

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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WHEN WE TWO PARTED

An Analysis of Lord Byron's Poem

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Byron's Poetry

Byron, without question, is my favorite poet. He created perhaps some of the most well-known love poems of all time. Today I will write about one of my—if not my favorite poems of his and analyze the brilliant meter found in this lovely poem, a meter that I find perhaps the most beautiful I have ever discovered; and one that does not appear again until much later in another poet's work (who I admire), Robert Frost. Frost employed the same foot at the end of his pentameter lines, which Byron used throughout this poem, made up of mostly dimeter lines. The unique form of foot both poets made great use of has been termed *anapestic feminine endings* or anapests at the end of lines with an extra syllable. It is a poem that inspired my unique style of poetry more so than any other poem. This poem shows Byron's unique way of creating emotive lines by changing his meter at key emotional moments. Both Byron and Poe made great use of this effect, and both made great use of anapestic feet, which give a certain melodic ring to poetry, and this poem is full of anapests, as are many of my lyrical poems.

Byron also used accentual verse to write this poem, though he carefully metered his poem so that it resembled traditional accentual syllabic verse. This is brilliant, since it takes the best of both worlds, the ancient and modern ways of writing poetry and combines them into something otherworldly. Accentual verse relies only on the strong stresses found in natural human speech patterns and not at all on the unstressed syllables, which are not usually counted; yet Byron, being a classical poet, did count every syllable: most lines have only five, but vary from as low as four to as high as seven total syllables. His meter is always very well thought out and beautifully crafted. An example of a highly stressed syllable is found in the line:

Long, long shall I rue thee

Here, the second or *epizeuxis* use of the word *long* is not only stressed more but held a bit longer on the tongue, which, when spoken, gives a deep sense of emotion, making for a line that is memorable as well as very easy to read. Accentual verse tends to have a rhythmical flow, a musical quality sometimes lacking in accentual verse, which often tends to be strictly iambic, as opposed to anapestic. Also, this

older way of writing poetry gives lines a natural cadence, sounding slightly more like one would normally speak, since the use of intervening words or syllables is a bit more flexible.

George Lord Byron was a master of storytelling, wit, meter, and rime, sometimes ending his lines with some truly unique phrase rimes, and you will often find his love poems full of internal rimes. The language in Byron's poetry is not as flowery as some, but terser and bolder, and sometimes even sarcastic or satirical. The meter of his poetry, especially his early works, was very flowery, its lyrical quality unparalleled by his peers: throughout this poem his lines usually start with an iamb followed by an anapest, with some iambic endings for lines of great significance: and several headless iambs at the beginning of several lines; as well as one anapest followed by another anapest, perhaps to add metric variety: romance poets were known to vary their meter for many different reasons. Here as in his poem, **The Tear** Byron relies on two to three major stresses in his lines, which is how one can tell he is not using syllabic verse, which when he does, he usually used the traditional four or five stresses found throughout much of English romance poetry (either tetrameter or pentameter). The form he used in this poem is an octave stanza, with the riming scheme of **ababdcdd**.

Meter

Accentual Dimeter Verse

Byron appears to have written this poem in a very melodic, slightly older poetic manner like Anglo-Saxon verse, in which only the major stresses are of importance, and every syllable is not required to be counted. Thus, relies more on the natural flow of the English language than adhering to any one foot. However, his poem does appear to have well-thought-out feet, and every syllable counted, ranging from 4-6 syllables, but mostly 5, as my scansion will attest to. Also, every line had two stressed syllables, save for the first stanza, which has a few trimeter lines, perhaps to emphasize a thought of great meaning to the poet.

Though his meter varies, overall, his poem seems to lean heavily towards following a melodic iamb/anapest beat as found in line 2:

da-Dum | da-da-Dum
(iamb, anapest)

in **SI** | lence and **TEARS**,

Though he varies this pattern ever so slightly using feminine endings, thus creating amphibrach feet as in line 9, 11, 13, and 15.

the **DEW** of | the **MORN**-ing
it **FELT** like | the **WARN**-ing
thy **VOWS** are | all **BRO**-ken,
i **HEAR** thy | name **SPO**-ken,

Yet, these lines can also be scanned as iamb/anapest/catalexis: in accentual syllabic verse, lines with incomplete feet are known as catalectic lines. If, indeed, this was his intent, as poets like his friend Shelley used this technique, perhaps Byron was trying to convey a sense of something missing:

the **DEW** | of the **MORN** | -ing

Here, Byron further varies the iamb/anapestic beat using a headless iamb, a foot often found throughout Byron's poetry. Such feet are categorized as a form of catalexis. Here, one can feel the tension in the air created by the missing syllables at the beginning of lines 5, 6, 7, and 8 in stanza 1:

