

Rooms



SUMMARY

The speaker recalls being in certain rooms that contributed to the slow dwindling of their energy, passion, and vitality. For example, there was a room in Paris, France; another in Geneva, Switzerland; and a small, clammy room that smelled like seaweed and let in constant ocean sounds that drove the speaker crazy. There were rooms where, for better or worse, deaths and other endings took place. Now, the speaker and an unnamed partner lie as still as corpses in yet another room. While it looks like they wake up each morning, the speaker thinks they might as well go back to sleep—just as they'll someday metaphorically sleep outside in the silent, dirty "bed" of the grave, under both sunshine and rain.



THEMES



THE UNLIVED LIFE

The speaker of "Rooms" looks back on various rooms they've lived in over the years: "the room in Paris," "at Geneva," "the little damp room" by the sea, and so forth. Their reflections are more bitter than nostalgic: in breaking their memories up into a series of restrictive, four-walled spaces, the speaker suggests that their life has been defined by confinement and/or the inability to live openly. This might be because the speaker suppressed their own needs and feelings, lived in a repressive society, or both. Regardless, the poem suggests that not living fully and freely isn't really living at all: each of these rooms has played a "part" in the "steady slowing" of the speaker's "heart," draining the speaker's vitality and bringing them closer to death. In fact, the speaker's present rooming situation is so dull and suffocating that it might as well be a grave.

The poem reveals almost nothing about the speaker's life beyond a deep dissatisfaction. The speaker mentions living in tourist spots and cultural centers like "Paris" and "Geneva," but doesn't describe anything about their experiences there. There's no mention of meaningful places or people; instead, the speaker just says that there were "rooms."

The poem's only flash of emotion comes as the speaker calls the sea sounds outside one of their rooms "maddening." But even this detail suggests an exasperating monotony; the repetitive sounds of the tide going in and out, day after day, might remind the speaker that their own life feels stuck in place.

[Paradoxically](#), the tide can also be read as a [symbol](#) of time and change, and its mention perhaps suggests that the speaker is frustrated by the sounds of the world moving on without them.

The scarce details all suggest a speaker who hasn't been able to live fully—whose life has been limited to the "rooms" in which they've stayed. These can be read as both literal rooms and as symbols of the speaker's feelings of repression and confinement. Maybe they've felt trapped by responsibilities (like having to care for a family member, as Mew did); maybe they've felt repressed by social norms (it's worth remembering that Mew grew up in morally rigid Victorian England); or maybe the speaker just has a risk-averse, reclusive personality.

In the end, it's not clear *why* the speaker isn't exploring and appreciating life more, just that not doing so has made them feel like the living dead. They share their current room with another person, who might be romantic partner or family member (Mew did in fact live with her sister through the latter's illness). Though these two residents are technically alive, they "lie" as "dead" as they someday will in their actual graves. Their room is like a coffin; they "might just as well" go back to sleep after getting up, the speaker says, implying that there's no point to their lives at all.

The only time the speaker envisions being "out there" is when they actually die and are buried in the earth, beneath "the sun" or "the rain." This final image might imply, with grim [irony](#), that freedom can only be found in death, when one escapes the soul-sucking restrictions and disappointments of life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10



THE TRAP OF UNHAPPINESS

The speaker of "Rooms" associates the various rooms they've lived in with confinement and disappointment. They never really describe these places, however, and it's not clear that their rooms have actually *caused* the speaker's unhappiness in any way. On the contrary, it seems that the speaker's own *unhappiness* is what has made their rooms feel dismal and confining. In this way, the poem might suggest that rooms don't affect so much as reflect the "heart[s]" of their inhabitants. Thus, while it's possible to read these "rooms" as [metaphorical](#) representations of the confinement the speaker has dealt with throughout life, it's also possible to interpret them as *literal* rooms darkened by the speaker's own suffocating, inescapable despair. In this reading, the poem suggests that people carry their unhappiness wherever they go; if you're miserable, it doesn't matter where you move to—you'll still be miserable there.

The speaker connects the series of rooms they've lived in with personal loss and diminishing vitality. They claim that these

rooms have played a "part / In the steady slowing down of the heart," with "the heart" implying one's overall life force as well as, perhaps, one's romantic feelings. These rooms have lessened their feelings of joy, love, etc. The speaker then recalls a room where they were disturbed by the sound and smell of the ocean: a mood-dampening reminder of time and change. They also mention "Rooms where [...] things died," marking rooms as both sites and reminders of death.

