So We'll Go No More a Roving

POEM TEXT

So, we'll go no more a roving
  So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
  And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
  And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
  And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
  And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
  By the light of the moon.

SUMMARY

So, we won't be staying out late and chasing nighttime pleasures as much as we used to, even though we're still just as full of romantic desire as we used to be, and the night is just as appealing.

Why? Because the body (especially its metaphorical "sword" and "sheath," a.k.a. its sex organs) can get tired of pleasure and wear out, and the soul will eventually get tired of living altogether. The heart has to take a minute to catch its breath sometimes—and even love itself gets tired.

Though night is the perfect time for romantic adventures, and though the sunrise brings an end to nighttime fun all too quickly, we still won't go out chasing pleasures in the moonlight anymore.

THEMES

YOUTH VS. MATURITY

Composed when the poet was 29, Lord Byron's "So We'll Go No More a Roving" proclaims the end of a wild phase of youth. It announces that the speaker (a plural "we") will stop "roving"—partying and pleasure-seeking—late into the night, because they feel worn out and in need of rest.

As a kind of elegy for youthful wildness, however, the poem contains an undertone of regret. The speaker hints that their lust for life hasn't gone away, leaving some ambiguity as to whether they'll actually settle down for good. Thus, the poem highlights the conflict and poignancy of having to act like an adult when, inwardly, you still feel the excitement of youth.

The speaker starts by declaring that they'll stop their late-night partying, suggesting that settling down is a part of growing up. The opening word "So" stresses that the declaration comes as a *consequence* of something. It's as if the speaker has been forced to a decision (because they're getting older and getting tired). The word "roving," meanwhile, suggests rowdy late-night activities: partying, seeking sex and romance ("loving"), etc.

The speaker indicates that all this "roving" has tired out their body, psyche, and emotions. They haven't lost all desire for late-night fun, but for now at least, they can't pursue it at the same pace. "The sword wears out the sheath," the speaker says, winkingly referring to sex ("sword" and "sheath" suggest the male anatomy and the partner's body) and implying that they're worn out from sexual adventure. The speaker's reference to "the soul wear[ing] out the breast" evokes a kind of spiritual fatigue, too. It might even suggest the speaker's awareness of their own mortality, since the soul, in some traditions, exits the dying body. Finally, the speaker signals their emotional fatigue by stating that "the heart" sometimes needs a chance to rest—that it "must pause to breathe." The word "pause" raises the possibility that this rest may be temporary.

The speaker's praise for the pleasures of "the night" adds a shade of doubt to their insistence that they won't be "roving" anymore. The admission that the night is (still) inherently enticing reflects a conflict between the expectations of maturity and the speaker's true desires. The two statements beginning with "Though" stress that the night is just as romantic as ever—and the speaker's desire for romance just as strong. The claims that "the night was made for loving" and "the day returns too soon" have a wistful tone, signaling the speaker's lingering fondness for nighttime pleasures. The pledge to "go no more a roving" brings the poem full circle, but this repetition suggests that the speaker may still be trying to convince themselves. The ending illustrates how people can still be tempted by lust and excitement even when they know they're "supposed to" settle down.

The poem captures a transitional phase between the end of youth and the beginning of maturity, whether that maturity is really embraced or not. As someone who lived fast and ultimately died young, Byron may have been adapting a traditional ballad theme to his personal situation, admitting that he needed to quit—or at least pause—his pursuit of nighttime pleasures.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,

"So We'll Go No More a Roving" starts with a firm decision: not to go "roving / So late into the night" anymore. In the most basic sense, "roving" means wandering, but here it implies partying, pleasure-seeking, and carousing: all the fun of nightlife.

The speaker, who speaks for a collective "we," doesn't yet explain why they've made this resolution. But perhaps readers can get some context from the poem's allusion to an earlier Scottish ballad. In that ballad, the words "And we'll gang nae mair a roving / Sae late into the night" (the Scots version of this poem's first words) form a refrain between verses that tell a story of sexual mischief and good times. Maybe this speaker's "roving" had a similar flavor.

But Byron's poem doesn't explain any background: it just jumps right into the middle of things with the word "So." This abrupt opening helps grab the reader's attention and pique their interest about what could have prompted this sudden decision.

The "So" in line 2 is interesting as well. The speaker isn't claiming that they'll stop roving altogether, or roving "at night," or even roving "late into the night." They're just claiming that they'll stop roving "*So* late into the night." They might still have wild nights out, but those nights will end a little sooner. That's a pretty limited pledge! This language sets up the subtle conflict that runs throughout the poem: this speaker sounds like they intend to embark on a new, more mature, slower-paced phase of life, but part of them is clearly reluctant to do so.

