When We Two Parted

POEM TEXT

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
Sunk 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 to 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.

SUMMARY

When you and I broke up, we were silent and tearful. Our hearts were broken as we tore ourselves apart from each other for years to come. During the break-up, your cheek became pale and cold to the touch—your kiss was even colder. It seems to me that the way we split up predicted the pain and sadness I feel now.

The morning dew sunk coldly into my forehead, foreshadowing the emotional coldness I now sense. All your promises are broken—and people gossip about you. When I hear someone say your name, I feel embarrassed.

Hearing your name is like a funeral bell ringing in my ear—it makes me shiver. Why did I ever love you like I did? People don't know how well I knew you, that in fact I knew you too well. I'll regret that for a long time, more deeply than I can say.

Our relationship was a secret, and so I grieve it secretly—and I hate that you have forgotten me, and that you misled me. If I meet you again after years have gone by, what should I do? I'll greet you silently, and with tears.

THEMES

LOVE AND DISILLUSIONMENT

"When We Two Parted" is a bitter poem about the end of a relationship. The speaker addresses the poem to an ex-lover, and so provides insight into the ongoing—and shapeshifting—pain of a breakup. Breakups, the poem argues, are not neat endings after which exes simply go their separate ways. Instead, they're often characterized by lingering, complicated pain and anger. The poem's main sentiments are disillusionment and frustration as the speaker learns that his beloved has moved on, and even wonders how he ever cared about her so much in the first place. The poem, then, speaks to the sheer messiness of breakups, and also to how quickly lovers' perceptions of each other can change when they're no longer together.

The poem begins by describing the actual breakup. The "broken-hearted" lovers "parted in silence and tears"—they were "sever[ed]" from one another, indicating the almost physical pain of ending a relationship. But something about the sudden distance between the two lovers—the physical and emotional separation—seemed to predict the way that the speaker would come to feel betrayed in later years. For the speaker, this sudden lack of affection foreshadows the even worse pain the lover will cause him in the future. The circumstances of this relationship and the subsequent fallout are not made clear, but the feeling of being let down is definitely present.

The speaker then relates how hearing other people talk about

the lover brings him pain. But that's also because of the nature of this hearsay: it seems to be gossip of some sort, and it's likely that this gossip relates to a *new* affair conducted by the speaker's ex. The speaker then wonders, a little meanly perhaps, how he ever held his lover "so dear." That is, how could he care so much about someone who seems to have forgotten him—and was their love as real as he thought it was in the first place?

These thoughts lead him to declare that he'll "rue" the lover for a "long, long" time, again depicting the lasting messiness of breakups. And, in a way, it's because the speaker perceives this change in the *lover* that his *own* attitude changes. It's almost as though, despite the breakup, he wants the ex to remain his (again speaking to the complicated feelings that come with the end of a relationship). Hearing rumors about the lover indicates that she may have moved on: the lover has given her heart to someone else, and in doing so denigrated what she and the speaker had.

Which is why, even after years have passed, this relationship *still* brings the speaker to "tears." People move on with their lives, the poem seems to say, but this doesn't mean that they move on completely from past loves. Feelings are messy and complicated, hanging around unwanted and unwarranted—and in this case, remaining as painful as ever, even as they change in other ways.

It's also worth noting the poem's specific context. The poem is thought to have been written about Byron's relationship with the aristocrat Lady Webster. After their affair ended, Byron heard the rumor that she had also had an affair with the Duke of Wellington, a British military leader who had just defeated Napoleon. It's thought that Byron felt embittered upon hearing of this other affair, and was thus spurred to write the poem. This would explain some of the references to the speaker hearing the lover's name associated with "shame" and "fame"—and why the affair was (and still is) shrouded in secrecy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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

The poem's opening line sets things firmly in the past tense: the speaker reflecting on the painful separation from his former lover, and their relationship is definitely over. The alliterating /w/ sounds ("When we") in this phrase—as a kind of twosome—subtly hints at the former union between these two people.

By referring to "we," the speaker also introduces the fact that the entire poem is written using the literary device apostrophe. That is, it's addressed directly to his ex-lover, but she doesn't participate in the conversation; instead, it's as if the reader is eavesdropping on a private speech from the speaker to one very specific individual. The repeated use of words like "thy" and "thee" continues to emphasize this throughout the poem.

