

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love and Relationships When We Two Parted - *Lord Byron*

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WHEN WE TWO PARTED

Lord Byron

Brief Summary

When we two parted was written by Byron to express his sorrow at the loss of a relationship. He implies that the relationship was a secret so he is only able to grieve in secret. This leads many people to believe that the poem was inspired by Byron's affair with Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster.

Synopsis

- The speaker states that they have separated with a lover and are upset about it.
- He expresses the impact of the separation on him
- The speaker then says how the relationship was a secret so none of his friends know of the suffering he is enduring.

Summary

Context – Byron had a controversial love life // This poem is thought to be written about one of his public affairs.

Structure - Cyclical narrative // Accental verse // Irregular line lengths.

Language – Semantic field of death // Despair // Metaphors.

Key Points – The narrator is mourning // They are unable to express their true feelings.

Context

Lord Byron (1788-1824)

Byron was a notorious Romantic poet who was frequently embroiled in public scandals: he is considered by many to be the first “celebrity”. After apparently having an illegitimate child with his half sister, Byron married Annabella Milbanke. They soon split up and after this, Byron engaged in shameful activities such as affairs and getting into debt. He eventually moved to Lake Geneva in 1816 where he spent time with Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Claire Clairmont (Mary Shelley's half sister). He also fathered Clairmont's child. Byron travelled further throughout Europe and eventually died of a fever in modern day Greece.

Literary context

Byron rejected societal convention throughout his life, including in his work. The archetype of the **Byronic hero** was created by Lord Byron.

A Byronic hero may possess some of these traits:

- Rejecting of authority
- Sexually attractive
- Self-destructive
- An outsider
- Secretive

These characteristics were based on Byron himself as well as some of his characters.



When We Two Parted

Repeated **“W”** sounds allude to the difficulty being expressed by the speaker.

“Sever” has violent connotations which show that the speaker is fully separated from their former lover.

Implications of emotional detachment, and ‘thy’ suggests that the speaker is placing the blame for the breakdown of the relationship on his lover rather than his own actions or emotions.

Use of cold imagery throughout the poem shows the lack of loving warmth in the speaker’s life. **“Sunk”** implies that the speaker is feeling the heaviness of their lack of love weighing on them.

This implies the breakdown of a marriage, showing that the speaker has lost a significant relationship and also a sacred promise has been broken.

“knell” alludes to the sound of a funeral bell, furthering the theme of death in the poem and adding to the impression of the speaker being in mourning. This also introduces the effect **synesthesia**, as he later references the physical sense of a **“shudder”** and here he has referenced noise. This overwhelming nature of the senses could be argued to mirror the all-consuming nature of the couple’s relationship.

Byron’s use of a **rhetorical question** here alludes to his solitude.

Alludes to an affair. The poem uses **collective pronouns** very infrequently, therefore this highlights this line as a significant point in their relationship.

This, in conjunction with the **past participle “met”**, suggests that they used to enjoy unity but now they have reverted to being separate entities.

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.

The dew of the morning
Sank chill on my brow –
It felt like the warning
Of what I feel now.

Thy vows are all broken,
And light is thy fame;
I hear thy name spoken,
And share in its shame.

They name thee before me,
A knell in mine ear;
A shudder comes o’er me –
Why wert thou so dear?
They know not I knew thee,
Who knew thee too well –
Long, long shall I rue thee,
Too deeply to tell.

In secret we met –
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.
If I should meet thee
After long years,
How should I greet thee? –
With silence and tears.

Byron’s use of **sibilance** here creates an uncomfortable sound for the listener and has funeral-like connotations.

The idea of a pale cheek and cold kiss has death-like connotations, implying that the speaker is mourning the death of the relationship. Byron also shows the physical impact of the character’s sadness. **“Grew”** suggests that a relationship is never concluded, only changes over time.

The fresh natural connotations of morning dew are subverted here to denote the speaker’s sadness. This shows their overwhelming desperation.

The image of dew is used to foreshadow the speaker’s tears.

Byron uses **sibilant alliteration** here to emphasise the shame experienced after the public breakdown of a relationship.

This shows the physical impact of the speaker’s sadness.

Emphatic repetition of **“long”** shows the speaker’s state of hopelessness.

This makes it seem like the poem is an **internal monologue** rather than meant to be spoken aloud.

Byron’s use of a **rhetorical question** shows how he has become uncertain around someone he was once intimately familiar with.

