

AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

Lord Byron: 'She Walks in Beauty'

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SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

Lord Byron

Brief Summary

A speaker describes an unnamed woman's **beauty** as she passes by, conveying his wonder at her **ethereal**, **innocent aura** and appearance. The speaker tries to capture the beauty of the woman, and her **enchanting effects** on others.

Synopsis

- An unnamed speaker writes in **awe** of a **mystery woman**, after being left so struck by her beauty as she walks by. The speaker describes the woman in **illustrious detail**, as though they are describing a **work of art**, and goes on to make assumptions on her character based on her outward appearance.
- The speaker strives to convey the woman's breath-taking beauty and its **captivating effects** on him in this **love poem**, which is not overtly sexual but expresses a **strong longing**.

Context

Lord Byron (1788 - 1824)

Lord Byron, also known as George Gordon Byron, was an English **poet and politician**, best known for his role as a leading figure of the **Romantic literary movement**. His work included epic poems such as Don Juan and poetry collections such as Hebrew Melodies, both of which proved **popular and influential** during his time, the latter of which included 'She Walks in Beauty'. Born to a British army officer and his heiress wife, Byron was educated at Harrow and Cambridge, and spent part of his childhood in **Scotland**. Byron's life was considered **adventurous and unconventional** compared to his contemporaries, through which he achieved **celebrity status**. He was also a key subject of discussion in regards to his personal life, most notably a well known alleged affair with his half sister. He lived and **worked across Europe**, in particular Italy, and later fought in Greek War of Independence. Many of his works are inspired by his travels, and he eventually **died while fighting** with the Greeks against the Ottoman Empire. He has remained **hugely influential**, with several literary tropes and phrases, such as the **Byronic hero** finding their roots in his work, serving as an example of his **lasting influence** on **English literature**.

Summary

Context – English peer, poet & politician // highly educated at prestigious schools // travelled across Europe // personal life a subject of scandal in high social circles in England

Structure - ABABAB rhyme scheme // third person // direct address // lyric poem

Language – alliteration // assonance // antithesis // caesura // enjambment // sibilance // simile // end-stopped line

Key points - a love poem of sorts, where a speaker describes a beautiful woman walking by // uses a number of comparisons & poetic devices // communicates themes of beauty, infatuation, unrequited love.



She Walks in Beauty

'She Walks in Beauty' describes a speaker's feelings of **infatuation**, and **love-struck awe** at the powerful beauty of a woman. The poem does not depict a romantic relationship, or a relationship at all, but rather comprises an illustrious **display of obsessive love, and wonder**. This perspective is different to most poems in the anthology as the majority of poems convey a relationship, between lovers or family. In this poem, the speaker does not seem to know the woman at all, and this lack of any **real, palpable connection** sets 'She Walks in Beauty' apart from the other poems in the anthology. 'She Walks in Beauty', first published in 1815, is said to have been inspired by Byron seeing a **distant relative**, Lady Wilmot, at a party sometime in 1814.



She Walks in Beauty

Theme of harmony, her beauty captures the harmony of the finest light and deepest darkness, gentle and delicate juxtaposition.

Further juxtaposition - dark and bright, duality clouds and skies, light and dark, day and night. Woman's complex beauty powerful and effortlessly captures best of darkness and light.

Line 6 alludes to a kind of heavenly beauty - the woman's beauty exceeds even that of sky.

Line 6 - 'gaudy day denies', woman's beauty so powerful and elegant, even daylight is gaudy, vulgar and inferior.

'Every raven tress' - more references to nature, speaker looks to nature to describe her beauty.

Alliteration - line 11 'serenely sweet'.

Lines 11 & 12, speaker begins to describe woman's character, based on her appearance. A shift in the speaker's praise.

Speaker does not know the woman, yet assumes her thoughts & character to be sweet and pure.

The notion that appearance = character introduced in 2nd & 3rd stanzas. Her sweet, pure, innocent beauty reflects pure character, or so speaker believes,

Speaker believes he can read the woman's pure and precious character by the impossible beauty of her appearance.

