

A Song Helen Maria Williams



No riches from his scanty store
My lover could impart;
He gave a boon I valued more —
He gave me all his heart!

His soul sincere, his generous worth,
Might well this bosom move;
And when I asked for bliss on earth,
I only meant his love.

But now for me, in search of gain
From shore to shore he flies;
Why wander riches to obtain,
When love is all I prize?

The frugal meal, the lowly cot
If blest my love with thee!
That simple fare, that humble lot,
Were more than wealth to me.

While he the dangerous ocean braves,
My tears but vainly flow:
Is pity in the faithless waves
To which I pour my woe?

The night is dark, the waters deep,
Yet soft the billows roll;
Alas! at every breeze I weep —
The storm is in my soul.

The straightforward message of the poem means that students will not be hampered by asking 'What does it *mean*?' It therefore provides an opportunity to discuss features which will appear in other, more difficult poems.

Inversion

The moving of the verb to the end of a line from where it would normally repose is a common technique in pre-twentieth century poetry and indeed beyond. It enables the verb to carry greater stress and also serves to help a rhyme scheme. Ask students to underline the verbs and then to double underline those that occur at the end of lines. Now ask them to rewrite the line or lines with the verb in its more conventional position, e.g.

While he the dangerous ocean braves → While he braves the dangerous ocean

Persona

Who is singing the song? Is it the voice and feelings of Helen Maria Williams or that of an imagined person left languishing at home? Who writes love songs? (Not just those in love – think of the lyrics of stage musicals, written by professional song-writers.) An investigation of Williams' life might be thought-provoking. The woman left home while the lover goes a-roving is a common trope; does Williams fit that cliché?

Structure

The simple ABAB verse form is very regular, as perhaps you would expect a song of this kind to be. Equally regular, in a way, is the emphasis that falls on the last line of each verse. Students might discover this for themselves if you ask them which lines are most heart-felt. There is also a progression in the poem from 'light' to 'dark' (just compare the last lines of verses 1 and 6).

Contrasts

In common with poems such as Ann Brontë's 'The Bluebell', there are many contrasts or oppositions here which students can tease out.

Punctuation

Dashes, exclamation and question marks – the poem is much punctuated. Remove these marks and see how a reading of the poem seems now. To what extent are they helpful? (The fourth verse would read a lot more smoothly if the exclamation was removed. As it stands, the first two lines make no sense.)

Finally

Wordsworth wrote a sonnet to Williams titled 'Sonnet on Seeing Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress'. Make what of it you can.

She wept.--Life's purple tide began to flow
In languid streams through every thrilling vein;
Dim were my swimming eyes--my pulse beat slow,
And my full heart was swell'd to dear delicious pain.
Life left my loaded heart, and closing eye;
A sigh recall'd the wanderer to my breast;
Dear was the pause of life, and dear the sigh
That call'd the wanderer home, and home to rest.
That tear proclaims--in thee each virtue dwells,
And bright will shine in misery's midnight hour;
As the soft star of dewy evening tells
What radiant fires were drown'd by day's malignant pow'r,
That only wait the darkness of the night
To cheer the wand'ring wretch with hospitable light.

AXIOLOGUS

Composed 1787.--Published March, 1787, in The European Magazine, Vol. XL