The speaker then portrays their current, shared room as a bleak, tomblike place, linking it with their own decayed passion and approaching demise. With eerie detachment, the speaker refers to the room as if observing the residents from the outside: "there is the room where we (two) lie dead." Basically, the residents' shared life in this room is a preview of death: they're so listless, they "seem to sleep again" even while awake, and they're as emotionally cold as they someday will be in the "bed" of the grave.

Of course, rooms are inanimate; they can only *reflect* the speaker's own feelings, and it seems that the speaker projects their own lethargy and unhappiness onto the rooms around them. After all, two of the speaker's past rooms were in Paris and Geneva—places that many people find romantic and inspiring! Many people would also find a seaside room romantic rather than "maddening." Even the "things" that "died" in the speaker's past rooms did so "for good or ill." That is, some of the endings that happened there may have been positive rather than negative.

In all these cases, however, the speaker chooses not to emphasize the positive. As for the speaker's current room, they never describe it at all—it's as if the exact location and features don't matter. The room is shared, not solitary, but the speaker emphasizes only the lifelessness of the two residents rather than the relationship or companionship between them. It seems, then, that the speaker doesn't feel depressed and zombie-like because their room resembles a tomb; their room resembles a tomb because they feel depressed and zombie-like.

In general, the poem suggests that people's surroundings are what make them happy or unhappy; instead, these surroundings mirror the backgrounds, personalities, and feelings people bring to them. Even the grave, the final "room," receives "sun" as well as "rain"—but the melancholy speaker closes by emphasizing the second.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I remember rooms ...

... of the heart.

The poem opens with a [rhyming couplet](#) that establishes a reflective, yet unsettling, [tone](#):

I remember rooms that have had their part
In the steady slowing down of the heart.

"I remember" might sound like a nostalgic opening, but the second line hints that the speaker won't necessarily be sharing pleasant memories. The speaker is recalling *rooms*—not *homes* or other places associated with belonging—and the rooms they recall have played a role "In the steady slowing down of the heart." This phrase appears to be a [metaphor](#) for a gradual loss of energy, passion, love, etc. The speaker is remembering living spaces that seemed to *age* them, not places that stirred their heart.

It's unclear *how* or *why* these rooms sapped the speaker's passion, and that ambiguity will extend throughout the poem. The poem never describes any of the speaker's rooms in depth either, so it's impossible to know whether they were large or small, beautiful or ugly, etc. Since the details of each [setting](#) barely matter to the speaker, it's possible that these rooms *reflect* the speaker's emotional state more than they *affect* it. In other words, the speaker may be projecting their despair or exhaustion onto any and all rooms around them.

These first two lines establish the rough, four-beat accentual [meter](#) that will run throughout lines 1-7 of the poem. (Things get a little weirder starting in line 8.) Basically, each line contains four strong **stresses**, but the pattern/arrangement of those stresses varies a lot from line to line:

I **remember** **rooms** that have **had** their **part**
In the **steady** **slowing** **down** of the **heart**.

For example, there are two syllables ("that have") in between the second and third strong stresses in line 1, but only one syllable ("-ing") between the second and third strong stresses in line 2. The difference in the metrical rhythm helps convey the altered rhythm of the speaker's heart.

There's also a lot of [alliteration](#) in these two lines: "remember"/"rooms"; "have had"; "steady slowing." Both of the alliterative syllables in "steady slowing" are also metrically stressed syllables, so the alliteration heightens that stress—and adds to the sense that this second line is moving "slow[er]" than the first.

LINES 3-5

*The room in ...
... of the tide—*

Lines 3-5 list examples of rooms that have "slow[ed] down [...]" the heart," or drained the speaker's vitality and passion. The

speaker offers sparse descriptions in a series of [parallel](#) phrases: "The room [...] the room [...] The little damp room." These [repetitions](#), which qualify as both [anaphora](#) and [diacope](#), seem to mirror the dull repetitiveness of the speaker's existence.

The rooms are presented as merely a series of places, with no warm or detailed memories attached to them. One is described as simply "in Paris" (the capital of France), another as "in Geneva" (the second-largest city in Switzerland). Both Paris and Geneva are beautiful, classic European cities, but the speaker doesn't describe going out in either nor doing anything while staying inside. Paris is often associated with romance, fashion, art, and culture, so maybe this detail corresponds with a romantic or creative time in the speaker's life—but if so, the speaker gives no hint of it.

Then the speaker describes a third room, located beside or near the ocean, in frankly unpleasant terms:

The little damp room with the seaweed smell,
And that ceaseless maddening sound of the tide [...]