The sounds as well as the words here introduce the poem's jaunty-yet-wistful tone. Take a look at how the meter works in these first two lines:

So, we'll go | no more | a roving
So late | into | the night,

This energetic pattern of accentual trimeter, in which lines always use three stresses but switch up their metrical feet (i.e., those stresses don't always fall in the same place in a line), gives the poem a bouncy, playful, musical sound. Meanwhile, strong assonance on the long /o/ sound in "So, we'll go no more a roving" adds a touch of mournfulness, as if the speaker is sighing "Oh!" In the tension between its lively rhythm and its poignant music, the poem establishes a mood of tongue-in-cheek nostalgia right from the start.

LINES 3-4

Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

After their initial pledge to stop "roving" so much, the speaker immediately introduces a qualification—a "Though." Although the speaker intends to change their wild behavior (somewhat), they want to emphasize what *hasn't* changed: their desire for love and the romantic fun of the nighttime.

In this context, "loving" doesn't suggest settled, long-term, domestic love. People who go out "roving" late at night aren't looking for a fiancé, but for sex and romantic adventure. The speaker promises to cut back on their wild nights even though their "heart" remains just as invested in this kind of romance. The crisp /t/ consonance in these lines, which links the "heart" and the moon's "bright[ness]" to the word "still," subtly supports the idea that the speaker's *enthusiasm* for "roving" is as lively as ever.

In theory, how much "roving" the speaker does should have nothing to do with the brightness of the moon. (Moonless nights can be wild, too.) But the moon here is a symbol, not only of night itself, but of romance, change, and wild madness—especially romantic madness. (Think of expressions like "moonstruck" or "over the moon for someone." Also, think of the kind of romance-seeker who changes partners as often as the moon changes phases.) For the speaker, the continuing brightness of the moon seems like an alluring beacon, reminding them of the night's temptations even as they're pledging to settle down a bit.

LINES 5-6

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,

In the second stanza, the speaker starts to explain why they're cutting back on nighttime fun.

They present the first two reasons —"the sword outwears its sheath" and "the soul wears out the breast"—in parallel phrasing that suggests a close connection between the two. It's as if the speaker is saying that the soul can wear out the "breast" (or chest) in the same kind of way that a sword eventually wears through its scabbard after long use.

"The sword outwears its sheath" can literally mean that swords will eventually wear out the cases that hold them. But here, the speaker is also metaphorically comparing themselves to a worn-out object, or to one object that has worn out another.

There's sexual innuendo here, too: the speaker is suggesting that the male anatomy, the "sword," will eventually tire out and/or get tired of a partner's body. In other words, the speaker is feeling tired out by sex. The military imagery also evokes the old-fashioned (arguably outworn!) idea of sex as a soldier-like pursuit—a form of conquest.

In an explanatory note on the poem, Byron told his friend Thomas Moore that "I find 'the sword wearing out the scabbard,' though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine." In other words, he was feeling tired even though he wasn't that old. (Byron, who had a notably wild and dissolute youth, often wrote poems about feeling too old for love when he was still pretty young.)

When the speaker says "The soul wears out the breast," they suggest that, just as objects can wear out their containers (and one sexual partner can wear out another), the soul, according to some belief traditions, eventually breaks out of the body that contains it. Byron was raised in a Christian culture and is specifically invoking the Christian idea that the soul leaves the body at the moment of death. ("Breast" here literally means "chest," but it's also a synecdoche for the body as a whole.) The speaker is not only feeling physically tired from "roving" but also more aware of their own mortality—of the fact that they're getting older and won't live forever.

LINES 7-8

And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

After explaining that bodies and souls get tired, the speaker adds that the emotions (the "heart") can get tired as well. The speaker's personification of the heart here suggests it might have a good deal in common with the rambunctious "we" who will no longer be doing quite so much "roving." The speaker is making a broad statement here, but they're also talking about themselves: their late-night romantic pursuits seem to have taken an emotional toll.

"The heart must pause to breathe" is metaphorical in that hearts don't really get winded (and in fact, if they pause long enough, the body dies). By comparing the heart to a body that needs a breather, Byron means that the emotions—which are often symbolically associated with the heart—sometimes need a break from operating at full intensity. Even love, which is sometimes imagined as constant and undying, needs a rest now and then.