Then, the speaker explains that the lovers "parted / in silence and tears." The mention of "tears" is clear enough—the lovers were sad when they went their separate ways. The structure of the poem's lines subtly reinforces this idea throughout. Though the lines are short, the phrases tend to run over two lines through the use of enjambment. This means that most phrases are "broken" into two, mirroring the lovers' split. The opening lines follow this pattern, with one distinct phrase running across lines 1 and 2 and another covering lines 3 and 4.

The "silence," though, is more mysterious, and requires the rest of the poem for context. It hints at the secrecy surrounding the lovers' relationship. Most scholars agree that Byron wrote the poem about an affair he had with a married aristocrat, Lady Frances Wedderburn-Webster. Because the poem uses "I," "you," and "we," throughout, it feels as though the reader isn't *really* invited to witness to this exchange, acting instead as a kind of voyeur eavesdropping on an intimate and likely illicit conversation.

Lines 3 and 4 offer more information about the break-up. The speaker and his lover "sever[ed] for years," with the verb "sever" indicating the almost physical pain of the split. The alliteration of "half broken-hearted" creates another pair of sounds, this time at a greater distance from one another than the alliteration in line 1. This subtle shift reinforces the idea that the lovers are now separated where they were once close.

LINES 5-10

Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.
The dew of the morning
Sunk chill on my brow—

The second half of the first stanza continues with the description of the break-up. This section plays with the poem's sense of time. It describes how the lover's cheek grew "cold" and "pale," and her kiss even "colder." The repetition of cold/colder emphasizes the coldness, making it seem almost like a kind of death—which sets up the sense of deep mourning that the speaker expresses in the coming lines.

This moment becomes a kind of prediction for the years that follow, with the coldness foreshadowing the bitter distance

between the speaker and his lover. He compares "that hour" to "this [hour]," relating how the former "foretold" the latter. In other words, the break-up's "sorrow" has not been dispelled; it's only been intensified and changed (for reasons that aren't yet clear).

The start of the second stanza is a continuation of the second half of the first, but the stanza break indicates that the speaker is describing an ongoing feeling; it seems to stretch across time in the same way that the description stretches across stanzas. The speaker feels the aforementioned coldness as a "chill" on his "brow," which also has connotations of illness, suggesting that the troubled mind of the speaker is a kind of lovesickness. Similarly, the "sinking" of that morning "chill" shows the way that bitter and painful feelings have embedded themselves in the speaker's psyche. The "brow" is a part of the head, which in turn relates to the brain and the mind; clearly, the lover remained stuck in the speaker's thoughts from the very moment that their relationship ended.

Throughout these six lines, the poem continues to separate its phrases into two-line segments. This consistent grouping of twos—which are divided by enjambment—reinforces the idea of an irreparable split between two people.

LINES 11-16

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.

Lines 11 and 12 restate how the initial break-up between the lovers seemed to somehow contain a prediction of ongoing pain in the future. That parting moment felt to the speaker like "the warning" of how he has come to feel in the poem's present moment (years later). The alliteration in these two lines links the past tense with the present, connecting the moment of parting with the ongoing pain that the speaker still feels:

It felt like the warning
Of what I feel now.

It's also worth noting that the alliteration in the poem tends to come in twos, relating to the way that the lovers were once a kind of couple (and, indeed, are still linked together through pain and bitterness).

Lines 13-16 are something of a turn in the poem, because they make it clear for the first time that the speaker isn't pining for his lover—rather, he's furious with her, and he condemns her in these lines. He accuses the lover of breaking her "vows" (or promises she made to him) and then says "light is thy fame." "Fame" here means a kind of notoriety, and, considering the poem's real-life context, probably refers to the notorious (alleged) affair between Lady Frances and the Duke of Wellington, a top military commander for Britain (and one of few men whose fame was perhaps even superior to Byron's own). The "light[ness]" doesn't mean that the lover is *not* "fame[d]," but rather that the nature of that fame is frivolous and insignificant. In short, the speaker insults his ex-lover by saying that she's well-known for trivial and perhaps illicit reasons.

Indeed, the speaker doubles down on this sentiment in lines 15 and 16. Whenever he hears his ex-lover's name, says the speaker, he "share[s]" in its "shame." The alliteration here forms another pair and also reinforces the link between the lover's "shame" and speaker's own experience of that same shame. But rather than be empathetic, this shared "shame" seems to be vindictive, perhaps indicating that the speaker is ashamed of having anything to do with this particular person—or that he feels pain whenever this romantic rival's name is mentioned (if the poem's backstory is to be believed).

