**The Full Text of “When We Two Parted”**

1When we two parted

2   In silence and tears,

3Half broken-hearted

4   To sever for years,

5Pale grew thy cheek and cold,

6   Colder thy kiss;

7Truly that hour foretold

8   Sorrow to this.

9The dew of the morning

10   Sunk chill on my brow—

11It felt like the warning

12   Of what I feel now.

13Thy vows are all broken,

14   And light is thy fame;

15I hear thy name spoken,

16   And share in its shame.

17They name thee before me,

18   A knell to mine ear;

19A shudder comes o'er me—

20   Why wert thou so dear?

21They know not I knew thee,

22   Who knew thee too well—

23Long, long shall I rue thee,

24   Too deeply to tell.

25In secret we met—

26   In silence I grieve,

27That thy heart could forget,

28   Thy spirit deceive.

29If I should meet thee

30   After long years,

31How should I greet thee?—

32   With silence and tears.

* **“When We Two Parted” Summary**
  + When you and I broke up, we were silent and tearful. Our hearts were broken as we tore ourselves apart from each other for years to come. During the break-up, your cheek became pale and cold to the touch—your kiss was even colder. It seems to me that the way we split up predicted the pain and sadness I feel now.

The morning dew sunk coldly into my forehead, foreshadowing the emotional coldness I now sense. All your promises are broken—and people gossip about you. When I hear someone say your name, I feel embarrassed.

Hearing your name is like a funeral bell ringing in my ear—it makes me shiver. Why did I ever love you like I did? People don't know how well I knew you, that in fact I knew you too well. I'll regret that for a long time, more deeply than I can say.

Our relationship was a secret, and so I grieve it secretly—and I hate that you have forgotten me, and that you misled me. If I meet you again after years have gone by, what should I do? I'll greet you silently, and with tears.

* **“When We Two Parted” Themes**

**Love and Disillusionment**

“When We Two Parted” is a bitter poem about the end of a relationship. The speaker addresses the poem to an ex-lover, and so provides insight into the ongoing—and shapeshifting—pain of a breakup. Breakups, the poem argues, are not neat endings after which exes simply go their separate ways. Instead, they're often characterized by lingering, complicated pain and anger. The poem's main sentiments are disillusionment and frustration as the speaker learns that his beloved has moved on, and even wonders how he ever cared about her so much in the first place. The poem, then, speaks to the sheer messiness of breakups, and also to how quickly lovers’ perceptions of each other can change when they're no longer together.

The poem begins by describing the actual breakup. The “broken-hearted” lovers “parted in silence and tears”—they were “sever[ed]” from one another, indicating the almost physical pain of ending a relationship. But something about the sudden distance between the two lovers—the physical and emotional separation—seemed to predict the way that the speaker would come to feel betrayed in later years. For the speaker, this sudden lack of affection foreshadows the even worse pain the lover will cause him in the future. The circumstances of this relationship and the subsequent fallout are not made clear, but the feeling of being let down is definitely present.

The speaker then relates how hearing other people talk about the lover brings him pain. But that's also because of the nature of this hearsay: it seems to be gossip of some sort, and it's likely that this gossip relates to a *new* affair conducted by the speaker's ex. The speaker then wonders, a little meanly perhaps, how he ever held his lover “so dear.” That is, how could he care so much about someone who seems to have forgotten him—and was their love as real as he thought it was in the first place?

These thoughts lead him to declare that he'll “rue” the lover for a “long, long” time, again depicting the lasting messiness of breakups. And, in a way, it’s because the speaker perceives this change in the *lover* that his *own* attitude changes. It's almost as though, despite the breakup, he wants the ex to remain his (again speaking to the complicated feelings that come with the end of a relationship). Hearing rumors about the lover indicates that she may have moved on: the lover has given her heart to someone else, and in doing so denigrated what she and the speaker had.

Which is why, even after years have passed, this relationship *still*brings the speaker to “tears.” People move on with their lives, the poem seems to say, but this doesn’t mean that they move on completely from past loves. Feelings are messy and complicated, hanging around unwanted and unwarranted—and in this case, remaining as painful as ever, even as they change in other ways.

It’s also worth noting the poem’s specific context. The poem is thought to have been written about Byron’s relationship with the aristocrat Lady Webster. After their affair ended, Byron heard the rumor that she had also had an affair with the Duke of Wellington, a British military leader who had just defeated Napoleon. It’s thought that Byron felt embittered upon hearing of this other affair, and was thus spurred to write the poem. This would explain some of the references to the speaker hearing the lover’s name associated with “shame” and “fame”—and why the affair was (and still is) shrouded in secrecy.