Line 8 here is the shortest in the stanza: it has only six syllables, while the preceding lines have seven each. The line itself seems to come to an early "rest," and a "pause" follows the period, which marks the end of the line, sentence, and stanza. The sound of the verse thus reinforces its meaning.

The words "pause" and "rest" suggest something temporary, not a complete stop. This language is slightly at odds with the poem's opening and closing declarations, which seem to promise a permanent change in the speaker's behavior. It's possible to reconcile this apparent mismatch: when the speaker resumes their pursuit of love, they might intend to do so on a slower, tamer, and/or more mature basis. Still, the apparent mismatch further highlights their internal conflict. Are they *really* ready to slow down, or is their wildness just on pause?

LINES 9-10

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,

The final stanza begins with another qualified word: "Though." These lines reverse the structure of the first stanza, which makes a statement and then introduces a countering "Though." Here, the qualification comes first. The speaker appears to be squeezing in one last expression of reluctance before repeating their pledge to end their late-night "roving."

Why are they reluctant? Because "the night was made for loving" and "the day returns too soon." On some level, the speaker is still intoxicated by the thrill of the night. Even though they know they're no longer young and energetic enough to "rove" at the same pace, they'll *miss* their wild nights of staying out late and looking for love. Again, "loving" suggests romantic adventure, and the speaker believes "the night was made for" such adventure—as if anyone who *isn't* staying out late is wasting the night's potential. The day seems to return "too soon" because it's dull and unromantic by comparison.

Listen to the way that assonance reflects the mood of these lines:

> Though the night was made for loving,
> And the day returns too soon,

While the long /ay/ sounds of "made" and "day" harmoniously weave the lines together, the round /oo/ of "too soon" sounds like a lament. The speaker presents this backwards look at their moonlit nights of roving with musical melancholy.

The speaker's wistful reluctance doesn't necessarily mean that their pledge to "go no more a roving" is insincere. But it does mean that the poem dramatizes an inner conflict (one that the 29-year-old poet seems to have felt personally). It's not just a straightforward statement about getting older and slowing down; it shows the mixed feelings that come with reaching that stage of life.

LINES 11-12

Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon.

At last, the poem comes full circle. The speaker repeats their pledge to "go no more a roving," using the same exact words that they used at the beginning.

This repetition might be read as the speaker still trying to convince themselves, or build up their resolve. While the words "we'll go no more a roving" repeat exactly, here that reluctant pledge is introduced by "Yet," which in context means something like "Even so." Basically, this final stanza is saying: "Yes, the night is romantic and much more exciting than the daytime, *but even so*, we're not going to stay out late at night anymore." Again, the speaker is conveying an inner conflict even

as they're promising a change of behavior.

That conflict might be reflected in the meter here. The last line is the only one in the poem that uses two stressed syllables instead of three: "By the light of the moon." There's something emphatic and firm about those two abrupt stresses—but also a feeling of incompletion. Perhaps there's still a bit more "roving" to be done, after all.

There's also a subtle difference between no longer roving "So late into the night" (line 2) and no longer roving "By the light of the moon" (line 12). If these two statements are read literally—and if the speaker is to be trusted—the second would suggest that the speaker is slowing down pretty drastically after all. (Moonlight tends to cover a large stretch of the evening hours—though the speaker might still theoretically get out and about at the new moon.) Once again, though, this moon is as much symbolic as literal. Whether the speaker cuts down on their partying or not, they've grown too old to be "moonstruck" by wild, youthful romance. They're passing from one "phase" of life into another.

SYMBOLS

THE MOON

The moon traditionally symbolizes several things that relate directly to Byron's poem: romance, change, and madness.

The moon has long been a symbol of love and romance, since lovers' meetings often take place at night. Here, it "still" holds the promise of romantic pleasure, shining as "bright" and tempting as ever. But the speaker is getting older and can't take advantage of that promise as much as before.

The moon, which goes through phases and shifts the tides, is also a conventional symbol of change. Sometimes it's specifically associated with changes in romantic desire, as in Juliet's speech to Romeo from the balcony (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.ii):

> O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,
> That monthly changes in her circled orb,
> Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

In Byron's poem, the moon is steadily alluring—"still as bright"—but also reminds the speaker that *they* have changed. They're getting older and feeling worn out from love. (The moon is also symbolically linked with nighttime itself, which the speaker now wants to use for "rest" rather than romance, partying, etc.)