LINES 17-20

They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;
A shudder comes o'er me—
Why wert thou so dear?

The third stanza expands on lines 14-16, in which the speaker discussed how he feels when his ex-lover comes up in conversation. In these lines, the speaker acts as a kind of silent and tortured witness to gossip about the ex-lover. He seems to be keeping quiet partly because the relationship was probably an affair, but also to save face, since he's embarrassed to be associated with the ex-lover (as noted in lines 15 and 16).

The "They" of line 17 probably relates to the social world in which the speaker moves—and in which the ex-lover perhaps once moved too. Contrasting with mention of lightness in line 14, the speaker characterizes hearing his ex-lover's name as a kind of "knell." A knell is the sound of a ringing bell, and the word is particularly associated with bells rung at funerals (e.g., a "death-knell"). This kind of bell is an extremely heavy object, and its mention hints at the emotional heaviness of the speaker's situation. The "knell" also speaks metaphorically to the death of this particular relationship. Once again, alliteration comes in a pair of words, hinting at the connection that once existed between the two lovers: "name" and "knell."

In lines 19-20, the speaker describes "shudder[ing} when he hears his ex-lover's name. The "shudder" echoes the "cold" and "chill" mentioned earlier, as the speaker wonders whether how and why his ex really was "so dear" to him. This speaks to the changing nature of interpersonal relationships, particularly after a break-up; it's as though the ex-lover has become a different person, and the speaker can't square this new identity with the old (the one he loved).

LINES 21-24

They know not I knew thee,
Who knew thee too well—
Long, long shall I rue thee,
Too deeply to tell.

Lines 21-22 discuss the secrecy of their previous relationship, stating that the "They" of line 17 never found out about the intimacy that the speaker and his lover shared. Indeed, he feels that he knew his lover "too well"—in the sense that his familiarity with her causes him ongoing pain. "Knew" here is also likely meant in the biblical sense—that is, the speaker had been sexually intimate with his lover.

The speaker uses a lot of repetition (including the diacope of "know thee") in these lines, which conveys the speaker's intense focus on his ex-lover. There are three mentions of "thee"—the lover—and also three references to knowledge ("knew" and "know"). Ultimately, these repetitions subtly show the speaker's twin obsessions: the ex, and what he knows/doesn't know about her (and indeed what the rest of society knows about the ex too). The internal rhymes here—between "knew," "too," "to," and "rue"—also intensify this sense of obsession, sounding like the speaker is tying himself up in emotional knots as his thoughts go round and round.

In the final lines of the stanza, the speaker then states his ongoing pain and regret explicitly. He says that he will "rue" (that is, regret) the old relationship, with another instance of coupled alliteration—in this case, the epizeuxis of "long, long"—emphasizing how impossible it would be to shake off this feeling. Indeed, line 24 uses alliteration too: "Too deeply to tell." The extra /t/ lends the line extra drama, as though each /t/ represents a stab of the emotional pain that the speaker feels so intensely.

LINES 25-28

In secret we met—
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.

The final stanza links back to the first, bringing the past relationship into the context of the poem's present. It states explicitly that the lovers conducted their affair "in secret"—implying that it was the kind of relationship that society would have disapproved of, probably because one of them was married. Lady Frances, on whom this poem is most likely based, was indeed married at the time of her relationship with Byron. This, of course, would then make the relationship require secrecy and deception.

This need for silence seems to be part of the speaker's frustration. Because the relationship was "secret," his grief for it has to be hidden too: "In silence I grieve." The parallelism of lines 25 and 26 highlights the direct connection between these two facts and again suggests that in some way, the relationship is continuing even after its end—if only in the sense that the speaker still has to bear the burden of silence in the present, just as he did when the relationship was ongoing. There's also some sibilance in these lines:

> In secret we met—
> In silence I grieve,
> ...
> Thy spirit deceive.

Sibilance creates a hissing, hushed sound—fitting given that the speaker is talking about secrecy and silence. The /s/ sound is also associated with hissing—perhaps like that of a snake, the original deceiver in the Garden of Eden; as such, it subtly reinforces the idea of the speaker's lover as someone dishonest and sinful.