[Lord Byron](https://poemanalysis.com/lord-byron/)

# When We Two Parted by Lord Byron

[Lord George Gordon Byron](https://poemanalysis.com/lord-byron-biography/), poet to When We Two Parted, was well-known in his time and remains well-known today for his work in poetry, through which he was able to express much of the melancholy and inner emotion that was never seen in him, save through the written word. During his lifetime, he was also known for his numerous scandals and debts, and for his own self-imposed exile from his home country. And despite all of this chaotic insanity that followed him around, his poetry paints a very different picture of the man. Poems such as *When We Two Parted* indicate a different aspect to Byron’s many relationships, and his feelings about them throughout his life.

## When We Two Parted Analysis

*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.*

When We Two Parted is written in rhyming format, typical of much of Byron’s work — ABABCDCD is the structure here that follows throughout When We Two Parted. His choice of words throughout are evocative of sadness — the “silence and tears” [imagery](https://poemanalysis.com/glossary/imagery/), as well as making more of the paleness and coldness of the lover’s face. The idea that the parting of the two left the narrator “half broken-hearted” is another deeply saddening idea, followed by the point that the fullness of separation is a severance that takes and lasts for years.

In the second half of the verse, an element of fate is entwined within the poem; the narrator remembers a time when the two kissed, and the kiss was cold, devoid of emotion, and realizes that the parting of the two was always inevitable; that the moment the warmth left the relationship, the separation and sorrow had been foretold.

*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.*

The second verse of When We Two Parted carries on much like the first, maintaining the sobriety of the poem, and continuing the theme of looking back and thinking about the many warning signs throughout the relationship that suggested the parting was doomed to happen one way or the other. Saying “the vows are all broken” could be a reference to the promises a typical couple makes to each other, or it could be a more literal vow, a saddening realization that a marriage has ended. The second half of the verse further suggests that some kind of infidelity may have been the final break in the relationship; suggesting that there is a shame in the name of the other person, as well as the idea of breaking a marital vow could be a reference to a scandal that involved an affair.

*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 so well–*

*Long, long I shall rue thee,*

*Too deeply to tell.*

Continuing on a theme introduced in the last verse — “light is thy fame” — the narrator finds himself discussing the apparently publicized figure they’ve recently split up with. The narrator finds they lover’s name to be a “knell” in their ear, referencing the solemn toll of a funeral bell. The line “why wert you so dear?” is a powerful one; despite the scandal and the evident betrayal, the narrator still shudders to hear the name of their lover, and realizes that their pain is going to last for a very long time, and such pain is inexplicably deep; they won’t be able to talk about it, nor will they be able to move on.

*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 words of this verse largely speak for themselves, carrying the sorrowful theme of When We Two Parted to its close by repeating the earlier theme of silence and tears. We learn that the lovers met in secret and so the narrator must grieve alone, feeling as though they have been forgotten and betrayed by their former lover. They realize that if they were to meet their lover again, there would be nothing to say, and nothing to do except to cry, and that would be all there could ever again be.

## Historical Analysis

*When We Two Parted* was written by Lord Byron in 1817, a year after the separation between himself and his wife, and also in the first year of his self-imposed exile from England, where his wife, daughter, lovers, and half-sister lived. If When We Two Parted was written about a particular person from Byron’s life, it makes sense to think that it would have been written about his wife, Lady Anne Isabella Noel Byron, or his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, both of whom he left behind when he left the country, never to return. Popular belief at the time held that Byron had been involved in a sexual relationship with Augusta, and this may have been the case (Byron would later write to a confidant after meeting Leigh’s fourth child, expressing his joy that the child was not deformed in any way, as was believed to be typical of children born out of incestuous union).

By 1817, Byron had given up all hopes of saving his marriage, writing in a letter to Augusta that he was no longer willing to try, saying that Lady Byron was a fool, and that while he did not hate her, that was all he wished to say. By all accounts, Lord Byron treated his wife very poorly during the year they were married, and so this could be viewed as a poem of regret. When the narrator asks “why wert you so dear?”, this could be Lord Byron realizing too late that his marriage meant more to him than he had believed while he had it. His desire in 1817 to never see his wife again resonates with the theme of “silence and tears,” and his wife was also caught up in the scandals that surrounded her husband, which makes sense of the line “I hear thy name spoken / And share in its shame.”

It seems less likely that this poem may have been written about Augusta Byron, who later married and became Augusta Leigh, but it is possible; if Byron did indeed have a sexual relationship with Augusta, then this poem could be about the betrayal he felt after she married another man. This seems unlikely, however, as Byron continued to correspond with Augusta for years after this poem was written.

The exact meaning of the poem is unknown, but given Lord Byron’s long history of affairs, scandals, and the unfortunate end to his marriage, it is unsurprising to think that he had dealt with regret, sorrow, and heartbreak a number of times in his life. To leave everything behind in England as he did would also have undoubtedly been extremely difficult. *When We Two Parted*is a powerful and beautiful example of the regret that he had felt during this difficult time in his life.