Finally, the moon is traditionally linked with craziness and wild abandon. The word "lunatic" comes from *luna*, Latin for *moon*, and derives from the ancient belief that the moon caused madness. It can be specifically linked with the madness of love, as in the word "moonstruck." All of this seems relevant to a poem about saying goodbye to your wild and crazy youth. (Byron himself was an eccentric and volatile personality; one of his lovers, Lady Caroline Lamb, famously called him "mad, bad, and dangerous to know.")

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the moon be still as bright."
- **Line 12:** "By the light of the moon."

THE SWORD AND SHEATH

The "sword" and "sheath" here symbolize the human body—and more specifically, its sexual parts. In the poem, these two objects get old and worn out from repeated use, paralleling the way people, too, start to tire out as they age. More specifically, the image that the body can get tired of sex! In other words, the "sword" and "sheath" are probably a reference to the male anatomy and...any part of a partner's anatomy it might enter during sex. (Byron was bisexual, so we won't narrow our interpretation here.)

In its coy way, this image links the concept of "roving" with the subject of sex—and, because weaponry is involved, the idea of sexual "conquest." It also connects this kind of "roving" with young soldiers and aristocrats, who in Byron's era might have carried literal swords with them while out on the town. (Byron himself was an aristocrat and, toward the end of his brief life, a soldier.) As an image of romantic pursuit, it could suggest violence, old-fashioned gallantry, or both. Regardless, it suggests that too much "roving" has left the speaker as worn out as weaponry—or soldiers themselves—after military service.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "the sword outwears its sheath,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"So We'll Go No More a Roving" doesn't use a lot of alliteration, but the alliteration it *does* use helps draw subtle connections between words. Two good examples occur in the second stanza: "sword"/"soul" and "breast"/"breathe." The alliteration here is reinforced by the fact that these word pairs fall on the same beats in their respective lines:

> For the sword outwears its sheath,
> And the soul wears out the breast,
> And the heart must pause to breathe,

Both alliterative connections make sense. Byron is implicitly comparing the sword and the soul, highlighting a similarity in the way they wear out what encloses or contains them. Likewise, breathing happens inside the breast (chest), where the heart is also located, so it makes sense to link "breast" and "breathe." These alliterative connections help stitch together the language and imagery of the stanza into something that feels unified.

A subtler alliterative connection can be traced between "made," "more," and "moon" in lines 9-12. Although these words occur relatively far apart, they weave the stanza's sounds together:

> Though the night was made for loving,
> And the day returns too soon,
> Yet we'll go no more a roving
> By the light of the moon.

This sequence of gentle /m/ sounds might also reflect the speaker's wistfulness! This stanza traces the speaker's regret as they think back on their good times in nights "made for loving" under the "moon," only to give that kind of fun up forever. The /m/ sound here connects words that suggest both nostalgia and renunciation—and perhaps helps to give readers the sense that the speaker won't really give up all that "roving" forever quite yet.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "sword"
- **Line 6:** "soul," "breast"
- **Line 7:** "breathe"
- **Line 9:** "made"
- **Line 11:** "more"
- **Line 12:** "moon"

ASSONANCE

Musical assonance is sprinkled throughout the poem, making the verses easy to recite (or sing) and pleasing to read or hear. This makes sense for a poem that's building on the ballad tradition of storytelling folk songs. Notice, for example, the many long /o/ sounds in lines 1-3:

> So, we'll go no more a roving
> So late into the night,
> Though the heart be still as loving,

These repeated vowels trip along in a light, pleasant way that helps capture the spirit of late-night roving.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "So," "go," "no," "roving"
- **Line 2:** "So"
- **Line 3:** "Though"
- **Line 5:** "For," "sword"
- **Line 9:** "made"
- **Line 10:** "day," "too," "soon"
- **Line 11:** "go," "no," "roving"

CONSONANCE

Consonance creates subtler patterns of sound that, like alliteration and assonance, reinforce the poem's meaning. For example, take a look at only a few of the hard /t/ sounds that weave through the poem:

> So, we'll go no more a roving
> So late into the night,
> Though the heart be still as loving,
> And the moon be still as bright.

These sounds help create a light, tripping music that suits a ballad about late-night pleasures.

The second stanza also uses a lot of soft "s" sounds, a form of consonance known as sibilance:

> For the sword outwears its sheath,
> And the soul wears out the breast,
> And the heart must pause to breathe,
> And love itself have rest.

