

Byron When We Two Parted



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.

There is almost too much context for this poem. Byron's life and loves are a kind of melodramatic soap opera. While the scandals of his love life might not shock these days (think of film stars and other celebrities) his casual attitude to women probably would not stand up to scrutiny. This poem is often taken to be Byron referring to his wife and perhaps his regret at the break up of their relationship. How likely is that interpretation?

INVESTIGATE!

1. Carry out some detective work on the poem, giving special attention to these lines:

They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;

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

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

In secret we met—
In silence I grieve,

2. Imagine the poem being the words of his wife or one of his lovers directed back at him. Would that interpretation work? Read it through with that idea in mind. Then think about these statements in pairs or small groups and arrange them, diamond fashion, with the most likely at the top, least at the bottom.

The writer truly regrets the ending of the relationship.

The poem is full of self-pity.

The writer is a hypocrite.

The writer is pretending to feel heart-broken in order to write a good poem.

After many years the writer sees the error of his ways.

The writer exaggerates his feelings.

The writer's fame has suffered as a result of the relationship.

The writer has not got over the love affair.

The writer is ashamed of the relationship.

3. The writer says he grieves in silence, yet his poem is addressed to the person he parted from. When the poem was published, the lover in question would be able to read it. What do you think her reaction might be? Write this or act it out. If written it could be in the form of a diary entry, an outburst (to a friend, a maid, a husband?), a letter or any other format you wish – it could be imagined in a modern setting with the lover being interviewed on television, radio or social media.