PALE | grew thy **CHEEK** | and **COLD**,
COLD | -er thy **KISS**:
TRUL | ly that **HOOR** | fore-**TOLD**
SOR | row to **THIS**

Feet

Accentual dimeter for all lines apart from the trimeter 5th and 7th

2-2-2-2-2-2-2

My Scansion of Byron's Meter in **When We Two Parted**

1st Stanza:

WHEN we | two **PART**-ed
in **SI** | lence and **TEARS**,
HALF bro | -ken-**HEART**-ed
to **SE** | ver for **YEARS**,
PALE | grew thy **CHEEK** | and **COLD**,
COLD | -er thy **KISS**:
TRUL | ly that **HOOR** | fore-**TOLD**
SOR | row to **THIS**

- Line 1: (dimeter) 1 trochee, 1 amphibrach
- Line 2: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 3: (dimeter) 1 trochee, 1 amphibrach
- Line 4: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 5: (trimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb
- Line 6: (dimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 7: (trimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb
- Line 8: (dimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest

2nd Stanza:

the **DEW** of | the **MORN**-ing
sunk **CHILL** | on my **BROW**—
it **FELT** like | the **WARN**-ing
of **WHAT** | I feel **NOW**.
thy **VOWS** are | all **BRO**-ken,
and **LIGHT** | is thy **FAME**:
i **HEAR** thy | name **SPO**-ken,
and **SHARE** | in its **SHAME**.

- Line 1: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 2: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 3: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 4: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 5: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 6: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 7: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 8: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest

3rd Stanza:

they **NAME** thee | be-**FORE** me,
a **KNELL** | to mine **EAR**:
a **SHUD**-der | 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 **DEEP** | ly to **TELL**.

- Line 1: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 2: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 3: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 4: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 5: (trimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 6: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest

- Line 7: (dimeter) 2 amphibrachs
- Line 8: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest

4th Stanza:

in **SE** | cret we **MET**—
 in **SI** | lence I **GRIEVE**,
 that thy **HEART** | could for-**GET**,
 thy **SPI** | rit de-**CEIVE**.
IF i | should **MEET** thee
AF | -ter long **YEARS**,
HOW should | I **GREET** thee?
 with **SI** | -lence and **TEARS**.

- Line 1: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 2: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 3: (dimeter) 2 anapests
- Line 4: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 5: (dimeter) 1 trochee, 1 amphibrach
- Line 6: (dimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest
- Line 7: (dimeter) 1 trochee, 1 amphibrach
- Line 8: (dimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest

Composition

1st Stanza

The Goodbye

The poet tells of a time he said goodbye to someone while in tears and silence. This suggests that something sorrowful was said or perhaps unspoken, yet deeply felt, before their departure. The next line speaks of being brokenhearted, yet oddly half-broken as if one of them were only slightly sad, or worse, feigning heartbreak: though it is such a personal matter that each reader may have a different interpretation of Byron's meaning as it appears he is not telling the reader intricate details of the break-up, but is using a broadbrush approach to let the reader use their imagination. Goodbye seems to be a lasting one, one that cannot be reconciled. The fifth line begins abruptly with a more detailed description of the subject of his loss, no doubt a woman, whose face turned pallid as if in shock or a lack of blood, or reddish hue. Red is often used as a metaphor for passion; hence, perhaps she now lacks that emotion towards him. The next line begins with the phrase 'colder thy kiss': c-words in the English

language tend to be harsher-sounding, thus denoting the hurt he feels in the abrupt ending of their relationship. The last line is rather mysterious, as only the poet would know what foretold the ending of the breakup. Although my best guess would be it came in the midnight hour, in other words, a dream. I myself have experienced a similar dream of the ending of a friendship, before it occurred, indeed felt like a warning, as it was a very rare, vivid dream, felt so real that I didn't forget it.

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.

2nd Stanza

His Dream Becomes Reality

The dew of the morning seems to be a play on words, dew in poetic language can mean many things, usually indicating tears when the poem's theme is sorrow. And morning sounds like mourning, indicating a funeral-like atmosphere that was felt that morning as though he had indeed awakened from a bad dream, as the next few lines hint at. Yet now the dew seems to also refer to something else as well. The next line tells of a warning he felt, perhaps he had a foreboding dream of the broken relationship and woke up sweating profusely. The fifth line further describes the lady as breaking her vows: mayhap it is a married woman who tore asunder her wedding vows. The sixth line tells of her fame and of others making light of or mocking her. The last line describes how, when he now hears her name, he feels shame due to whatever caused her fame, and shares in the shame: perhaps she left him for another man of high status (fame), as Lord Byron's subtle wordplay does hint at in line 14. Also of great importance is his use of assonance, particularly sibilance or the s-sound throughout this poem, as found here in lines 10, 15, and 16. Its use is ingenious, as it creates a very lonely or even dangerous atmosphere, evoking the sound of wind, or even snakes. The latter, perhaps purposely, as Byron's suppressed stanza mentions the biblical story of the fall of man. I will delve into that missing stanza later.