Besides adding to the musicality of the lines, this sibilance creates a hushed, soothing sound that feels appropriate to a passage about "rest."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "more," "roving"
- **Line 2:** "late," "into," "night"
- **Line 3:** "heart," "still"
- **Line 4:** "still," "bright"
- **Line 5:** "sword," "outwears," "sheath"
- **Line 6:** "soul," "out," "breast"
- **Line 7:** "heart"
- **Line 8:** "itself," "rest"
- **Line 9:** "night"
- **Line 10:** "returns"
- **Line 11:** "Yet," "more," "roving"
- **Line 12:** "light"

ALLUSION

Byron's poem is a direct takeoff on at least one older ballad—so in a sense, it's built on a foundation of allusion.

Byron's immediate source material may have been an anonymous Scottish folk ballad called "The Jolly Beggar," which

tells a saucy tale about the seduction of a farmer's daughter. A version anthologized about 40 years before Byron's poem included this refrain:

> And we'll gang nae mair a roving
> Sae late into the night,
> And we'll gang nae mair a roving, boys,
> Let the moon shine ne'er sae bright.
> And we'll gang nae mair a roving.

The similarities to Byron's poem are obvious.

A version of "The Jolly Beggar" called "The Jolly Gauger" had also appeared in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, an 18th-century anthology of dirty ballads supposedly written or compiled by the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns. The refrain in this song begins: "An' we'll gang nae mair a rovin' wi' ladies to the wine." An even older song, a sea shanty called "The Maid of Amsterdam," includes a first-person version of the refrain: "I'll go no more a-rovin' with you, fair maid." It's not clear whether Byron was familiar with these particular songs, but he must have been familiar with at least one of their variations.

These older works are bawdy and farcical, and they tell detailed stories. Even as he draws on this tradition, Byron takes his poem in a different direction, dialing back the bawdiness and leaving most of the narrative implied. There's still some innuendo in line 5, but for the most part, this isn't a dirty song; it's a lyric poem. Rather than a tale of sexual misadventure, it tells a more universal story about growing older and feeling that the wildest, most romantic phase of your life is over.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "So, we'll go no more a roving / So late into the night,"
- **Line 4:** "And the moon be still as bright."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Yet we'll go no more a roving / By the light of the moon."

METAPHOR

Byron weaves several metaphors into the poem. The "moon" in stanza 1 carries symbolic associations with many things: nighttime, romance, change, the wildness or madness of love. But the phrase "the moon be still as bright" can be read more narrowly as a metaphor meaning, "the night is still as powerful and appealing."

"Sword" and "sheath" are probably metaphors for sexual anatomy, and line 5 as a whole is a metaphor for sex tiring out the body—or making partners tired of one another. The parallel syntax of lines 5 and 6 also implies a comparison between sword/sheath and soul/breast. In other words, the poet suggests that a soul in its body is *also* like a sword in its sheath: something powerful that can be separated from, and in fact will outlast, its container.

Finally, "the heart must pause to breathe" is metaphorical. "The heart" is a traditional metaphor for the emotions, and here it's compared to a body that's been working or exercising too hard and needs to take a breather. Like "love" in the following line, it's also personified here, treated as if it's a human being. The general sense of the metaphor is that human emotions, and especially romantic feelings, can't operate at full intensity all the time.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the moon be still as bright."
- **Lines 5-6:** "For the sword outwears its sheath, / And the soul wears out the breast,"
- **Line 7:** "And the heart must pause to breathe,"

REPETITION

Repetition is essential to the poem's structure. The speaker returns to their declaration that they'll "go no more a roving" at the beginning and the end of the poem, using exactly the same words. That repetition suggests their wistful reluctance to give up on that roving altogether, even as they repeatedly pledge to do so. The repetition of those words also works a little like a refrain—which makes sense, as Byron's poem is based on older songs and ballads, which almost always used refrains.

The poem also uses anaphora, repeating the words "So" at the beginning of lines 1-2 and "And" at the beginning of lines 6-8. This technique helps give the poem a pleasing (euphonious) sound and memorable rhythm. In stanza 2, it also links ideas in a logical sequence, with the word "And" tying together the speaker's list of reasons for their decision to give up their wild nighttime revelries.

Meanwhile, the antimetabole of "outwears" and "wears out" (lines 5-6) is one of the poem's more peculiar features. Why not just repeat one term or the other? There's no obvious answer, but one possibility is that this inversion helps conjure up the kind of back-and-forth or in-and-out process that causes "wear."

Repetition helps make the poem's language feel measured and balanced— and also evokes the speaker's nostalgia for "rovings" past.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we'll go no more a roving"
- **Line 2:** "night"
- **Line 3:** "Though"
- **Line 4:** "moon"
- **Line 5:** "outwears"
- **Line 6:** "And," "wears out"
- **Line 7:** "And"

- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "Though," "night"
- **Line 11:** "we'll go no more a roving"
- **Line 12:** "moon"

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism prominently throughout. For instance, line 1 is nearly identical to line 11, and lines 2 and 12 express parallel ideas. It's fair to say the whole poem proceeds through a series of parallels!