These lines also suggest that hearing about an alleged other affair is doubly painful because the speaker can't talk to anyone about it. The speaker laments the fact that the ex's "heart could forget" him, and that her "spirit" could "deceive." In other words, the speaker is hurt that the ex has moved on—or seems to have moved on at least. Line 27 is yet another example of the coupled alliteration that runs throughout the poem, a kind of linguistic joke at the expense of the speaker (who is, of course, no longer coupled himself): "That thy heart could forget."

LINES 29-32

If I should meet thee
After long years,
How should I greet thee?—
With silence and tears.

The poem's concluding four lines take the form of a question and an answer. The speaker uses aporia—the expression of doubt—as he contemplates the future. That is, having first focused on the past and then demonstrated the pain of the ongoing present, the speaker now considers whether he will find any relief in the future.

Imagining "long years" having passed—presumably "long" because they are still full of heartache and bitterness—the speaker wonders what it would be like to bump into his ex-lover. He asks how he should greet them in such a scenario, the aporia showcasing the strangeness of having to behave differently towards someone whom he once loved passionately.

And it's at this point that the poem comes full circle, showing that, in a way, very little has changed. Circumstances *have* changed, but the ex-lover still causes the speaker pain (as she did in the moment of separation)—and this pain *still* can't be expressed, because the relationship was probably an affair in the first place. Accordingly, the future greeting between the two—in the speaker's prediction at least—will be the same as their parting: sad and secret. Concluding with exactly the same

phrase as in line 2 ("silence and tears") emphasizes that the speaker's sorrow is ongoing, unchanging, and potentially limitless, since there's little hope that the speaker will ever be able to tell anyone else about this burden.

Considering the real-life story behind the poem, though, the poem itself can be considered an antidote to that persistent silence and a release of bitterness and frustration. That is, Byron may not have been able to talk about his ex-lover and ongoing pain, but he did get to make those feeling public by expressing them in this poem. It's worth noting here that Byron did take two actions to conceal the true identities behind the poem. He deleted a stanza in which Lady Frances was named specifically, and he also pretended that the poem was written much earlier than it actually was. This made it harder for the public to link the content of the poem to the alleged love-triangle between Lady Frances, Byron, and the Duke of Wellington.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a prominent feature of "When We Two Parted." Even the title alliterates with its two /w/ sounds! In most instances, the alliterative sounds come as a pair. The poem is all about a relationship between two people—a couple—and the alliteration is often coupled too. This is almost like a kind of painful joke for the speaker, with the actual sound of his words subtly showcasing his fixation on his previous relationship. The paired words in each instance of alliteration highlight the fact that the speaker himself is no longer part of a couple.

Additionally, these instances of alliteration sometimes emphasize the conceptual connection between two words and reinforce their meaning in the lines. In lines 5 and 6, for instance, the alliteration between "cold" and "colder" intensifies the sense of a chill running through these two lines.

In line 16, the alliteration of "share" and "shame" also makes the line more dramatic, with the shared sounds conveying the way in which the speaker himself "share[s]" the bad feeling about his ex-lover.

Alliteration in lines 25 and 26 joins "secret" with "silence." This informs the reader about the nature of the discussed relationship. Clearly, it was some kind of affair or illicit union, and the conceptual link between secrecy and silence speaks to the way that the speaker can't seem to let go of his bitterness—perhaps because he can't mention it out loud.

This alliteration specifically is part of the sibilance that echoes throughout lines 25 to 28, with "secret," "silence," "spirit," and "deceive." On the one hand, the /s/ sound is associated with hushed whispering—and, as such, seems appropriate here given that the speaker is talking about conducting the affair and grieving in silent secrecy. But sibilance is also associated with a kind of snake-like hissing. Snakes are symbols of evil and deception—think of the Garden of Eden—and as such the sibilance here subtly reinforces the idea of the speaker's lover as a sinful and deceptive.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w"
- **Line 3:** "H," "h"
- **Line 5:** "c"
- **Line 6:** "C," "k"
- **Line 11:** "f," "w"
- **Line 12:** "w," "f"
- **Line 16:** "sh," "sh"
- **Line 17:** "Th," "n," "th"
- **Line 18:** "kn"
- **Line 20:** " W," "w"
- **Line 21:** "kn," "n," "kn"
- **Line 22:** "kn"
- **Line 23:** "L," "l"
- **Line 24:** "T," "t," "t"
- **Line 25:** "s"
- **Line 26:** "s"
- **Line 27:** "Th," "th"

APORIA

Aporia is used just once in "When We Two Parted," in the poem's ending. Here, the speaker expresses doubt and concern about how to behave should he ever encounter his ex-lover again—even "after long years" have passed. It's a relatable problem, of course! The changing relationship between people after their romantic relationship has ended is often hard to navigate. The question also speaks to the way in which the speaker doesn't seem to really know who the ex-lover is anymore. That is, there is a disconnect between his picture of her as he once knew her and the rumors that he now hears about her.