Again, plenty of people would likely find a seaside room romantic or beautiful, but not the speaker. The speaker complains of the room's "damp[ness]" and "seaweed smell" and finds the sound of the tides "maddening." There are numerous reasons why this sound might irk the speaker:

- Repetitive sea sounds might remind the speaker of their own repetitive life.
- The openness and wildness of the ocean might make the speaker's room feel all the more cramped and tame.
- The tides, which traditionally [symbolize](#) time and change, might remind the speaker that the world goes on without them as they stay in their room.
- The tide's "ceaseless[ness]" might contrast with their own mortality (the ocean is eternal, but the speaker is a temporary resident of earth, just as they are of their "rooms").
- Tides wear down the shore, so the speaker, too, might feel worn down as they listen to the noise. (Recall the "steady slowing down of the heart" in line 1.)
- Or maybe the speaker is just so unhappy that even the littlest things, such as repeated sounds, annoy them.

Alternatively, this list of rooms might reflect a descent from happiness to unhappiness, or from excitement to boredom. Perhaps "Paris" is meant to evoke romance and glamour, "Geneva" a somewhat lesser glamour (or a neutral experience, since Switzerland is famous for its political neutrality), and the "damp room" a completely unromantic, unglamorous

experience. The speaker doesn't even bother saying where the "damp room" is located!

LINE 6

Rooms where ... for ill—things died.

Line 6 is the closest the poem comes to explaining the significance of the speaker's rooms. The poem has already withheld some of the context readers might expect, such as what these rooms looked like or why the speaker moved around so much. Now the speaker seems on the verge of describing some important incidents that happened in their rooms, whether "for good or for ill" (for better or worse). And yet, instead, the speaker simply says that "things died," withholding context yet again.

This enigmatic phrasing raises all sorts of questions. Did people or animals die in the speaker's former rooms, or just "things"? Were these "things" abstractions such as hopes, dreams, fears, or relationships? Or has the speaker become so indifferent to life that they consider living things just another kind of "thing"? How was it "good" that certain "things died"?

There's clearly a lot of unspoken backstory here, but the speaker seems unwilling or unable to discuss their past in detail, even while reminiscing. Perhaps their reticence implies that their past is too painful, dreary, or uncomfortable to discuss, except in the broadest terms.

Even the [caesura](#) in this line is psychologically interesting. The dash between "for good or for ill" and "things died" seems to represent a hesitation on the speaker's part. Perhaps the speaker is about to spill the beans about what happened in these rooms—or at least reveal a *little* personal detail—but pulls back at the last second.

LINES 7-8

*But there is ...
... to sleep again*

Lines 7-8 shift into the present tense, as the speaker describes their current room. The description is eerily detached:

But there is the room where we (two) lie dead,

Notice that the speaker says "there," not "here," as if describing the room from the outside—while clearly inside it! It's as though the speaker is a ghost watching themselves from outside their own body.

Even more curiously, the speaker puts the word "two" in parentheses, as if the fact that they have a roommate is an afterthought. The speaker offers no further detail about the roommate or about the relationship between the pair. Perhaps this is a couple whose romance has gone dead, or perhaps "we (two)" refers to Mew and her dying sister, whom Mew lived with and cared for. Regardless, the speaker feels so detached

from life that they don't bother to specify. They don't move around much, either: [metaphorically](#), the two roommates "lie dead" in the room, whether from sickness, depression, boredom, or other causes.

Line 8 expands on this idea, while also expanding far beyond the length of previous lines:

Though every morning we seem to wake and might
just as well seem to sleep again

The line seems to go on and on without stopping; even when it [breaks](#), it omits the comma that would normally follow "again." In other words, the form here mirrors the way the speaker's dull life seems to go on and on, repeating the same cycle day after day (much like the "ceaseless [...] tide" mentioned in line 5). In fact, their life feels like a tedious dream: even when they wake, they only "seem to wake," and they're so listless that they "might just as well seem to sleep again." The /s/ [alliteration](#) (a.k.a. [sibilance](#)) in this line adds to its soft, lulling sound: "seem [...] seem [...] sleep."

LINES 9-10

As we ...
... sun—in the rain.

Lines 9-10 close the poem with a [metaphor](#) about death. The speaker remarks that they and their roommate "shall somewhere," someday, lie just as listlessly as they do now:

[...] in the other quieter, dustier bed
Out there in the sun—in the rain.