Generally, the speaker uses these parallels to present their ideas and images in a clear, logical fashion, and also to suggest comparisons. For example, the parallel syntax in lines 3-4 not only presents two related thoughts in a logical way, but also suggests that the loving heart has something in common with the bright moon:

> Though the heart be still as loving,
> And the moon be still as bright.

The similarity of these two lines helps the reader see that a loving heart is *like* a bright moon: both are intense, associated with nighttime romance, can make people a little crazy, and so on.

Similarly, the parallel syntax in lines 5-6 suggests that the sword that wears out the sheath—whether this image is taken literally or figuratively—is *like* a soul that exhausts its body:

> For the sword outwears its sheath,
> And the soul wears out the breast,

According to the speaker, just as a sword will wear out its case and eventually need a new one (or just as one partner may get tired of sex with another), the soul will *outlast* the body, which merely holds it for a time. Broadly, all four lines of the second stanza are united by parallel elements, which emphasize that the speaker is giving up their "roving" for a series of interconnected reasons.

The poem's parallelism helps the speaker's thoughts proceed in a rhythmic, emphatic, logical fashion. These choices make the poem—a modified ballad—easy to memorize and recite, and also make thematic sense given that the speaker is stating a decision and explaining it.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11

EUPHONY

This is a poem structured around euphonious language: that is, language that's easy to pronounce and pleasant to hear. And no wonder: it derives from ballads that were meant to be sung. "So We'll Go No More a Roving" has itself been set to music multiple times; its harmonious sounds make for excellent lyrics! The easy flow of the verse is also thematically appropriate, since the poem concerns a light, carefree period of youth—albeit one that's ending.

Some of the features that make up this poem's euphony are its rhyme and rhythm; a great deal of repetition; and a fair amount of alliteration, assonance, and consonance (including sibilance).

Look at the poem's nouns alone. Nearly all of them use soft, melodious sounds: the sibilance of "The sword outwears its sheath," the liquid /l/ of "love" and "light," the tripping /t/ of "night" and "heart." These gentle echoes give the whole poem a delicious softness: there's nothing jarring here.

The poem's end rhymes are euphonious, too. Take a look at the way that rhymes (and related sounds) progress through the second stanza:

> For the sword outwears its sheath,
> And the soul wears out the breast,
> And the heart must pause to breathe,
> And love itself have rest.

Here, besides the perfect rhyme between "breast" and "rest," there's both a gentle slant rhyme between "sheath" and "breathe" and an alliterative connection between "breast" and "breathe." This variation between subtly similar and subtly different sounds musically eases the reader through the verse.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 11-12

VOCABULARY

Roving (Line 1, Line 11) - Roaming or wandering.

Outwears (Line 5) - Wears out.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"So We'll Go No More a Roving" has 12 lines broken into three quatrains (four-line stanzas). It's also a ballad adapted from an earlier ballad ("The Jolly Beggar," one of the collection of traditional English and Scottish songs known as the Child ballads). It's written in three-beat accentual meter, follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, and, in an echo of traditional ballads, contains something like a refrain: the phrase "we'll go no more a roving," which occurs in lines 1 and 11.

The three stanzas organize the poem into a logical and symmetrical structure. Stanza 1 describes the speaker's decision to roam no more (though they seem a little reluctant about it); stanza 2 presents the speaker's reasons for their decision; and stanza 3 returns to the decision again—still wistful, but final.

Unlike traditional ballads, including the earlier songs/ballads it derives from, Byron's poem doesn't tell a detailed story. Although it hints at an underlying story about a speaker who's indulged in a lot of late-night fun, it focuses on a more general emotional experience: the feeling that youth is over. In that respect, Byron has adapted his source material into a different poetic mode, shifting from narrative to lyric. Lyric is more about the expression of personal emotions and thoughts than complex storytelling. It's a mode closely associated with the Romantic movement of which Byron was a part (though Byron also wrote a lot of narrative poetry).

METER

The poem uses a three-beat accentual meter, meaning that the total number of syllables per line varies, but the number of stressed beats per line is always three. Try reading the poem aloud and tapping your hand/foot on every stressed syllable, and you'll hear this for yourself:

> So, we'll go no more a roving
> So late into the night,
> Though the heart be still as loving,
> And the moon be still as bright.