However, aporia is often used as a way of expressing a question to which the speaker already knows the answer, and that seems to be the case here as well. The aporia sets up the poem's strained and emotional conclusion, which brings the poem back full circle to the beginning. Just as the poem began with "silence and tears," it ends with "silence and tears." In other words, the speaker isn't *really* confused about what he'll do when he sees the ex-lover again; he knows deep down that things haven't really changed, and the somewhat false doubt of the aporia gives him a chance to express this knowledge.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-31:** "If I should meet thee / After long years, / How should I greet thee?—"

DIACOPE

Diacope is used twice in "When We Two Parted." It first appears in lines 5 and 6:

> Pale grew thy cheek and **cold**,
> **Colder** thy kiss;

The repetition of a version of "cold" intensifies the speaker's feeling of emotional "chill," the distance between him and his ex-lover contrasting with the emotional and physical warmth they once shared.

The next example is in lines 21 and 22:

> They **know** not I **knew** thee,
> Who **knew** thee too well—

The repeated "know"/"knew" (which is also an example of polyptoton) subtly renders the world of gossip and rumor that the speaker refers to. Essentially, he is responding to things he has heard about his ex-lover—things he now knows and that other people know—and reflecting on what he himself knows that others *don't* know. The diacope paints a picture of a complicated web of knowledge and secrecy, which makes the speaker's ongoing frustration feel more vivid to the reader.

It's also worth noting that there are numerous "thy[s]" and "thee[s]" throughout the poem. These are essential words to the poem's meaning, so are perhaps not diacope in and of themselves. But it's worth noting how often they crop up, because it shows the speaker's intense focus on his ex-lover. Indeed, it feels like the reader isn't really meant to be hearing/reading the speaker's words at all—the speaker has one very specific person in mind.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "cold"
- **Line 6:** "Colder"
- **Line 21:** "know," "knew"
- **Line 22:** "knew"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is an important feature of "When We Two Parted." The poem uses short lines throughout, generally with two main stresses in each. This approach doesn't lend itself well to saying much in one line, because there simply isn't much space. Accordingly, almost every line comes as part of a pair, with phrases stretching over two lines at a time. The enjambment facilitates this, though sometimes commas and dashes do the same job too.

The most important effect of this line division and enjambment is the way that it creates splits and divisions throughout the poem, hinting at the broken relationship between the speaker and his ex-lover. To illustrate, notice how different the first stanza seems if the lines are organized to match the full phrases:

> When we two parted [i]n silence and tears,
> Half broken-hearted [t]o sever for years,
> Pale grew thy cheek and cold, [c]older thy kiss;
> Truly that hour foretold [s]orrow to this.

Compared to the short lines, this version doesn't convey the pain of separation—and the ongoing bitterness—that the speaker feels. The enjambment is crucial in highlighting both the speaker's distance from his lover and the way that the two are still connected through the speaker's pain, just as the phrases remain complete across the line breaks.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "parted"
- **Line 2:** "In"
- **Line 3:** "hearted"
- **Line 4:** "To"
- **Line 7:** "foretold"
- **Line 8:** "Sorrow"
- **Line 9:** "morning"
- **Line 10:** "Sunk"
- **Line 11:** "warning"
- **Line 12:** "Of"
- **Line 29:** "thee"
- **Line 30:** "After"
- **Line 31:** "thee?—"
- **Line 32:** "With "

METAPHOR

"When We Two Parted" uses fairly plain, non-figurative language for the most part. There are, however, a couple of subtle instances of metaphor.

One of the oldest metaphors in the English language is the use of the heart to represent the world of emotion. Accordingly, "broken-hearted" (line 3) is the poem's first metaphor, though it's so familiar today that it may sound like a cliché to modern ears.