This "bed," of course, is the grave. Notice that the adjectives "quieter" and "dustier" imply that the speaker's current bed is *already* pretty quiet and dusty. Their room is already tomb-like and confining, and their life is deadly dull. Thus, the grave won't come as a total shock: it'll just represent a heightened version of their current experience!

In a subtle [irony](#), the grave *almost* seems to represent a kind of escape for the cooped-up speaker. It's described not as a "room" but as a "bed"—one that will at least be outdoors rather than indoors. The phrase "Out there in the sun" even sounds pleasant!

Still, this final image isn't exactly cheerful: the speaker ends by noting that the grave will also be exposed to "the rain." And, of course, rain or shine, the grave's inhabitants won't *feel* any freedom.

Following the overflow of lines 8-9, which completely threw off the poem's already rough accentual meter, line 10 is terse and restrained (eight syllables, three strong **stresses**). Meanwhile, in this poem about "slowing down," the punctuation of these final lines seems to slow down the language itself. After thirty-

one syllables (lines 8-9) without punctuation, the poem inserts a comma toward the end of line 9, then a dash in the middle of line 10, then a full stop at the end of the poem. In other words: a soft [caesura](#), then a stronger caesura, then a final [end-stop](#). The poem seems to slowly brake to a halt, as if the speaker is spending their last energy—or falling back within limits.



SYMBOLS



ROOMS

Unsurprisingly, rooms are a key [symbol](#) in "Rooms." Because they're enclosed rather than open spaces, they represent confinement and domesticity as opposed to freedom, wildness, etc. The speaker experiences these rooms as limiting, disappointing, tame settings and implicitly contrasts them with the untamed outdoors (including the ocean "tide"). In many ways, the rooms of the poem seem more like cells. As if taking the symbolism to its extreme, the speaker ultimately associates rooms with the grave—the final, total confinement of death itself.

As living spaces, rooms also seem to stand for a transient and unstable mode of living. The speaker has inhabited a series of mere *rooms*, not *homes*. (And those rooms have been in different countries—France, Switzerland, etc.—so they've clearly moved around a bit.)

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10



THE SEA

The sea, or "tide," in lines 4-5 can be interpreted in a few different ways.

First, tides are cyclical, so they often [symbolize](#) repetition. It's possible that the speaker finds the ocean's sound "maddening" because it echoes the repetitiveness of their own life.

[Paradoxically](#), the sea is also an ancient symbol of time and change (due to the *movement* of tides, erosion of shores, etc.), so the speaker may view it as a disturbing reminder that time is slipping by. Perhaps the "damp[ness]" and "seaweed smell" of the room near the shore makes them feel as if their life is decaying or worn down. (Notice the references to death in the following lines.) Tides can also flood or engulf things, so they might correspond to the speaker's feeling of being overwhelmed—[metaphorically](#) drowning.

Finally, the sea represents the vast, untamed power of nature, which the speaker implicitly contrasts with the small, tame rooms in which they've spent their life. The tidal sound may be "maddening" because it evokes a power and freedom the

speaker has never known.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "The little damp room with the seaweed smell, / And that ceaseless maddening sound of the tide—"



POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The poem uses [parallelism](#) three times: first to create a list and then to create two [antitheses](#). Together, all this parallel phrasing lends the poem a feeling of monotony that evokes the repetitiveness of the speaker's life.

First, lines 3-4 present a succession of phrases beginning "The room" or "The [...] room":

The room in Paris, the room at Geneva,
The little damp room with the seaweed smell [...]

This structure (which is also an example of the device [anaphora](#)) allows the speaker, who is reminiscing about "Rooms," to offer a series of examples in a clear, logical fashion. Line 6 then contains a minor instance of parallelism: the antithetical phrase "for good or for ill." This is an old-fashioned, but still [idiomatic](#), version of the expression "for better or for worse."

In both of these examples, parallelism creates the sense that specifics don't really matter to the speaker. The speaker is simply slotting different locations and scenarios into the same linguistic structure; whether the room was in Paris or Geneva, and whether good or bad things happened there, readers get the sense that it's all the same to the speaker. This person's life has felt claustrophobic and disappointing time and time again.

Parallelism returns at the very end of the poem, in the form of two phrases beginning with "in the" and set off by a dash:

[...] Out there in the sun—in the rain.

Again, parallelism allows for a direct antithesis, or [juxtaposition](#) of opposites. In the "quieter, dustier bed" of the grave (line 9), the speaker and their roommate will sleep through both good weather and bad. The world will still have its ups and downs, but they won't matter anymore. Again, parallelism suggests that it's all the same to the speaker.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "The room in Paris, the room at Geneva, / The little damp room with the seaweed smell,"
- **Line 6:** "for good," "for ill"

- **Line 10:** "in the sun—in the rain."