Accentual verse is often found in older English poetry, including nursery rhymes, folk verse, and the ballad tradition from which Byron's poem derives.

The syllable count per line varies from six (in lines 2 and 8) to eight (in lines 1, 3, 9, and 11). Lines 2 and 8 are also regular iambic trimeter: that is, they each use three iambs (metrical feet that go da-DUM). The meter as a whole might be described as irregular iambic trimeter, or iambic trimeter with some extra syllables that give it a jaunty "swing." That "swing" combined with the steady three-beat pattern helps evoke both the lightness of (waning) youth and the steady march toward age.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's three quatrains rhyme on alternating lines, like this:

ABAB CDCD AEAE

The A-rhymes in the first stanza repeat in the third, helping to bring the poem full circle.

The rhymes in line two and four of each stanza are exact; the rhymes in lines one and three are *nearly* exact, slant rhymes rather than perfect ones. That is, "roving" rhymes almost perfectly with "loving" and "sheath" with "breathe"—but not *quite* perfectly, at least in standard British and American pronunciation.

This tight, closed rhyme scheme emphasizes the closure the poem deals with: the end of youth. (The poem's few imperfect rhymes might be read as an echo of the speaker's resistance toward this closure.) It's also a scheme adapted from the ballad tradition that gave rise to Byron's poem. The short lines and regular rhymes make "So We'll Go No More a Roving"—like all well-crafted ballads—memorable, musical, and easy to recite.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is an unnamed "we," a group of lively young-ish people who don't feel so young anymore. This "we" is borrowed from the ballads, popular folk songs that served as the poem's source material: most notably, "The Jolly Beggar," whose refrain in a 1776 printing went like this:

> And we'll gang nae mair a roving
> Sae late into the night,
> And we'll gang nae mair a roving, boys,
> Let the moon shine ne'er sae bright.
> And we'll gang nae mair a roving.

An older song, "The Maid of Amsterdam," dates to at least the early 1600s and features a version of the refrain with a singular, not plural, speaker: "I'll go no more a-rovin' with you, fair maid."

These older works include detailed tales of sexual misadventures. In adapting the refrain to his poem, Byron has made his "we" and their situation much more general—broad enough to encompass anyone worn out by the wildness and excitement of youth. At the same time, the poem reflects specific events in Byron's own life. He originally enclosed it in a letter to a friend with an introductory note:

> At present, I am on the invalid regimen myself. The Carnival – that is, the latter part of it, and sitting up late o' nights – had knocked me up a little. But it is

> over – and it is now Lent, with all its abstinence and sacred music … Though I did not dissipate much upon the whole, yet I find "the sword wearing out the scabbard," though I have but just turned the corner of twenty nine.

In other words, this "we" is both a generalized voice, relatable to anyone who's reached the end of young adulthood, and a stand-in for Byron himself as he turned the corner into his thirties.

SETTING

The poem is not set in a specific physical location. The "roving" it refers to presumably takes place in a setting of fun social activity—"out on the town," so to speak.

The poem is also set during the nighttime hours. It portrays "roving" as an activity of the night, illuminated by a big, bright, romantic moon. While the poem doesn't specify a time of year, Byron originally enclosed it in a letter to a friend, prefaced by a note in which he explained that "sitting up late o' nights" during "Carnival" (the festive season before Lent) had tired him out a little. In other words, the poem emerged from a season of raucous partying.

Finally, while the references to "sword" and "sheath" are primarily metaphorical, they help evoke an age when soldiers, aristocrats, and other "gallant" young men out on the town might have carried literal swords in literal sheaths. (Byron was an aristocrat, a naval captain's son, and an eventual soldier who owned swords himself—and occasionally appeared with them in portraits.)

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Byron's poem draws on an extensive literary ballad tradition, and is directly adapted from at least one older work. The immediate source seems to have been the Scottish folk ballad "The Jolly Beggar," one version of which, collected in David Herd's anthology *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs, Heroic Ballads, Etc.* a few decades before Byron's poem, contains a refrain that begins, "And we'll gang nae mair a roving / Sae late into the night." (The poem is written in the Scots dialect, which contains variant spellings and versions of many English words: "gang" = "go," "nae" = "no," etc.).

But other versions of "The Jolly Beggar," and other songs and ballads containing a similar refrain, had been floating around for ages by the time Byron wrote his poem. A variation on "The Jolly Beggar," called "The Jolly Gauger," appears in the 18th-century collection *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, supposedly compiled by Robert Burns. A sea shanty called "The Maid of Amsterdam," a.k.a., "A-Roving," dates at least to the early 1600s and also has a "go no more a-roving" refrain.

