

Explanation: She Walks in Beauty

 *EXPLORING Poetry*, 2003

Lines 1-2

Readers of poetry often get confused because they stop when they reach the end of a line, even if there is no mark of punctuation there. This could be the case with this poem, which opens with an enjambed line, a line that does not end with a mark of punctuation. The word enjambment comes from the French word for leg, "jamb"; a line is enjambed when it runs over (using its "legs") to the next line without a pause. If read by itself, the first line becomes confusing, because the reader can only see a dark image, almost a blank image. If "she walks in beauty, like the night," a reader might wonder how she can be seen. But the line continues: the night is a cloudless one and the stars are bright. So immediately the poem brings together its two opposing forces that will be at work, darkness and light.

Lines 3-4

These lines work well because they employ an enjambed line as well as a metrical substitution—a momentary change in the regular meter of the poem. When poets enjamb a line and use a metrical substitution at the beginning of the next line, they are calling attention to something that is a key to a poem. Here Byron substitutes a trochaic foot (an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one) for the iambic foot at the start of the fourth line. Why? Because he is putting particular emphasis on that word "meet." He is emphasizing that the unique feature of this woman is her ability to contain opposites within her; "the best of dark and bright / meet" in her. In the same way that enjambment forces lines together, and a metrical substitution jars the reader somewhat, this woman joins together darkness and light, an unlikely pair. They "meet" in her, and perhaps nowhere else besides a starry night. It's also important to note that the joining together can be seen in her "aspect," or appearance, but also in her "eyes." A reader might think of the eyes simply as a feature of beauty, but the eyes also have been associated in literature with the soul, or the internal aspect of the person: the eyes reveal the heart.

Lines 5-6

The emphasized word "meet" is here again echoed with the initial "m" sound in "mellowed." This woman joins together what is normally kept separate, but there is no violent yoking going on here; instead, the opposites meld together to form a mellowed, or softened, whole. By joining together the two opposing forces, she creates a "tender light," not the gaudiness of daytime, but a gentler light that even "heaven" does not bestow on the day. If a reader were to think of night in terms of irrationality and day in terms of reason—as is implied by the term enlightenment—that would not be apt for this poem. Neither night nor day seem pleasing to the speaker; only the meeting of those two extremes in this woman pleases him. She is a composite, neither wholly held by rationality or by irrationality.

Lines 7-10

Once again the opposites are combined here. "Shade" or darkness is combined with "day" or light, and "raven tress" or dark hair is linked with a lightened face. The speaker suggests that if the woman contained within her and in her appearance either a little bit more of darkness or a little bit more of light, she would be "half impaired." A reader might expect the speaker to say she would be totally

ruined or impaired, but if things were not just in the right proportion, she'd be half impaired, but still half magnificent. A key word in this section is "grace." Although the poet is seemingly talking about appearances, in actuality he is referring to the "nameless grace" that is in her hair and face. Once again, it is something internal as well as external that is so attractive about this woman.

Lines 11-12

Although this poem begins with the image of a woman walking, the reader should notice by now that no images are given of her legs or arms or feet; this is a head poem, confined to hair and eyes and face and cheeks and brows. The conclusion to the second stanza emphasizes this. The reader is given an insight into the "dwelling place" of the woman's thoughts, an insight into her mind. The repetition of the "s" sounds is soothing in the phrase "serenely sweet express"; because the poet is referring to her thoughts, and her thoughts are nothing but serene, readers may infer how pure her mind is.

Lines 13-18

Byron concludes the poem with three lines of physical description that lead to the final three lines of moral characterization. The soft cheeks, the winning smile, the tints in the skin eloquently express not only physical beauty, but they attest to her morality. The physical beauty, the speaker concludes, reflects days spent doing good, a mind at peace, and "a heart whose love is innocent." Whether Byron would have preferred a less innocent cousin, someone with whom he could enjoy Byronic passions, is left unspoken for the reader to decipher.

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