

## Analysis of George Gordon Byron's "When We Two Parted"

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### Abstract:

George Gordon Byron's poem "When We Two Parted" portrays enduring love, deep disillusionment, and unspeakable pain after a broken ambiguous relationship, addressed to an ex-lover who left for another. Structured in four eight-line stanzas with an ABABCDCD rhyme scheme, its cyclic narrative begins and ends with "in silence and tears," emphasizing haunting, ongoing memories. The poem evolves through emotional stages: the somber breakup, desolation from shattered promises, conflicted feelings at the lover's name, and a gloomy vision of future reunion, echoing the opening's sorrow. Literary devices include synesthesia, structural repetition, and alliteration symbolizing the relationship. The poem is compared to China's Song Dynasty "Graceful and Restrained Ci" by Yan Shu and Yan Jidao, which share themes of lost love and regret but differ in expression: Byron's is direct, sensory-focused, while Ci uses subtle, landscape-based imagery, often from a female perspective.

**Keywords:** George Gordon Byron; "When We Two Parted"; lost love; literary devices; Graceful and Restrained Ci; Song Dynasty poetry

### When We Two Parted<sup>1</sup>

George Gordon Byron

When we two parted  
In silence and tears,  
Half broken-hearted  
To sever for years,  
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,

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<sup>1</sup> This poem is believed to have been written by George Gordon Byron for Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster, a married woman who had a secret affair with him. Most scholars are convinced that the poem was actually written in 1816, when Lady Frances was involved in an illicit relationship with the Duke of Wellington. Feeling deeply betrayed, with love intricately intertwined with resentment, Byron was driven to write this poem.

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. (Ferguson & Salter, 2004)

“When We Two Parted” is a well-known romantic poem that portrays Byron’s enduring love, deep disillusionment and unspeakable pain following the end of this ambiguous relationship. He addressed this poem to his ex-lover, who finally separated from him for another person and left him in regret and remembrance. The poem contains four eight-line stanzas with the rhyming scheme of ABABCDCD, which is commonly observed in many of Byron’s works. The cyclic narrative structure, beginning with the recollection of the lovers’ parting “in silence and tears” and ending with the imagined encounter years later, again “in silence and tears”, make his love and memories more haunting and ongoing, like a melancholy storyteller keeps murmuring about his fading lover.

The poem begins by describing the moment of their breakup with a sombre tone, evoking feelings of loss and sadness. It is clear that both of them were heartbroken, as they parted “in silence and tears.” However, the author distinctly senses that his lover’s cheek is pale and cold, and her kiss even colder — images foreshadowing how their poignant farewell will later be remembered as a tale of betrayal.

The second stanza uses the image of morning dew, with the verb “sunk” to embody the desolation permeating his heart and the growing detachment in their relationship, as he realizes that after they broke up, their promises had been shattered and his lover’s reputation was tarnished. A strong emotional shift is evident in the last verse, where the author’s affection turns to shame and disappointment.

As the situation evolves, as articulated in the third stanza, the mere mention of his lover’s name, or anything related to her, causes the author to tremble with deeply conflicted emotions. Though filled with shame, he is also startled by the enduring love still buried deep within him,

a feeling symbolized by the simile “a knell to mine ear”. In the end, this whirlwind of emotions fades into an unspeakable past.

In the final stanza, the author once again mourns their lost and secret love, a consequence of the other person’s infidelity. The poem ends with a gloomy vision of their love story - when they meet years later, he will respond in the same way he did when they parted years ago: “in silence and tears”. The last two lines of the final stanza echo the first two lines of the opening stanza, implying that although both remain “in silence and tears,” everything has changed, and they have passed the point of no return.