Later in the stanza, it's unlikely that the ex-lover's cheek and kiss literally grew "colder" when she parted from the speaker. Rather, this description relates more to absent emotional warmth and a new sense of distance and alienation. This metaphorical coldness is restated in line 10 with the speaker's "chill."

The most obvious use of metaphor is in line 18. Here, the speaker describes merely hearing his ex's name as a figurative "knell." This is a ringing of a bell, usually relating to funerals, with the "death-knell" marking out a period of mourning and

respect for the deceased. The metaphor indicates that hearing the ex's name reminds the speaker of the death of their relationship, with the coldness of death also relating to the "chill" mentioned earlier.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Half broken-hearted"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Pale grew thy cheek and cold, / Colder thy kiss;"
- **Lines 9-10:** "The dew of the morning / Sunk chill on my brow—"
- **Lines 17-18:** "They name thee before me, / A knell to mine ear;"

APOSTROPHE

"When We Two Parted," as the name suggests, is a poem about two people: the speaker and his ex. Through the use of "we" and repeated references to "thee" (and "thy" etc.), the *entire* poem is technically apostrophe. That is, it addresses one person specifically—and that one person is clearly not present to hear the speaker's words.

Essentially, these words are a way for the speaker to vent his frustrations and heartache. One of the key effects of this consistent apostrophe is that the reader feels almost like an unwanted guest in the poem, a kind of voyeur. On the surface of it, the speaker isn't trying to convince the reader of anything—*all* of his words are directed at the ex-lover. This helps build a sense of how much the speaker still obsesses about this one particular individual, even though years seem to have passed and, evidently, the ex-lover is in some kind of new relationship. It's also worth noting that this poem was published in a time when, by and large, and unless explicitly stated otherwise, most poet's words were equated with being their own thoughts. So Byron most likely knew that this poem, though shorn of specific references to the back story, would be understood by its intended recipient for what it is: a bitter confession of emotional pain and frustration.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we"
- **Line 5:** "thy"
- **Line 6:** "thy"
- **Line 13:** "Thy"
- **Line 14:** "thy"
- **Line 15:** "thy"
- **Line 17:** "thee"
- **Line 20:** "thou"
- **Line 21:** "thee"
- **Line 22:** "thee"
- **Line 23:** "thee"
- **Line 25:** "we"
- **Line 27:** "thy"
- **Line 28:** "Thy"
- **Line 29:** "thee"
- **Line 31:** "thee"

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis is used just once in "When We Two Parted." This sole example is found in line 23 (quote with line 24 to complete the phrase):

> Long, long shall I rue thee,
> Too deeply to tell.

There isn't all that much to say about this use of epizeuxis apart from the obvious: the repeated "long" makes the length of time referred to seem even longer! The speaker has already "rue[d]" his ex-lover for years (as referenced in line 4), and will continue to do so for what seems like a probably endless amount of time. Indeed, part of this moment's power is that there isn't really much of a difference between an amount of time being "long" and it being "long, long," because it is an unspecified amount of time—but the *sound* of the phrase and the fact that the word is repeated makes this moment feel longer.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 23:** "Long, long"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is used in lines 25 and 26. Both line's start with "In" followed by a noun, with the first phrase referring to "we" and the second to the speaker specifically. These nouns—"secret" and "silence"—also alliterate on the /s/ sound. The parallelism helps compare two moments (or time periods): the beginning of the speaker's relationship with his ex, and the poem's present in which he grieves her.

The first phrase confirms to the reader that the relationship in question was shrouded in secrecy from the beginning. That is, there was probably some aspect of it which required deception and concealment. Looking at the story on which the poem is likely based, the secrecy here relates to the fact that Byron's relationship with Lady Frances was an affair—she was a married woman. Though this was a secretive time, the speaker and his lover were partners in this secrecy.

Now in the poem's present, however, the speaker's "silence" is his alone. Instead of loving secretly, he now *grieves* secretly. This shows the way that a divide has opened up: with "we" on one side, and the speaker—the "I"—on the other.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "In secret we met— / In silence I grieve,"

VOCABULARY

Sever (Line 4) - Torn apart.

Thy (Line 5, Line 6, Line 14, Line 15, Line 28) - This is an archaic form of "your."

Chill (Line 10) - This means "coldly."

Brow (Line 10) - Forehead.

Vows (Line 13) - Promises.