It's clear that Byron was familiar with, and drawing from, at least one of these older works. However, this doesn't mean he was plagiarizing. Instead, he was alluding to the older song(s) while making substantive changes to create an original work. In particular, he removed or dialed back the extended narratives and broad sexual comedy that mark these earlier ballads. Rather than an elaborate dirty song, "So We'll Go No More a Roving" is a short lyric poem that highlights the themes of aging and renunciation (giving up on old pleasures).

In adapting an old ballad, Byron was very much a poet of his time. His fellow Romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Keats, also reached back to the ballad tradition to shape their themes and their style, rejecting the measured elegance of the earlier 18th century in English poetry in favor of earthier language and simpler meter. Byron wouldn't have enjoyed being lumped in with either of these contemporaries, though: he insulted them both spectacularly on a number of occasions, calling Wordsworth "Turdsworth" and disparaging Keats's "piss a bed poetry." In this kind of witty, haughty scorn, as well as in his usual poetic style and subject matter, Byron considered himself more of a descendant of earlier satirists like Alexander Pope.

Byron didn't publish "So We'll Go No More a Roving" in his lifetime, but enclosed it in a private letter to his friend and fellow poet Thomas Moore, who was likely to have known the ballad he was alluding to. Moore served as Byron's literary executor (the official caretaker of his works) and published the poem in 1830, six years after Byron's death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lord Byron (1788-1824) was not only a major figure in literary history but a historic figure in general. One of the first true celebrities, he ranked among the most famous (and infamous) people in the world during the early decades of the 1800s. His impact on European culture during this period was profound. Born into an aristocratic family as the 6th Baron Byron, his literary star rose after the publication of his long poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812). His wife Annabella coined the word "Byromania" to describe the hype that swelled around him.

As well as being a popular and controversial author, Byron lived a life full of scandal. He was known throughout Europe and beyond for his love affairs, breakups, debts, unusual pets, athletic feats, and volatile personality. He was bisexual, though this fact was less well known during his lifetime, and was publicly accused of an incestuous romance with his half sister, Augusta Leigh. One of his lovers, the Lady Caroline Lamb, called him "mad, bad and dangerous to know."

Byron's writings and notorious persona gave rise to a literary/cultural archetype called the "Byronic hero." The Byronic hero was proud, brooding, volatile, passionate, and rebellious. This

archetype is closely associated with the Romantic literary movement of which Byron was a part.

Basically, Byron packed more wildness and drama into his 36 years (he died of illness while fighting in the Greek War of Independence) than most people fit into lifetimes twice as long. The occasion for "So We'll Go No More a Roving" was a break he took after partying too much during Carnival (the festival season preceding Lent) while living in Venice. As he wrote to his friend Thomas Moore in an explanatory note:

> At present, I am on the invalid regimen myself. The Carnival—that is, the latter part of it, and sitting up late o' nights, had knocked me up a little.... The mumming closed with a masked ball at the Fenice, where I went, as also to most of the ridottos, etc., etc.; and, though I did not dissipate much upon the whole, yet I find 'the sword wearing out the scabbard,' though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine.

So he was feeling older and a little tired as he neared thirty, and he was resting up like an invalid (sick person). Still, the phrase "At present" hints that he didn't expect his late nights to end forever—and they didn't.

The larger context of the poem is that Byron was an infamously wild young celebrity. Sometimes he spiraled out of control, becoming self-destructive and destructive to others. All of this biographical background helps shape the poem. At the same time, the poem captures a more commonplace feeling of getting older, realizing you need to slow down, and acknowledging that your wild youth can't last forever.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Lord Byron — Read a biography of Lord Byron at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lord-byron)
- The Poem's Inspiration — Read "The Jolly Beggar," an anonymous ballad originally written in Scots dialect, and a likely influence on Byron's poem. (https://archive.org/details/cu31924064989787/page/n35/mode/2up?q=roving)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor John Gielgud reading the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04EJ6GbGPtQ)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a 1964 musical rendition of Byron's poem by folk singer Joan Baez. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8GI7tKuag8)
- Byron's Private Life — Read some background on Byron's own "roving": his scandalous private life (which wasn't especially private—he was a much-discussed celebrity in his own time). (https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Lord-Byron/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LORD BYRON POEMS

- On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year
- Prometheus
- She Walks in Beauty
- The Destruction of Sennacherib
- When We Two Parted

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