He speaker believes reveal that the woman spends her days doing good, is of pure and peaceful heart and mind.

listing beauty - her aspect, her eyes, on that cheek and brow, the smiles that win, the tints that glow listing further physical attributes,

Repetition - 'how pure, how dear' 'so soft so calm'. Emphasis woman's beauty and her bewitching effects on the speaker.

'She Walks in Beauty', like the night

Of cloudless climes and starry skies;

And all that's best of dark and bright

Meet in her aspect and her eyes;

Thus mellowed to that tender light

Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,

Had half impaired the nameless grace

Which waves in every raven tress,

Or softly lightens o'er her face;

Where thoughts serenely sweet express,

How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,

So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,

The smiles that win, the tints that glow,

But tell of days in goodness spent,

A mind at peace with all below,

A heart whose love is innocent!

"She Walks in Beauty", an unusual phrasal choice, suggests the woman's relationship to beauty is total, She is more than just a beautiful woman, beauty surrounds her.

Further emphasised by caesura, which places special emphasis on the word 'beauty', encourages readers to pause and consider woman's beauty.

Enjambment - maintains the sense of speaker's awe, who is breathless at woman's beauty. Endless lines reflect 'cloudless climes' & vast skies. Lack of punctuation mirrors woman's endless beauty.

Poem begins with pastoral comparison of woman, to the 'night', to simile 'cloudless climes', to the skies. Conveys a pure natural image of woman's beauty. Also immediately creates an atmosphere of admiration and awe.

Alliteration - soft /s/ sounds create gentle, delicate feel, conjures images of tender, light touch.

Line 4 - 'in her aspect and in her eyes' something intangible and tangible; poetic technique.

Line 7 - a perfect, unbelievable, intricate beauty - 'one shade' off would have greatly diminished woman's beauty & power. Conveys speaker's awe at her impossible beauty & elegance of her being.

'nameless grace' - almost royal like, divine beauty, smoothness and elegance of her movement, reflects a divinely given beauty.

Speaker expresses difficulty in describing her beauty, which manifests in her eyes, her hair, her face.



Perspective

'She Walks in Beauty' is a **lyric poem**, a short poem intended to be set to **music**, with the contents generally conveying **thoughts and feelings**. It is written from the perspective of an **unnamed man**, assumed to be Byron, watching a woman walking by. The speaker does not know the woman and has **no explicit relation** to her. The poem explores the notion of **physical beauty** being **intrinsically linked to**, and even dependent on, an individual's **character** and inner nature. The speaker does not mention themselves or reveal details about their identity, the **focus** of the poem is entirely on the woman and her **impossible beauty**. Furthermore, the poem does not indicate the speaker's interest in courting the woman, the poem is simply an **ode to her beauty**. As such, although 'She Walks in Beauty' may be considered a love poem, there is **no suggestion of romance** between the speaker, the man, and his subject, the woman walking by; although there is **deep affection** portrayed. As such, the speaker's **admiration, idolisation and awe** of the woman and her assumed **purity and innocence** forms the essence of 'She Walks in Beauty'.

Themes

The main, recurring themes in 'She Walks in Beauty' are **love, beauty and harmony**. The **contextual background** information that posits this poem as written by Byron after being struck by a beautiful woman aids literary analysis, however 'She Walks in Beauty' can be considered as a wider commentary on **beauty and purity**, a study of beauty in the **literal and abstract senses**. As such, 'She Walks in Beauty' is as much a **song of praise** on a specific woman's beauty as it is a general consideration of the notions of beauty, innocence, and unattainable love. This is further supported by the fact Byron does **not name the woman** at the centre of the poem, referring to her as 'she' from the start, adding weight to his use of the **personal pronoun** in this way.

'She Walks in Beauty' begins with a **detailed description** of the woman's **physical appearance** and **outward beauty**, and then transitions into an assessment of her **character** and **countenance**. The speaker's extended, comprehensive praise of the woman's physical beauty, her face, her eyes, her hair, recalls the **blazon poems** of the **Elizabethan age**, a poetry genre which set out to **glorify** and describe a lover's appearance. The description of the woman's character that follows is essentially a series of assumptions, through which Byron explores the idea of **inner and outward beauty** being connected.



