



WHEN WE TWO PARTED

Lord Byron

1816

Unseen Task

Read the poem and discuss your answers to the following questions with a partner:

- What is the tone of this poem and how do you know?
- What is this poem about?
- How do you respond to this poem and why?

Get into groups

- Organise yourselves into groups of 4 as best you can.
- Each group member is to take responsibility for one of the stanzas of the poem.
- During the lecture, you should take note of anything important about your stanza, this will help with your annotations later.

Romantic Poetry

Romantic poetry is the poetry of the Romantic Era, an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century. It involved a reaction against prevailing Enlightenment ideas of the 18th century, and **lasted from 1800 to 1850, approximately.**

Romantic poetry contrasts with neoclassical poetry, which is poetry of intellect and reason, while **romantic poetry is the product of emotions, sentiments and the heart. Romantic poetry is a reaction against the set standards, conventions, and the traditional rules of poetry.** According to William J Long, “The Romantic Movement was marked, and is always marked, by a strong reaction and protest against the bondage of rule and custom which in science and theology as well as literature, generally tend to fetter the free human spirit.”

Lord Byron was a poet of the Romantic Movement.

Context – Lord Byron

- *Byron was the ideal of the Romantic poet, gaining notoriety for his **scandalous private life** and being described by one contemporary as '**mad, bad and dangerous to know**'.*
- **George Gordon Noel, sixth Baron Byron, was born on 22 January 1788** in London. His father died when he was three, with the result that he inherited his title from his great uncle in 1798.
- In 1814, Byron's half-sister Augusta gave birth to a daughter, almost certainly Byron's. The following year Byron married Annabella Milbanke, with whom he had a daughter, his only legitimate child. The couple separated in 1816.
- **Facing mounting pressure as a result of his failed marriage, scandalous affairs and huge debts, Byron left England in April 1816 and never returned.** He spent the summer of 1816 at Lake Geneva with Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary and Mary's half sister Claire Clairmont, with whom Byron had a daughter.
- Byron travelled on to Italy, where he was to live for more than six years. In 1819, while staying in Venice, he began an affair with Teresa Guiccioli, the wife of an Italian nobleman. It was in this period that Byron wrote some of his most famous works, including 'Don Juan' (1819-1824).
- **On 19 April 1824 he died from fever** at Missolonghi, in modern day Greece. His death was mourned throughout Britain. His body was brought back to England and buried at his ancestral home in Nottinghamshire.

Context – Byron's relationship with Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster

When We Two Parted was first published in 1816, but Byron falsely attributed its writing to 1808 in order to protect the identity of its subject, Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster.

Many scholars believe the poem to have actually been written in 1816, when Lady Frances was linked to the Duke of Wellington in a scandalous relationship.

The poem is highly autobiographical in that it recounts Byron's emotional state following the end of his secret affair with Lady Frances and his frustration at her unfaithfulness to him with the Duke.

If we did not know this, however, the poem would be mysteriously vague, since the sex of neither the lover nor the beloved is revealed, and the poem provides virtually no clue regarding the time, place, or other setting of the poem beyond its being a place with morning dew.

Form and Meter- Accentual Verse

Accentual verse means that the *only* metrical rule is that the number of accents, or stresses, per line must remain the same. The number of syllables in the line and the number of unstressed syllables can vary throughout, as long as the number of accented syllables stays the same. In *When We Two Parted* the standard number of accents or stresses per line is two. Here's accentual verse in action in stanza 1:

***When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.*** (1-8)

As you can see, every line but two has only two stressed syllables. Notice also that, whereas lines 1-5 and 7 have three unstressed syllables, lines 6 and 8 only have two. As you will recall, this part of the meter (the number of unstressed syllables) is flexible. For the most part, Byron sticks to two stressed syllables, and three unstressed syllables, though he does sometimes use as few as two and as many as four unstressed syllables.

What's the significance of the break in meter?

The two exceptions (lines 5 and 7) in this stanza are the only two exceptions in the entire poem. They're exceptions because they have three stressed syllables, even though the standard number in this poem is supposed to be two.

So what's the significance? Line 5 describes something that, for the speaker, was very traumatic (his friend's sudden transformation into a cold, pale, corpse-like figure) while line 7 narrates a prophecy.

Those added syllables emphasize or make us feel more acutely the trauma (line 5) and give the prophecy (line 7) a more ominous tone.

Why use accentual meter?