Overall, Byron employs various literary devices in this lyric poem. A prominent one is synesthesia. Images such as “pale cheek”, “morning dew”, and “the knell” evoke the intertwined senses of sight, touch, and sound, amplify the feelings of sorrow and despair in the poem. They enable the reader to not only visualize the scenes but also experience the emotional pain through multiple sensory channels. Additionally, the poem’s structure, with its echoes between the beginning and end, reinforces the author’s prolonged sorrow through repetition. The alliteration which comes as a pair, such as “when” and “we”, “half” and “hearted”, “share” and “shame”, “secret” and “silence”, not only strengthen the rhythm but also seems to symbolize the relationship of the couple in the poem. Ultimately, this is a hauntingly beautiful poem, capturing a bittersweet moment in Byron’s rich romantic history.

In classical Chinese Ci (宋词), there is also a romantic genre called “the Graceful and Restrained Poetic School” (wǎn yuē pài, 婉约派), which captures similar emotions and literary themes, such as nostalgia for past love, the unspoken sense of betrayal after parting, and the conflicted longing that follows. However, unlike English poetry, Ci tends to convey these

emotions more subtly, employing richer imagery and often written from a female perspective by male poets. Here, we will compare two Ci from the famous poets of Graceful and Restrained School with Byron's *When We Two Parted*.

The first one is "Spring In Jade Pavilion: Spring Grief" (玉楼春·春恨) by Yan Shu (晏殊, 991-1055) from the Song Dynasty:

Farewell Pavilion green with grass and willow trees!  
How could my gallant young lord have left me with ease!  
I'm woke by midnight bell from dim dream in my bower;  
Parting grief won't part with flowers falling in shower.

My beloved feels no sorrow my loving heart sheds:  
Each string as woven with thousands of painful threads.  
However far and wide the sky and earth may be,  
They can't measure the lovesickness o'erwhelming me.<sup>1</sup> (Xu, 2011)

The second one is "Tune: Wandering While Young" (少年游) by Yan Jidao (晏几道, 1038-1110) from the Song Dynasty:

The eastern water and the western part,  
Oh, but at last  
They'll merge into one stream.  
The fickle clouds have not a heart;  
Though they have passed,  
At night they'll come into your dream.

But woman is more fickle than water and cloud.  
Alas! but when  
May I meet the fickle one again?

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<sup>1</sup> The original Chinese Song Ci is: 绿杨芳草长亭路。年少抛人容易去。楼头残梦五更钟，花底离愁三月雨。无情不似多情苦。一寸还成千万缕。天涯地角有穷时，只有相思无尽处。

On thinking over, I've been overflowed

With heartbreaks.

Oh, but what difference this time makes!<sup>1</sup> (Xu, 2011)

It could be observed from these two Ci that Yan Shu's lines — “How could my gallant young lord have left me with ease”, “my beloved feels no sorrow my loving heart sheds”, and “they can't measure the lovesickness overwhelming me” — and Yan Jidao's — “woman is more fickle than water and cloud”, “when may I meet the fickle one again”, and “I've been overflowed with heartbreaks” — closely mirror Byron's themes and emotional tone. All three works portray the turbulent journey from love and connection to pain and regret.

They are all rich imagery, but while Byron evokes emotion through sensory images like “chill dew”, “knell”, and “pale cheeks”, Yan Shu draws on “willows”, “pavilions”, and “rain”, and Yan Jidao employs “fickle clouds and water”. These are iconic symbols of separation, sorrow, and transience in classical Chinese poetry, reflecting the Graceful and Restrained School's preference for expressing emotion through evocative landscapes or scenery, in contrast to Byron's sensory-focused approach. Therefore, Byron's emotional expression is more inward and direct, revealing a sense of solitude and deep personal regret closely tied to his own emotional experiences and personality. On the other hand, Yan Jidao and Yan Shu expresses their feelings in a more subtle and philosophical manner, manifesting the dynamic relationship between “emotion” (情) and “scenery” (景). The use of natural imagery in their verses adds philosophical depth, while Byron's poetry tends to focus more on internal struggles and self-reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> The original Chinese Song Ci is: 离多最是，东西流水，终解两相逢。浅情终似，行云无定，犹到梦魂中。可怜人意，薄于云水，佳会更难重。细想从来，断肠多处，不与今番同。

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