Love

'She Walks in Beauty' is a **quintessential Romantic poem**, where a male poet endlessly praises a woman's beauty, and therefore love is a prominent theme throughout. Byron explores an **unconventional view of love** through the speaker praising and glorifying the woman, without any indication of his **own desire**. There is a **sense of detachment** in 'She Walks in Beauty'; the speaker watches the woman pass by and is deeply moved and struck by her beauty, yet gives no indication of a desire to court or be with her in any way. This could be interpreted as a display of **unattainable love**; it could be argued that the speaker knows the woman's **impossible, otherworldly beauty and purity** of character makes her ultimately **unattainable** to him. The speaker evidently is very **fond** of the woman, yet does not communicate any **aspiration or intention** of approaching her. This distinct approach serves an **alternative display of love**, one **without entitlement or expectation of romance or courtship**, but rather a removed exaltation of the woman and her beauty. Furthermore, this places the woman at the **centre** of the poem, and is further reinforced by the **lack of information** on the speaker, his identity or in fact anything about him.

Another interpretation could be that though 'She Walks in Beauty' is a poem of the **Romantic movement**, and a love poem, it does not necessarily aim to convey a **romantic love** between the speaker and the woman. Perhaps, the speaker is ultimately communicating his **deep love of beauty, purity, innocence** and all that the woman represents to him. In this sense, the speaker does not wish to personally pursue a **romantic relationship** with her, and may not have had this intention at all. Such a reading makes the poem a focus on the **love of the aesthetic**, the beauty, a poem of praise, **beauty, purity, serenity, an endorsement of her aesthetic qualities**, the speaker expressing his **approval**. In this way, the poem is more **conventional** as the woman is a typical **conventional beauty**, with her fair skin and dark hair. This would be in line with the principles and tenets of the **Romantic movement**, which Byron was a major figure of.

Beauty & harmony

'She Walks in Beauty' has a strong, central focus on **female beauty**, outer and inner, as well as **harmony**. The spotlight of the poem falls on the mystery woman and her perfect beauty, on which the speaker remains **fixated and enraptured**. Byron's **language** and use of **poetic devices** capture a sense of the speaker's awe, which at first is at her outward appearance, and then moves to her **inner spiritual core**, where the speaker believes only **pure thoughts and emotions** can be found.

The initial descriptions speak of her **physical beauty**, explored through a series of **harmonious contrasts**. Her beauty is partly a result of these delicately conveyed contrasts, such as the woman's dark hair, her 'raven' tresses, in **juxtaposition** to her presumably fair and bright face, skin and eyes. Her beauty and supposed purity is almost **biblical** in nature, and the speaker also draws attention to the way the light falls on her face, a '**tender light**' (line 5) which '**softly lightens**' (line 10) her countenance, conveying a **harmonious convergence between light and dark**. This depiction of the **woman's**



beauty as divine invokes **religious imagery** which is reflected in the poem's structure, which is much like a hymn. This further reinforces and alludes to the woman's almost **virginal innocence**. Furthermore, this interpretation is also supported by the speaker referring to the woman as a '**nameless grace**' in line 8, perhaps a reference to the three goddesses of beauty within **Greek mythology**.

The speaker also compares the woman to a **lovely night with a clear starry sky**, focusing on one point on her eyes, the windows of the soul, the **woman's soul** which is pure and innocent. This conjures an image of a peaceful woman with a **peaceful aura**. The **delicate pastoral comparisons** to the skies, the dark and bright, the night and the clouds communicates an image of an exceptionally beautiful woman who in turn **beautifies all that surrounds her**. In this way, Byron explores the notion of beauty, the **perfect harmony** between the woman and her surroundings. Moreover, the comparisons to nature, where the woman is compared to endless skies and '**cloudless climes**' (line 2) in the night, arguably heighten the **sense of mystery** around the woman's **unmatched physical beauty**. Byron uses alliteration throughout, further portraying the woman's **exquisite beauty** and lending the poem a **decorative feel**. There is also the **antithesis** between **light and dark**, a contrast that is successfully **balanced** in the woman's beauty.