Accentual verse was widely used in an Old English poetry so it's a nod to the old style of writing, the most classic example of which is *Beowulf*. The other thing about accentual verse is that it allows the poet a little bit more freedom than, say, something like Iambic Pentameter.

When We Two Parted sounds conversational or improvised—like a monologue spouted out at random. This is because the lines are of irregular length, which makes the poem sound more like an actual lament than a strictly-metered poem would.

Structure and Rhyme Scheme

Each stanza in this poem contains eight lines. This means that this poem is made up of **octets** (eight-line stanzas). Furthermore, each octet in the poem has the following rhyme scheme: ABABCDCD, where each letter represents that line's end rhyme. This means that, in each stanza, the first and third lines rhyme, the second and fourth rhyme, etc.

The regularity of the rhyme scheme offsets the semi-irregularity of the meter and injects a sense of certainty in a poem that is plagued by uncertainties. (Will the speaker see his friend again? Will he ever not feel sad when he hears her name? Why did she grow cold when they parted?) **It seems that, in this way, the speaker can be sure of one thing: his own ability to craft his feelings into words and work those words into a coherent shape.**

1 - 8

The poem begins with the **bleak tone of despair** which will characterize the entire work. Immediately the reader is introduced to the speaker's "silence and tears" (line 2) upon the breakup. The woman's reaction is to grow cold—the physical description of her cheek as "cold" and "pale" hints at sickness, but her "colder" kiss (line 6) implies an emotional detachment growing from the very moment of their parting, which Byron finds unbearable. He sees her immediate response and his own emotional reaction at the time as a portent of the future (the present of the poem) as "that hour foretold / Sorrow," which would reach from the past to today.

What impression do you get from the line "Half broken-hearted"? and the use of the verb "sever"? Discuss.

9 - 16

The **imagery** of coldness carries over from the end of the first stanza into the beginning of the second stanza with the chilly dew upon Byron's brow, suggesting his own emotional detachment, but also calling to mind the cold sweat from which one might wake after a particularly harrowing nightmare. He awakens into a world still as desolate as the one he ended the previous night. So he turns his attention to his beloved's apparent infidelity to him. Her "vows are all broken" (line 13), implying she had made some promises to Byron despite the clandestine and illicit nature of their affair, and further suggesting Lady Frances' scandalous relationship. The speaker notes that her fame is now "light"—**without weight or guilt and easily blown about**—yet there should be shame in the speaking of her name because of him, which he at least will feel for them both (lines 14-16).

In line 12, the speaker refers to how he feels "now," and he continues to speak in the present tense. **It seems like the poem is shifting away from what happened then (when they parted) to the consequences of that parting.**

What can we say about the noun "vows" and the adjective "light" in the context of this poem?

17 - 24

The beloved's tarnished name carries over into the third stanza, as Byron compares hearing her name spoken by outsiders to the **“knell”** of a heavy bell—like a church bell tolling a funeral. He shudders when he hears her name, indicating that **he cannot shake the power of their relationship**. Now that she is publicly scandalized, those who gossip about Lady Frances do not know her the way Byron knows her—all **“too well”** (line 22). Now his pain turns to **“rue”** or even bitterness as he regrets his relationship, especially because of the pain it brings him. Although he is writing a poem about his suffering, he claims the hurt is still too deep to speak of (line 24)—using the poetic convention of having emotions too deep for words even while he tries to write.

How do the lines “They know not I knew thee/ Who knew thee too well” link with his “shame” from the previous stanza?

25 - 32

The unspeakable nature of Byron's pain recurs in the beginning of the final stanza, as he reflects that the secret nature of their affair leaves him unable to tell of their affair for a second reason: he is unable to mourn publicly for her or her unfaithfulness to him since their romantic relationship had been a secret. **He grieves silently** over her neglectful heart and deceitful spirit (lines 26-28).

He ends the poem predicting his reaction at some future meeting years later: how would he greet her? Again there would be silence, but also sadness: "silence and tears" (line 32). **His pain will not diminish, nor his sense of being wronged by her actions, even after many years.** Nonetheless, he will maintain silence forever to prevent further scandal being attached to her name.

Individual task

- Focusing on your chosen stanza, spend some time annotating it based on what you've heard in the lecture and your own interpretations of vocabulary/ technique choices.

Areas to discuss:

- Metaphor “knell”
- Repetition of “silence and tears” in the first and last stanza
- Meter: what’s the significance of the additional stressed syllable in lines 5 and 7?
- negative vocabulary choices that have connotations of death and their impact on the poem’s tone.