Light (Line 14) - Light here is meant to mean something like frivolous and unimportant.

Thee (Line 17, Line 21, Line 22, Line 23, Line 29, Line 31) - This is an archaic form of "you."

Knell (Line 18) - This is the ringing sound of a bell, particularly relating to funerals and periods of mourning.

Mine (Line 18) - This is an archaic form of "my."

Shudder (Line 19) - A shudder is like an especially strong shiver.

O'er (Line 19) - This a contraction of "over," made into one syllable to serve the poem's meter.

Wert (Line 20) - This is an archaic form of "were."

Thou (Line 20) - This is an archaic form of "you."

Dear (Line 20) - Here, this means important and loved.

Rue (Line 23) - To rue something is to regret it bitterly.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When We Two Parted" is made up of four octets (eight line stanzas). This regular form is typical of Byron's poetry. Each of these stanzas can also be broken down further into two sets of quatrains.

In a sense, the poem ends up where it starts. It begins by stating that when the speaker and his lover parted, it was "in silence and tears." The first stanza sees the speaker reflecting on that moment, and how it seemed to predict what was to come.

The second and third stanzas relate to the way the speaker feels about his ex-lover in the present day. He hears people talk about the ex, and finds it painful whenever they do—in part because of the raw pain of the break-up, but also because this gossip seems to relate to another affair the ex is having. There's more than a hint of jealousy and bitterness at play. At the end, then, the poem folds back in on itself as the speaker asks how he should greet his ex-lover when he next sees her—and then says that this meeting will also occur "with silence and tears."

Overall, the poem's rigid structure and return to the opening lines reinforce the sense that the speaker is trapped in his grief; he can't move on from this relationship any more than the poem can break out of this form.

METER

Because of its short lines, the poem's meter seems more complicated than it actually is. When read out loud, the phrases tend to *sound* like they are organized in dactylic feet (a poetic foot made up of two unstressed beats followed by one stressed), plus an extra stressed syllable at the end of each phrase:

> When we two | parted [i]n | silence and | tears,
> Half broken- | hearted [t]o | sever for | years,

This sound continues throughout the poem but, of course, is not how it is actually written on the page! Instead, the phrases tend to be split across two lines, which evokes the break-up at the center of the poem: the sentences are themselves are literally broken up.

Scanning it on the page, then, the poem reads as a somewhat freeform version of accentual verse—that is, verse organized based on the specific number of accents in each line. There tend to be two accents in each line, but they don't fall at the same spots in each line. For example, consider the first two lines:

> When we two parted
> In silence and tears,

The fact that most lines have two accents ties into the broader importance of the number two in the poem. Just as the pairs of alliterative words in many lines evoke the idea of a couple, the pairs of accented syllables in the meter highlight the same idea—and provide a somewhat cruel contrast to the fact that the speaker himself is no longer part of a couple.

RHYME SCHEME

"When We Two Parted" is written with a regular rhyme scheme that follows the same form in every stanza:

ABABCDCD

In practice, this means that every end-word has a partner soon after. This is a deliberate strategy, and it highlights the way almost all of the poem's phrases are broken in two by line breaks. When heard out loud, the rhyme scheme gives the poem a couplet feel.

The use of pairs is important: the poem describes how the speaker and his lover were once a pair and have now become individuals again, so the paired rhymes separated by non-rhymed lines reflect this sense of simultaneous unity and

division.

It's also worth noting that the end-words for lines 21, 23, 29, and 31—the second halves of the last two stanzas—are all "thee." This reinforces the speaker's fixation on his ex-lover.

SPEAKER

"When We Two Parted" doesn't name its speaker, but the poem is widely interpreted by critics to be told from the perspective of Byron himself. Byron's own letters draw a link between the poem and his affair—which may or may not have been consummated—with a British aristocrat, Lady Frances Wedderburn-Webster, who, as her title suggests, was married at the time. She was subsequently rumored to have had an affair with the Duke of Wellington, one of Britain's most notable military leaders. It was around the time of hearing about this rumored affair that Byron is said to have written this poem—though he did delete a stanza that named Lady Frances specifically. This real-life context and its credible influence on the poem are the reason that this guide uses masculine pronouns in reference to the speaker and feminine pronouns in reference to his lover.