Furthermore, in continuing the prominent theme of **harmony**, Byron uses **assonance** in four lines in the **second stanza**, '**shade**', '**ray**', '**nameless grace**', '**waves**' and '**raven**'. These poetic devices add to our understanding of the **woman's complex beauty**, and emphasises the **perfect harmony** between all aspects and features of her appearance and her powerful beauty. The unnamed woman seems to effortlessly **reconcile light and dark** together, resolving these opposing contrasts. Her shining beauty in the dark of the night, in turn, further accentuates her overall allure. There is **emphasis** on the word '**meet**' in line 4, which also depicts the opposing forces supporting each other, **working in tandem** to **intensify** her beauty, much like the relationship between her **inner and outer beauty**. This light and dark exist together in the woman, two opposite qualities elegantly balanced. In establishing this **binary opposition** between **light and dark**, Byron conveys the woman's perfection as resulting in part from the harmonious union of these opposites. It could be argued that the woman's beauty **softens these contrasts**, the extremes of the light and dark, an example of which could be the bright stars in the dark, as she passes by.

Moreover, the woman is portrayed as a **perfect, prime example of beauty**, a complete **manifestation of beauty**. The speaker even describes the **woman's beauty as eloquent**, communicating a beauty so powerful that it even speaks in a **pleasing and charming manner**. The woman is a **catastrophic, immense beauty**, a deep, overwhelming, complex force, as indicated by the speaker's awe at her. Byron distinctly writes that she '**walks in beauty**', the **peculiar phrasing** suggesting she is a perfect beauty, and that her beauty makes her surroundings more beautiful, perhaps like some **powerful forcefield**. Byron also takes time to describe the **preciseness** of the woman's beauty in line 7 '**one shade more, one shade the less**', which further builds on the sense of the woman's beauty as impossibly perfect and intense. It is also important that the speaker and the



woman do not meet at any point, she is completely **oblivious** of the fact she is being **observed**, and the speaker expresses a **desire to interact**.

Additionally, 'She Walks in Beauty' explores the notion of **physical beauty** depending on inner **goodness and righteousness of character**, as well as the harmony achieved in this Romantic ideal of **aesthetic perfection**. After its discussion of the woman's physical beauty, the poem then asserts this outer beauty as **representative of her inner goodness and virtue**. The speaker believes they can feel goodness exuding from the woman. Her beauty is in fact built on her strong pure character, a **moral foundation** which the speaker detects. Perhaps the speaker sees in the woman a level of **purity** which they **fail to recognize in their own soul or character**. This notion of **outer beauty** tightly linked to inner beauty is especially apparent in the second and final stanzas, where the speaker moves from the '**grace [which] waves in every raven tress**' to her face '**where thoughts serenely sweet express**', peacefully **reflecting her inner thoughts**, which the speaker assumes with confidence to be pure.

This provokes thought on the woman's beauty, and presents the poem as more than just a **superficial display** of a man **gawking at an unnamed woman**. Additionally, this makes readers consider if the woman's beauty is because she is pure and good character or is her character so because of her **overwhelming outer beauty**. This also harks to practices and beliefs of **physiognomy**, with Byron's portrayal resurrecting this form of assessment of people, and further exploring this **notion of beauty**. Byron engages with **conventional views** of beauty, which usually refer to outer appearance, by consistently talking about inner beauty throughout 'She Walks in Beauty'. As such, the woman's beauty is not purely physical, as some readers may initially assume, instead, it is almost a **shield of beauty**, made **more powerful** by the fact the woman herself is oblivious to her own beauty. Perhaps this lack of awareness means the woman is **not corrupted by her own beauty**, ensuring her heart **remains pure**, as exemplified in the **final lines**, '**a mind at peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent.**' The thoughts in the **woman's mind** behind that **beautiful face** must be of how **pure and dear** she is, '**how pure and how dear their dwelling-place**'. The **culmination** of the final stanza indicates that it is her '**goodness**' proceeding from the **innocence of her heart** which affords her this perfection.'

