

An explication of lord
byron's she walks in
beauty and
christopher marlowe's
the ...



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On the afternoon of June 11, 1814, at the home of Lady Sitwell, George Gordon, Lord Byron, upon seeing his cousin Lady Anne Wilmot Horton in "a mourning dress of spangled black" (Leung 312), was so moved that by the next day he had written "She Walks in Beauty," first published in *Hebrew Melodies* in 1815. Similarly, more than two centuries earlier, a young, radical poet from Canterbury named Christopher Marlowe published *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* which contains a poem inspired by "The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships," namely Helen of Troy. As "idealized" women, Byron's cousin Anne and Marlowe's Helen stand as icons of love that reflect "days spent pondering the intricacies of adoration for hearts whose love is innocent" (Martin 25) through the use of symbols, both natural and subjective. In "She Walks in Beauty," Byron utilizes numerous metaphors to describe the beauty of his cousin, a rather "prim and pretty" girl that "after a tumbler of brandy and a consequently bad night," (Longford 71), Byron celebrated in two of his most entrancing lines—"She walks in beauty, like the night/Of cloudless climes and starry skies." In essence, Byron is comparing her with the beauties of the natural world, for her loveliness is "cloudless" like the dark and starry night and her "aspect" or physicality is imbued with "all that's best of dark and bright" which symbolizes her dual nature as a woman of varying temperaments. Yet Byron's main focus in this poem is upon the woman's head and face, where "the nameless grace. . . waves in every raven tress, being her black hair (a symbol of darkness) and the light softens her face amid "thoughts serenely sweet. . ." (a symbol of brightness). Her face is also the "dwelling place" of pureness with "the soft cheeks (and) the winning smile which express not only her beauty but also her mortality" (McConnell 146). But the most telling aspect of "She Walks in <https://assignbuster.com/an-explication-of-lord-byrons-she-walks-in-beauty-and-christopher-marlowes-the-face-that-launched-a-thousand-ships/>

Beauty" concerns the idealized woman's soul which is "at peace with all below" (a symbol for darkness) and her heart which is "innocent," a trait very important to Byron which he equates as a necessary component for true love and adoration. In "The Face of Helen" ("The face that launched a thousand ships") as featured in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, scene V. i, Marlowe "transcends sensual delight and Helen becomes the symbol of . . . pleasure. . . the acme of physical delight" (Wright xxii). With "the face that launched a thousand ships," a reference to the Greek invasion of Troy, and the one that "burnt the topless towers of Ilium" or the high fortified walls of the city, Marlowe, like Lord Byron, uses numerous metaphors to describe Helen's beauty via natural symbols and with a focus on her face. Her lips are most important to him, for "heaven is in these lips" and "all is dross that is not Helena" which infers that compared to Helen all else is meaningless. Marlowe then declares that for Helen's love he will sack Wittenberg "instead of Troy" and struggle "with weak Menelaus," Helen's Greek husband, and then "wound Achilles in the heel," a reference to the Greek hero's only vulnerable spot on his body, much like Marlowe's heart that is smitten with his love for Helen. Marlowe also describes Helen's beauty as "fairer than the evening air" and "clad in the beauty of a thousand stars" which like Byron's cousin Lady Anne symbolizes her dual nature as one who reflects darkness and brightness. The poet also states that Helen's beauty is brighter "than flaming Jupiter," a reference to "the God of Heaven who loved Semele and consumed her with thunder and lightning" (Barnet 93). Since Helen is also "more lovely than the monarch of the sky," a possible metaphor for Phoebus, the sun god, the poet wishes to be in the "azure" arms of Arethusa, a nymph "greatly loved by Jupiter for her beauty as <https://assignbuster.com/an-explication-of-lord-byrons-she-walks-in-beauty-and-christopher-marlowes-the-face-that-launched-a-thousand-ships/>

reflected in the blue waters of the Hellespont" (Harmon 258). Finally, the poet declares that " none but (Helen) shalt be my paramour!" or a greatly loved and adored woman who is far above all else on Earth and in the Heavens. In his epic poem " Hero and Leander," Christopher Marlowe puts forth a vital question to his readers-" Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" (Marlowe's Poems 254), a declaration that surely reflects Marlowe's adoration for his Helen of Troy and also Lord Byron's " first sight" of his cousin Lady Anne in her mourning dress. Thus, " She Walks in Beauty" and " The Face of Helen" are more than mere love poems, for they express internal and external forces related to the physical beauty of the women as well as their interior strengths via symbols that elevate their idealized states.

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