War of Independence.

Byron wasn't alone in his fascination with Prometheus; the Greek god played a huge role in the Romantic imagination, as evidenced by Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a retelling of Aeschylus's tragedy, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*.

Prometheus was a perfect symbol for the Romantic writer. According to *Romantic Literature* author John Gilroy, "In the revolutionary climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Romantic artist is often seen as a Promethean figure who, resisting the oppressive forms of society and fired by imagination, foresees a future in which all such repression will be overthrown." The Romantic artist—Byron being no exception—believed in social responsibility and revolution. "Prometheus" was not just born from this tradition, but actively speaks to it.

The Prisoner of Chillon, the collection of poems in which "Prometheus" was published in 1816, was likely written between June and July of 1816, when Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley travelled through Switzerland together. The work's title is also the name of the longest poem in the collection which, like "Prometheus," details the narrative of a strong, solitary figure in suffering.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Byron lived during a time of great political upheaval and social reconfiguration. The French Revolution began just a year after his birth, a long and violent struggle that aimed to overthrow the French monarchy and its feudal system, ushering in a rapidly changing world. The ideals driving the revolution were central to the rise of Romanticism.

Romanticism was a response to Enlightenment-era art, which emphasized rationalism and upheld traditional artistic forms and styles. Romantic artists believed instead in the value of expressing emotion authentically and spontaneously. The individual imagination was of utmost value. Nature and natural settings took precedence over the growing industrialization of the world. In the spirit of revolution, Romantic art sought to end oppression and injustice. It elevated the individual and celebrated the heroic acts of the individual as a means to improve society as a whole.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Prometheus Bound — The full text of the Greek tragedy which inspired Byron to write "Prometheus." (http://classics.mit.edu/Aeschylus/prometheus.html)
- The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems — A digitized copy of the first edition of The Prisoner of Chillon and Other Poems, the volume in which "Prometheus" was first published. (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark:/13960/t9r22576n&view=1up&seq=9)

- Romanticism — An overview of the Romantic movement. (https://www.theartstory.org/movement/romanticism/)
- The Poem Out Loud — Hear the poem read by Jordan Harling. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SarOloMJF0g)
- Selected Letters — A selection of Byron's correspondence. (https://englishhistory.net/byron/selected-letters/)
- Byron's Life and Poems — Biographical resources from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lord-byron)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- She Walks in Beauty
- The Destruction of Sennacherib
- When We Two Parted

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