

Lord Byron wrote a poem about ketchup

IT'S DIFFICULT TO picture the 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' Lord Byron – who kept a bear in his rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge – being moved to write poetry after smacking the end of a bottle of ketchup over a plate of fries. Anyone hoping to discover 'Ode to a Ketchup-Bottle' or 'Lines on Hearing that the Restaurant was out of Tomato Sauce' will be disappointed.

The poem in which Lord Byron *mentions* ketchup is the lengthy *Beppo: A Venetian Story* (contrary to indications, this is not a lost Marx Brothers movie). In the eighth stanza, the poet recommends that English visitors to Venice during Lent should stock up on 'Ketchup, Soy, Chili-vinegar, and Harvey' due to the punishing 40-day diet of nothing but sauceless 'ill-dressed fishes'. But *Beppo* could hardly be regarded as a poem *about* ketchup – unless you consider *Oliver Twist* to be a novel about porridge.



The 'Harvey' that appears alongside the ketchup in *Beppo* refers to a popular type of fish sauce – and this is where Byron really did send his 'condiments to the chef'. In 1811, in a now-lost letter to Augusta Leigh, he wrote an epigram humorously comparing the sauce with the English theologian James Hervey: 'The Composite Merits of Hervey's Fish Sauce and Hervey's Meditations'.

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Interestingly, Harvey's (or Hervey's) fish sauce does contain mushroom ketchup as an ingredient, but Harvey's is not itself ketchup; so the claim that 'Byron wrote a poem about ketchup' is, unfortunately, not quite true.

VERDICT: FALSE

A more recent poetic usage of 'ketchup' appears in John Betjeman's *Lake District*, where he namechecks 'Heinz's ketchup', as well as 'H.P. Sauce'.

Steely Dan are named after a dildo

THE LEGENDARY JAZZ-ROCK/ROCK-JAZZ band Steely Dan (just 'The Dan' to their hardcore devotees) re-formed in 1995 after a fourteen-year hiatus and are officially still going, but they are best known for their intricate studio albums of the 1970s. At the band's heart is the partnership of Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, who decided to form their own group in 1972. As big fans of 1950s Beat writers, they took their name from a characteristically explicit section of William Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* that describes the use of dildos from Yokohama named Steely Dan I, II and III (also referred to later in the book as Danny Boy).

Steely Dan themselves have inspired names used by other artists. The Scottish band Deacon Blue, for example, took their name from 'Deacon Blues', a track from the 1977 album *Aja*. The Dan's 1974 song 'Barrytown', meanwhile, was used as the name of the fictional Dublin suburb in Roddy Doyle's novels *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van* ('the Barrytown trilogy') as

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well as *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*. The song may have been a direct reference to Barrytown in New York state, near where Becker and Fagen went to university, which was home to the Unification Church ('the Moonies'); it's not clear whether Roddy Doyle realised this when he used the name (potentially lending it extra symbolic weight). On the other hand, all Steely Dan songs are supposedly about drugs, so the lyrics 'I can see by what you carry that you come from Barrytown' may be about heroin rather than the bunches of flowers sold on street corners by Unificationists.

VERDICT: TRUE

The completely unrelated band Steeleye Span are named after a character in the Lincolnshire folk song 'Horkstow Grange'.

Eugene O'Neill disowned his daughter because she married Charlie Chaplin

THE AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT Eugene O'Neill could accurately be described as a literary heavyweight – and for once, this isn't just a thinly veiled way of calling someone fat. He won four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize for Literature, drawing inspiration from the likes of Aeschylus, Nietzsche, Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg in thought-provoking, despair-laden works such as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. His tragic, disillusioned characters are a far cry from the shoe-eating antics of Charlie Chaplin's pratfall-prone Little Tramp, although Chaplin's artistry and cultural impact were certainly profound.

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When Chaplin wanted to marry O'Neill's daughter Oona, Eugene's problem was not with the Englishman's bow-legged walk, silly moustache or any lack of soul-searching in his creative output – quite simply, Chaplin was old enough to be her father. When they met in 1943, Oona O'Neill was seventeen while Chaplin was 54 (only about six months younger than Eugene) and currently embroiled in a paternity suit brought by the actress Joan Barry, herself only 22. Chaplin had something of a penchant for younger women and Eugene, though not exactly a saint himself, was having none of it. He vowed never to speak to his daughter again if she married Chaplin – which she promptly did.

Chaplin's third marriage (or his fourth – depending on whether he really married Paulette Goddard or not) actually proved to be his last and longest. The couple remained an item until his death in 1977, having eight children together. After her husband died, Oona O'Neill Chaplin struggled with depression and alcoholism for the rest of her life.

VERDICT: TRUE

Eugene O'Neill lightened up just once, in 1932, when he wrote a comedy called *Ab, Wilderness!* – his only known use of the exclamation mark.