Therefore, in the speaker's view, the woman has **only pure thoughts**, and she is untainted by any **external influence**. There is this assumption that the woman's character is as perfect as her appearance, that she spends her time doing only good, '**tell of days in goodness spent**' (line 15), displaying upstanding **righteous behaviour**. This also reflects the context of the poem in that many Romantic poets strove to **idealise beauty** by engaging with emotions, and in 'She Walks in Beauty', this is conveyed through the speaker's feelings towards the woman. The woman's **powerful outer beauty** is dependent on her inner beauty, the **physiognomic view of goodness and purity** of character and thought **directly causing beauty** in outer appearance, resulting in an **aesthetically pleasing countenance**, aspects and features. This **outer beauty** could also be



interpreted as a **reflection of inner beauty**, with both kinds of beauty in **perfect harmony**.

Ultimately, this develops the **underlying themes** in 'She Walks in Beauty', transforming the poem from an ode of praise and wonder to a wider commentary on beauty and what it means to be beautiful.

Structure

'She Walks in Beauty' is written in **iambic tetrameter**, where there are **four feet per line** and each line consists of **one unstressed syllable** followed by a **stressed syllable**. This creates the kind of **regular beat** necessary for a lyric poem which is intended to be **set to music**. Furthermore, there are **three stanza, each six lines long**, creating a **poetic form** that is generally adopted for **hymns**. This **structural note** reflects the **religious imagery** within the poem, as the simple structure reflects the woman's innocent, ethereal beauty. Here, Byron utilises the **poetic structure** to effectively **mirror the poem's content** as a love poem, albeit absent of references to a **passionate or sexual love**.

The **three stanzas are equal in length**, each seemingly dedicated to a **specific aspect** of the woman's beauty and the speaker's thoughts and feelings. The combination of the **strict structure** and the **categorisation of the speaker's words** creates a feeling of the speaker endeavouring to fully capture the beauty of the mystery woman as well as meticulously taking the time to carefully convey his **deep and complex thoughts and feelings** towards her. As such, the poem reads much in a **measured, deliberate way** with the speaker taking a great deal of care with how they **articulate themselves**.

However, there are exceptions to the **poem's regular meter and structure**, in particular an example of **metrical inversion** in line 4, where the **iambic foot is trochaic**. 'Meet in / her / as / pect and / her eyes', here the **stressed syllable** is first, followed by an unstressed syllable, in contrast to the rest of the poem. A possible explanation for this could be that Byron intended to highlight the **harmonious, opposing forces** that 'meet' and **intersect in the woman's eyes**, and by extension, in her beauty.

Rhyme scheme

The rhyme scheme of 'She Walks in Beauty' is **ABABAB**. The rhymes in the poem apart from a few instances where **half** or **near rhymes** are utilised, e.g. in lines 13 and 15, 'brow' and 'glow'. The **regular rhyme scheme** further reinforces the themes of harmony and balance prominent in the poem, and lends the poem a **delicate, musical feel**.

Furthermore, the structure of the poem also reflects its content and themes through a mix of **caesura** and **enjambment**. A number of lines are paired together through **enjambment**, and then later **end-stopped** as seen in line 2 of the first stanza. The organisation of **pairs of lines** in this way, not only reflects the theme of **harmony and**



perfection, but also conveys the **juxtaposition** between the binary forces mentioned in the poem. It could be interpreted as the **speaker's struggle** or hesitation also indicates the speaker as they try to describe their feelings and the woman's beauty.

Language

Similes

The speaker uses **similes** to illustrate the **woman's beauty**, as in the first stanza where he draws comparisons between her beauty and the night sky '**like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies**'.

Alliteration

The **alliteration** in 'She Walks in Beauty' adds a feel of **musicality**, aptly reflecting the **lyrical nature** of the poem. Byron uses alliteration frequently throughout the poem, e.g. in lines 2 '**cloudless climes**' '**starry skies**' and line 5 '**thus...that**' and line 6 '**day denies**', line 8 '**had half**' line 9 '**which waves**', line 11 '**serenely sweet**', line 12 '**dear...dwelling-place**', line 1 '**so soft**', line 15 '**the, that**'.

Sibilance

The **sibilance** in this poem primarily involves the **repetition of 's' sounds**, as seen in '**thoughts serenely sweet express**'. These sounds combine to give **texture** and add to the sense of harmony in the poem.