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.

3rd Stanza

The Funeral Bell

He begins by describing the sound of her name as like that of a church bell's chime when denoting the death of someone, known as the death knell or funeral toll. The word shudder hints at him feeling cold, as if his love, too, has turned cold, much like hers 'that hour'. Next, he describes how the public doesn't know of his apparent sexual affair with her, since his repeated use of the word knew, and its variations tends to imply the biblical metaphor for sex.¹ The last line tells of how he regrets ever knowing her, too deeply to describe with mere words.

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.

4th Stanza

Hope of Reconciliation

The first line gives us more information about their tryst, that they secretly met with one another. Then he writes of grieving that she forgot him and deceived him in some fashion, perhaps she never told him something that only he *now* knows. The last few lines resolve the poem beautifully, describing his inner turmoil with a question and an answer, echoing the first few lines of the entire poem; hence, Byron, with one simple line, encapsulates the poem's entire message: he asks if he ever met her again, what would he say to her. Thus, using a poetic technique known as a refrain, he states that he would greet her in silence and in tears: 'silence' could mean that he is unwilling to forgive her for her deception, thus the silent treatment, but 'tears' seems to indicate something else, an allusion to the possibility of forgiveness, the hope of a future meeting, even reconciliation of their friendship. Such multilayered metaphorical lines can be interpreted in many ways, which is the beauty of poetry.

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.

¹ 'And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.' (Genesis 4:1 KJV)

The Suppressed 5th Stanza

Things Best Left Unsaid

Also, one minor note. Byron hid a stanza that he wrote for this poem. Perhaps out of respect for the lady he was writing this poem about, he never published it in its entirety; here is the missing stanza. Despite what many critics will say, and no doubt why he didn't want it published, I find it to be very beautifully written and heartfelt as well, so full of intense emotions. There is much to be said of these lines, which I will save for my conclusion on the important topic of suppressed poetry.

Then—fare thee well—Fanny—
Now doubly undone—
To prove false unto many—
As faithless to One—
Thou art past all recalling
Even would I recall—
For the woman once falling
Forever must fall.—

Final Thoughts

The Dilemma of Writing Personal Poetry:

Or when it's best to leave out things of a personal nature:

Sometimes, though heartfelt and true to one's memory of what occurred in a real-life event, poems can be too personal, and things like names are removed or suppressed out of regard for the person one is writing about. Often, harsh words in a poem can come across as bitter, hard feelings, thus destroying an otherwise beautiful love poem, or simply causing the poet embarrassment. These types of lines are usually created in the heat of the moment, during times of anger, jealousy, or great sorrow. And it is not until time has passed that the poet may find a great need to remove entire lines. This may be the case for the missing final eight lines in his lyrical masterpiece, 'When We Two Parted.'

Byron sent the missing, unpublished stanza to his cousin, Lady Hardy. Only because the letter was found is why we now have the 'complete' poem. The lady whom Byron wrote about is named Fanny in the first line. He describes her as doubly undone, faithless to many, and faithful to none. The third line tells of her beauty being past recalling or that he no longer thinks her memory is worth remembering, were he to somehow recall her. The last two lines once more refer to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, specifically, the fall of Eve, or the end of innocence; hence, such a loss is permanent in this fallen world. Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster, no doubt, was the inspiration for this poem upon Byron hearing of the widespread scandal of her having an affair with the hero of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington. The nature of Byron's relationship with Lady Frances is still unknown. Although the poem does hint at a sexual one, it may have been merely a platonic friendship.

When to leave out a stanza or the name of someone dear to the poet is something each poet should decide for themselves. Perhaps Byron left out the missing stanza because he wished to reconcile a broken friendship with someone he truly loved. And by releasing the full poem, it may have truly ended all hope of mending things with her. I tend to believe this to be the case, since long after this poem was written they exchanged letters, and he certainly had an emotional connection with her. In poetry, or

prose for that matter, one can use things from real life as inspiration for one's art, which leaves much room for the imagination, as poetry can best be described as a combination of both dreams and reality. I believe that the best writers and poets are those who have experienced life and have felt both great love and great loss. As Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote, 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'²

² A line from Tennyson's poem 'In Memoriam A.H.H.'