When We Two Parted by Lord Byron

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
Sink chill on my brow—
It felt like the warning
Of what I feel now.
Thy vows are all broken,
And light is thy name;
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.
Lady Frances Caroline Wedderburn Webster and Lord Byron

- The poem was first published in 1816, but Byron falsely attributed its writing to 1808 in order to protect the identity of its subject, Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster.
- Many scholars believe the poem to have actually been written in 1816, when Lady Frances was linked to the Duke of Wellington in a scandalous relationship.
- The poem is highly autobiographical in that it recounts Byron’s emotional state following the end of his secret affair with Lady Frances and his frustration at her unfaithfulness to him with the Duke.
Powerful images in the poem
‘When We Two Parted’

He addresses his former lover directly, which makes the poem feel more personal. This contrasts with the use of “They” in stanza – this hints at a bond between the narrator and his lover which keeps them separate from others.

This violent imagery suggests that the parting was painful and traumatic for the narrator.

Enjambment emphasises the link between past and present – this shows how his sorrow is ongoing.

When *we two* parted
In *silence* and tears,
Half *broken-hearted*

To *sever* for years,
*Pall* grew thy cheek and *cold*,
Colder thy *kiss*;
Truly *that hour foretold*
*Sorrow* to this.

This could mean they had nothing to say to each other any more, but it also hints that their relationship was secret.

This could suggest that they weren’t properly in love with each other. However, it’s clear that the narrator was deeply affected by their parting, so perhaps he’s accusing his lover of only being half in love with him. He could also be referring to himself as “Half” of the couple, meaning that he’s broken-hearted and his former lover isn’t.

Repetition of the harsh ‘k’ sound emphasises coldness.

The narrator describes his lover like a corpse. This suggests that her feelings for him have died.
‘When We Two Parted’

The cold dew on the narrator’s forehead reflects the coldness between him and his lover.

The poem switches to talk about the present.

Her reputation is damaged (“light” suggests weak and flimsy) because people know about the affairs.

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.

Alliteration of ‘sh’ sound links to silence

Links to broken hearts in stanza 1

He hears people talking about the affairs his former lover is having – this is painful for him.

He feels he’s involved in her “shame” because he also had an affair with her.
‘When We Two Parted’

He hears people talking about the affairs his former lover is having – this is painful for him.

Metaphor suggests that her name sounds like a death knell to him; it reminds him of the death of their relationship.

Repetition emphasises how long he’ll feel regret.

Rhetorical question emphasises how deeply he felt for her; he can’t bear to hear that she’s having affairs with other men.

The narrator repeatedly addresses his former lover directly, creating the impression that he’s still preoccupied by her; this shows how her actions continue to upset him.

He’s silent because he’s incapable of expressing his pain not just because of the need for secrecy.

He doesn’t just feel sadness; he also regrets their relationship.

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.
‘When We Two Parted’

Because no-one knew they were lovers, he can’t talk about his pain.

He mourns their relationship like a death.

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.

The poem switches to thinking about the future.

Accusatory language suggests that he is angry.

Repetition from stanza 1 emphasises secrecy and sorrow—he’s still hurting and is unable to move on.
‘When We Two Parted’

Poem Dictionary

Sever - separate
Foretold - predicted or foreshadow
Fame - reputation
Knell - the sound of a bell rung slowly to mark a death
Rue - to feel regret or sorrow over something.
‘When We Two Parted’

What is the poem about?

The narrator recalls the day he and his lover parted – she didn’t seem to have any affection for him anymore. He believes the sadness that he felt then foreshadowed the sadness he feels in the present.

Although time has passed, even hearing her name affects the narrator deeply. He hears people talking about her affairs with other men, and he feels hurt by her actions.

He thinks that he’ll always feel hurt – if he meets her again he’ll act just the same as when they parted.

Byron may have been writing about Lady Frances Webster—it’s rumoured they had a relationship while she was married to a friend of Byron’s. She apparently went on to have an affair with the Duke of Wellington.
Feelings and Attitudes in the poem

The narrator mourns the end of the relationship as though it’s a death.

The narrator seems angry that his lover has broken promises and is having affairs with other men. He imagines greeting her with silence and tears, suggesting he wants her to see how much she’s hurt him.

He regrets their relationship because of the way things turned out—he suffered a lot.