Pre-reading activities

1. What is beauty?

Consider your answer to this question and produce a mind-map of words and images that you associate with ‘beauty’.

2. Decide which word from the following list best completes the simile that’s used in the first line of Byron’s poem:

‘She walks in beauty like the ......................’

- rose
- dove
- night
- dawn
- stars

3. Now choose words from below to extend your chosen simile:

‘She walks in beauty like the ..................of ..................... .....................
and .................. .....................’

- starry skies
- velvet petals
- verdant meadows
- sweet perfume
- azure skies
- white wings
- graceful flight
- cloudless climes
- golden sunrise
- radiant sparkle
- iridescent glow
- moonlit calm

4. Create an extended simile of your own which you think best represents the qualities of beauty.

5. Now read the first part of the poem and discuss Byron’s choice of words in the simile by answering the questions below.

- Were you surprised by his choice of simile?
- What effect is created? What does the image of night suggest about the woman’s character?
- Do his words create a traditional image of beauty?
- What do you notice about the language that he has chosen to extend the simile?
- How does Byron’s simile compare with the other options that you discussed? How does it compare with your own simile?
Exploring the poem

1. Byron’s poem deals with the contrast and opposition between darkness and light.
   a. Track through the poem, highlighting in one colour all the words associated with darkness and with another colour all the words associated with light.
   b. Annotate these references, considering the following questions:
      - How does he extend and develop the initial image in which he compares her to the night sky?
      - What is Byron suggesting about the woman he is describing through these references to darkness and light?
      - Is she idealised or described in a realistic way?
      - What is the effect of writing about her in the present tense?

2. Match the following quotations with an explanation of their meaning.

   - ‘thoughts serenely sweet express, / How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.’
     - Her beauty is impossible to define but is apparent in every part of her.
   - ‘The smiles that win, the tints that glow, / But tell of days in goodness spent …’
     - She does not judge those who are beneath her.
   - ‘A mind at peace with all below …’
     - Her appearance achieves a perfect balance between darkness and light.
   - ‘... all that’s best of dark and bright / Meet in her aspect and her eyes …’
     - She is dazzling and is a genuinely good and honest character.
   - ‘... the nameless grace / Which waves in every raven tress …’
     - Her thoughts are pure and untarnished.

3. Love or admiration?
   Was Byron declaring his love for the young woman or simply celebrating her beauty? Discuss your ideas.

4. This poem, along with 28 other poems by Lord Byron, was originally written to be sung to music composed by Isaac Nathan, a Jewish musician. You can hear a recording of the song here: [www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/album-hebrew.html](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/album-hebrew.html)

   Does hearing the poem in this way change your view of it?
Creative extension tasks

Hello there!

Using your own extended simile as a starting point, imagine that you see someone that you admire at a party and write a poem about them. (You could imagine that it was a celebrity party and base it on a Hello magazine style celebrity column or photograph.)

You could imitate Byron’s poetic style:

- iambic tetrameter
- regular, alternate rhyme scheme
- present tense.

You might begin:

She dances in grace like …
She poses in glamour like …
He poses in style like …
He smiles in radiance like …

Have some fun with words whilst praising the person that you admire!

Diary entry

The following is an account of how the poem came to be written:

On the evening of June 11, 1814, Byron attended a party with his friend, James Wedderburn Webster, at the London home of Lady Sarah Caroline Sitwell. Among the other guests was the beautiful Mrs Anne Beatrix Wilmot, the wife of Byron’s first cousin, Sir Robert Wilmot. She was apparently wearing a black dress which was embellished with sparkling jewels. Her exquisite good looks dazzled Byron and inspired him to write ‘She Walks in Beauty’.

Now that you have some contextual information for Byron’s composition of the poem, re-write the poem as a diary entry from Byron. You could begin:

This evening I chanced upon the most wonderful sight. As she walked into the room, I was overcome with her beauty …