In any case, the speaker in the poem is clearly embittered, and perhaps even a little confused. He still feels the pain of the break-up, even though it seems to have taken place years ago—and is caused further pain when he hears people talk about his ex-lover and rumors of her new affair. In a way, he is stuck, still caught up in the "silence and tears" that marked the end of the relationship. Indeed, the poem also feels very intimate—as though there is only really one intended reader: the ex-lover.

SETTING

"When We Two Parted" compares two moments in time: the actual break-up between the speaker and his lover, and the poem's present. Other than that, it's very light on specifics—there is no real sense of place. Instead, the poem takes place in the world of human emotions, with the speaker delving deep into his psyche to examine how he feels about his ex-lover.

The reference to "They" in the third stanza appears to indicate a kind of gossiping crowd, perhaps subtly suggesting some kind of urbane social world. The poem ends on a glimpse into the future—which, like the past, is likely to be shrouded in "silence and tears."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Lord Byron—George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron, to be precise—is one of English literature's most famous figures. He was one of the British Romantic poets, specifically the second generation (along with Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats).

Though Byron is now considered one of the English language's foremost poets, his early forays into the literary world were not very successful. Indeed, his first volume of poetry was slammed by critics. Byron got back at the literary establishment by publishing his satire, "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" (1809), which took aim at contemporaries like William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge (a move that he re-evaluated later in life).

Byron has a number of qualities in common with the usual associations of Romanticism. These include political engagement, extensive travel, and a taste for freedom. That said, he occupies in a place in Romanticism like no other. After publishing his long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron became a celebrity on a scale that was practically unknown at the time. That poem saw the genesis of the "Byronic hero," a well-educated, cunning, and charming man who has a disdain for authority. Many readers saw Byron himself as the archetype for this hero.

This particular poem doesn't share many of the attributes of Romanticism, except for one key focus: the poem is entirely concerned with the speaker's subjective experience, placing an emphasis on the individual at the (broken) heart of the poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Byron lived during an age of considerable upheaval. For one thing, he was born on the cusp of the French Revolution, when French citizens overthrew the country's absolute monarchy and showed the rest of Europe how formidable the people, when banded together, could be. The French Revolution, initially at least, was well-received in some quarters of Britain; for instance, William Wordsworth, another Romantic poet, praised it in his *Prelude*: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive." Not long before the French Revolution, America had also rebelled against its colonial British rulers. Additionally, the late 18th and early 19th century also marked the First Industrial Revolution in England, a time of widespread societal change spurred by new technologies and manufacturing processes.

Byron also strongly admired Greek culture, and he supported the Greeks in their attempts to win independence from the Ottoman Empire. He spent much of his personal fortune on improving the conditions of Greek ships and soldiers. The Greek side had a number of internal conflicts, with Byron sometimes acting as mediator. It was in Greece that he died in 1824 at the age of 36 from fever.

This poem perhaps has a stronger link to the French Revolution than is first apparent. The poem is thought to have been written about Byron's relationship with the married aristocrat Lady Frances Wedderburn-Webster. After their affair ended, Byron heard the rumor that she had also had an affair with the Duke of Wellington, a British military leader who had just defeated Napoleon. Wellington was one of the few men whose fame rivaled—or even eclipsed, perhaps—Lord Byron's. It is thought that Byron felt embittered upon hearing of this latter affair, and was thus spurred on to write the poem. This would explain some of the references to the speaker hearing the lover's name associated with "shame" and "fame"—and why the affair was shrouded in secrecy.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems About Break-ups — A contemporary list of poems on an age-old subject: saying goodbye to a relationship. (https://www.bustle.com/p/21-poems-about-heartbreak-to-read-after-a-breakup-if-you-want-a-good-cry-8665603)
- Byron's Life and More Poems — A good resource from the Poetry Foundation with biographical details on Byron, plus more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lord-byron)
- A Scathing Review — A less-than-glowing review of Byron's first collection of poems. (https://ir.vanderbilt.edu/bitstream/handle/1803/2465/Edinburgh%20Review%20-%20Vol%20XI%20-%20Review%2
- Lord Byron's Revenge — Byron launches an attack on the literary establishment—one which helped him make his name. (https://archive.org/stream/bardsscotenglish00byrorich?ref=ol#page/n4/mode/2up)
- Byron's Scandals — A documentary about Lord Byron's more salacious side. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CR-R0XFHtng)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- Prometheus
- She Walks in Beauty
- The Destruction of Sennacherib

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