REPETITION

The poem contains several forms of [repetition](#), which help to convey the repetitiveness and tedium of the speaker's life.

For example, the words "The room [...] the room [...] / The [...] room" repeat across a series of phrases in lines 3-4. This is an example of [parallel](#) structure (discussed in the [Parallelism](#) section), as well as an example of the special type of repetition called [anaphora](#). It could also be classified as [diacope](#), since the repetition occurs in quick succession, with only a few intervening words.

Whatever readers call it, this repetitive language suggests the dismal monotony of the speaker's existence as they move from room to room. Repetition makes these rooms seem to accumulate in an oppressive or overwhelming fashion. The same word will appear in lines 6 and 7, adding to the effect. This relentless repetition might even feel slightly "maddening" (line 5), like the sound of the ocean and the speaker's experience in general.

The phrases "seem to ___" (line 8) and "in the ___" (line 10) repeat as well, in contexts that involve repetitive cycles:

Though every morning we seem to wake and might
just as well seem to sleep again

The speaker and their roommate wake and sleep, wake and sleep, so automatically and passionlessly that they might as well be dead. In fact, they only "seem to wake" and "seem to sleep": they feel detached from their own experience, as if it's all an endless dream. They anticipate lying in their graves through the repetitive cycles of nature: "in the sun—in the rain." Again, the repeated words help bring their deadly boredom (or boring deadness) to life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "rooms"
- **Line 3:** "The room," "the room"
- **Line 4:** "The," "room"
- **Line 6:** "Rooms"
- **Line 7:** "room"
- **Line 8:** "seem to," "seem to"
- **Line 10:** "in the," "in the"

IMAGERY

"Rooms" is a poem that's as notable for withholding [imagery](#) as for providing it. For example, the speaker never describes the interior of their rooms in detail. Still, the few images the poem does provide are significant.

"The steady slowing down of the heart" (line 2) may be more of a [metaphor](#) than a literal image (i.e., the speaker's heartbeat is only [figuratively](#) slowing down). Still, the specificity of the description, plus the heavy rhythmic emphasis (underscored by [alliteration](#): "steady slowing"), makes the speaker's weariness more vivid than a straightforward phrase such as, "my gradual loss of energy."

Lines 4-5 combine touch, smell, and sound imagery. Due to the closeness of the ocean, the speaker's old room felt "damp," smelled like "seaweed," and reverberated all day long with the "ceaseless maddening sound of the tide." It's clear the speaker hated this room, and their imagery engages several senses at once in encouraging the reader to share that revulsion.

The poem's final imagery comes in its metaphorical description of the grave:

[...] the other quieter, dustier bed
Out there in the sun—in the rain.

Pointedly, the speaker imagines this "bed" as only *somewhat* more uncomfortable than their current one: not shockingly quiet and dirty, just "quieter" and "dustier." With subtle [irony](#), the speaker also suggests that, in a way, the grave will be less confining, since it's "Out there" in the elements. Still, this imagery doesn't suggest a cheerful view of death—more like a grim view of the speaker's current life, which already feels tomb-like.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the steady slowing down of the heart"
- **Lines 4-5:** "The little damp room with the seaweed smell, / And that ceaseless maddening sound of the tide—"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the other quieter, dustier bed / Out there in the sun—in the rain."

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) is sprinkled throughout "Rooms" and reinforces the meaning of important lines.

In line 1, for example, alliteration bridges two words—"remember" and "rooms"—that establish the subject of the poem, which will be a reminiscence about living spaces (and, by extension, life itself). Then, in line 2, alliteration links two metrically stressed syllables ("steady slowing"), adding further emphasis and *slowing down* the line itself.

In lines 4-5, alliteration emphasizes the room's "seaweed smell" and "ceaseless [...] sound" of crashing waves, underscoring what the speaker found so viscerally unpleasant about this place. And in line 8, alliteration (as well as [assonance](#)) links the thematically important words "seem" and "sleep." This speaker's waking life is so dull and unfulfilling that it only *seems* like life—they might as well be sleeping through it!