Juxtaposition

Byron **combines opposites** in his description of the woman. The 'dark' and 'light' mentioned in line 2, and the '**shade**' and '**rays**' in line 7 show the **intricate balance** in the woman's beauty. By presenting these forces side by side, Byron communicates a powerful beauty that reconciles both light and dark.

Assonance

The **assonance** in the poem adds to its musicality, with several words sharing similar vowels to adjacent words, e.g. the '**climes**' and '**skies**', in line 2, '**nameless grace**', in line 8 '**waves/raven**' in line 9 '**serenely sweet**' in line 11, 'wins/ tints' in line 15.



Comparisons

'She Walks in Beauty'	The Flea
<i>"nameless grace"</i>	<i>"selfe murder"</i>
<i>"which heaven to gaudy day denies"</i>	<i>'sacrilege'</i>
<i>"how pure, how dear their dwelling-place"</i>	<i>'blood of imagery'</i>

Both poems have religious imagery; in 'She Walks in Beauty', it is used to symbolise the woman's **heavenly beauty** and in The Flea religious imagery conveys a **sacred union** achieved through **physical intimacy**.

'She Walks in Beauty' & 'Whoso List to Hunt'

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In both poems, the speakers are captivated by a woman; in 'She Walks in Beauty' the speaker falls in love at first sight with the woman walking by; in 'Whoso List to Hunt' there is a similar display of the speaker spellbound by a woman. Both poems communicate a sense of impossibility; the woman in 'She Walks in Beauty' is impossibly beautiful, and her beauty is perfect in every last 'shade' and 'ray'. In 'Whoso List to Hunt', the speaker uses a metaphor to portray his futile attempts at pursuing the 'hynde', 'sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind' a metaphor for the impossible and his unattainable love.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The speakers' positions vary; in 'She Walks in Beauty', they make no attempt to court the woman walking by, content in admiring her beauty from afar. In 'Whoso List to Hunt', the speaker's frustrated desire for the woman drives his acts of desperation, his 'vain travail'. In 'She Walks in Beauty', the focus of the poem is on the unnamed woman and her beauty, there is no information on the speaker and we can assume they have no real desire to be with her. However, in 'Whoso List to Hunt', the poem's focus is on the speaker's feelings and how the woman and their pursuit of her has made them feel, leaving them 'sore', 'wearied' and 'fainting'.

'She Walks in Beauty' & To His Coy Mistress

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems provide descriptions of the beauty of their lover or object of affection; in 'To His Coy Mistress', the speaker mentions 'youthful hue' that sits 'like morning dew' on his mistress and warns her 'beauty' shall disappear after death. Similarly, the speaker in 'She Walks in Beauty' talks of the 'smiles that win...the tints that glow'.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The language in 'To His Coy Mistress' is sexually suggestive e.g. the speaker wishing he had 'two hundred [years] to adore each breast', typical of blazon poetry but also reflects the speaker's attempt to persuade the woman before it is too late. By contrast, the language in 'She Walks in Beauty' has no sexual suggestion and the speaker does not wish to possess the woman in any way, an appreciation of moral virtue and inner beauty.
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Critical perspectives

Feminist reading

Feminist interpretations of 'She Walks in Beauty' argue that the poem is an **objectification** of the woman and are critical about the speaker's assessment of her appearance and character. The poem mostly focuses on her physical beauty with all that is known about the woman is communicated through the speaker and them only. In this sense, the woman is a **mute object**, the **object of admiration** for the speaker, whose words of assumption about her character comprise much of the poem. Not much is communicated about her actual personality, her 'thoughts' are merely **assumptions of the speaker** on the **purity and innocence** of her character.

The poem could also be interpreted as **infantilising** the woman, reducing her to an **empty template** of an 'innocent', 'calm' 'soft' creature rather than a **multifaceted woman** with a unique personality and character. This conveys the woman as childlike and passive, disempowering her and upholding **damaging tropes of traditional beauty**. The woman does not get the opportunity to speak for herself at any point, and the complete **breakdown of her appearance**, for her hair to her eyes to her skin adds to the sense of **total objectification**. The speaker is **presumptuous**, assuming they can tell her thoughts simply based on her looks, effectively silencing the woman.