Shows that the speaker still has hope that they may be reunited again in the future. Repeats the adjective **“long”** again from earlier which further emphasises that the pain of moving apart and separating won’t leave the speaker and it continues to haunt him frequently.

The poem ends emphatically with a full stop, showing that all the speaker is left with is silence and tears. It is also a response to a **rhetorical question**, which is unusual and could be argued to mirror the unconventional dynamic of their relationship.



Perspective

The poem is written in the **first person** to show how personal the poem is. This narrative form creates the impression of an **insular environment** to highlight the speaker's isolation.

The speaker is heavily **fixated on his emotions** and expresses them readily. This implies that those emotions have built up over time and the speaker is desperate to express them.

The Opening

The poem opens with the same line as the title to establish an **intense tone** from the start. The tone is unwavering throughout the poem so by starting in the same way, Byron provides the listener with no relief from this emotional intensity.

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.

Structure

Cyclic narrative

There is no progression in the narrative, implying that the speaker's sadness is **repetitive and ongoing**. The poem begins with the speaker discussing his **"silence and tears"** and ends with him discussing how he shall **"rue thee, // Too deeply to tell"**.

Form and Meter

Accentual verse

The poem is written in **accentual verse** which means the number of stresses per line must be consistent throughout the poem. However, the total amount of syllables can vary.

There are **two stresses per line** throughout the poem - such as:

when we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years.

The two stresses could be seen to be representative of the **two separate people**.



Accentual verse is also very common in Old English literature, so it suggests that their relationship is traditional. The verse has greater flexibility than more rigid rhyming and syllable structures. The freedom provided by this form allows for the expression of intense emotion which is characteristic of a Romantic poem but unexpected of a contemporary man.

Rhyme scheme

The **repetitive rhythm** of the poem demonstrates the regularity of the speaker's sadness, it is seemingly endless. Byron also uses a regular ABABCD CD rhyme scheme to the same effect.

Line lengths

The line lengths are irregular which gives the poem a **conversational tone**, adding authenticity to the speaker's sadness.

Language

Semantic field of death

Byron frequently uses **lexis** from the **semantic field** of death to emphasise the significance of the speaker's suffering. The **tactile imagery** used in "**pale grew thy cheek and cold, // Colder thy kiss**" acts as a **metaphor** to compare the speaker's former lover with a dead body. This shows how his lover no longer has love or warmth for the speaker and it could be implied that he is dead to her.

Auditory imagery is used in "**A knell in mine ear**" to provide connotations of the bell used to somberly announce a death. This contributes to the deathly atmosphere increasing the listener's impression of the speaker experiencing an absence of love.

Despair

Byron's use of language in the poem creates a **tone of despair**. **Sibilance** is frequently used throughout the poem and is heard in "**silence and tears**" and "**sorrow to this**". This use of **phonetics** creates an uncomfortable sound for the listener to demonstrate the speaker's discomfort.

The tone is perpetuated by Byron's **allusion to silence**. The regular ABABCD CD rhyme scheme creates a strict rhythm, implying that things are being left unsaid by the speaker. This adds to the listener's sense of the speaker's anguish.



Comparisons

Porphyria's Lover

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In "Porphyria's lover", Browning makes explicit references to death in "Three times her her little throat around, // And strangled her". In "When we two parted", Byron makes more implicit references to death to compare his relationship to it in the auditory imagery in "A knell in mine ear".
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In "Porphyria's lover", the speaker describes his lover's body in a way which makes her seem alive in the metaphor "Laughed the blue eyes without a stain." and "The smiling rosy little head". The opposite is true in "When we two parted", in which something living (his love) is made to seem physically dead. Byron does so through his use of lexis from the semantic field of death in "Pale grew thy cheek", "In silence I grieve" and "foretold // sorrow to this".

Neutral Tones

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both speakers use morbid references to express their sadness. Byron does so through his use of auditory imagery in "A knell to mine ear" and the lack of in "In silence I grieve". Hardy similarly uses the metaphors "The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing" and "Alive enough to have strength to die". The speaker's sadness is further shown through the poet's use of phonetics. Byron uses sibilance in "share in its shame" and "silence and tears" whilst Hardy uses the same technique in "bitterness swept thereby" and "keen lessons that love deceives".
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In "Neutral tones", the speaker's dejection is reflected in his negative description of his surroundings. Natural imagery usually has positive connotations however, here this is subverted in the syndetic listing in "Your face, and the God curst sun, and a tree, // And a pond edged with greyish leaves." Oppositely, in "When we two parted", the speaker reflects on his internalised feelings in "In silence I grieve".