Notice that most of the important alliteration in the poem is also [sibilance](#) (alliteration or [consonance](#) involving /s/ sounds). Sibilance can help give poetic language a hushed, whispery, or hissing sound, as it does here in line 5 (where it evokes the murmur of the ocean waves) and line 8 (where it adds to the line's lulling, sleepy sound). In general, the prominence of whispery /s/ sounds in "Rooms" contributes to the poem's ghostly atmosphere.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "remember rooms," "have had"
- **Line 2:** "steady slowing"
- **Line 4:** "seaweed smell"
- **Line 5:** "ceaseless," "sound"
- **Line 7:** "where we"
- **Line 8:** "seem," "seem," "sleep"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several [metaphors](#), all of which relate to death or loss of vitality. This [figurative language](#) helps capture the dreary, depressed state in which the speaker and their roommate live.

First, the speaker recalls "rooms that have had their part / In the steady slowing down of the heart." Since rooms don't literally slow people's heart rates, the speaker means, figuratively, that some of the rooms they've lived in have contributed to their feeling of lost energy and passion.

The speaker also claims that "we (two) lie dead" in their current room (line 7). As the subsequent lines make clear, this, too, is a metaphor. The two roommates are as listless and passionless as *if* they were dead, but they're still awaiting literal death—which the speaker doesn't believe will feel much different.

Finally, the "other quieter, dustier bed" described in lines 9-10 is a metaphor for the grave. The adjectives "quieter" and "dustier" eerily imply that the roommates' *current* bed, in their tomb-like room, is already pretty quiet and dusty. The silence and dirt of the actual grave will just be a more intense version of the same! There's also a metaphorical aspect to the fact that this "bed" will lie under "the sun" and "the rain." These weather conditions seem to represent the world's ongoing change or cycles of change, which the dead no longer experience.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "In the steady slowing down of the heart."
- **Line 7:** "where we (two) lie dead,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the other quieter, dustier bed / Out there in the sun—in the rain."

CAESURA

"Rooms" contains several clear examples of [caesura](#). The poet

uses these mid-line pauses for both rhythmic and dramatic effect.

The poem's first caesura comes in line 3, after "The room in Paris." Thus, the first room the speaker describes is immediately followed by a pause. It's as though the room itself has slowed the line down, just as, according to line 2, rooms have "slow[ed]" the speaker's "heart" down!

A more dramatic caesura comes in line 6:

Rooms where for good or for ill—things died.

Here, the dash seems to indicate a slight hesitation, as if the speaker is weighing how to describe certain personal tragedies before settling on the terse, indirect phrase "things died."

The comma toward the end of line 9 (after "quieter") marks the first and only caesura in lines 8-9. Since these lines are much longer than the others in the poem, the caesura here has the effect of slowing down the speaker's language, reining in their restless thoughts as the end of the poem approaches.

The final caesura, in the final line, also packs a dramatic punch:

Out there in the sun—in the rain.

Just as "Out there in the sun" seems to offer some hope of freedom and escape (albeit in the grave!), the speaker hesitates, then grimly acknowledges that the grave will also lie out "in the rain."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Paris, the"
- **Line 6:** "ill—things"
- **Line 9:** "quieter, dustier"
- **Line 10:** "sun—in"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains either two or three [enjambments](#), depending on how strictly readers count. The first occurs in lines 1-2:

I remember rooms that have had their part
In the steady slowing down of the heart.

This effect helps draw the reader into the poem by creating a minor moment of suspense (had their part in *what?*).

The lack of punctuation at the end of line 8 seems to indicate that this phrase, too, is enjambed. That said, under standard grammatical rules, a comma (and thus a pause) would follow "again" to mark the conclusion of a clause. The poet is in fact using a run-on sentence that creates the *appearance* of enjambment:

Though every morning we seem to wake and might
just as well seem to sleep again
As we shall somewhere in the other quieter, dustier
bed

Whether readers consider this line *truly* enjambed or not, the lack of punctuation does usher readers swiftly across the line break—not coincidentally, into a line about the speaker's death. There's little separation, formally, between life and death in the poem, which makes sense considering the fact that the speaker already feels "dead." A clearer enjambment then follows at the end of line 9, moving the reader quickly from "bed" to "Out there."

Altogether, the poem's enjambments seem to reflect the speaker's restlessness, as if the speaker feels as confined by their poem's structure as by their room. These long enjambed lines might also evoke the tedium of the speaker's life—the way time, in their room, seems to drag on endlessly. Finally, the lack of punctuation at the end of these long lines makes the full stop in line 10 (the poem's shortest, and final, line) seem that much more abrupt and chilling.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "part / In"
- **Lines 8-9:** "again / As"
- **Lines 9-10:** "bed / Out"



VOCABULARY

Geneva (Line 3) - The second largest city in Switzerland.

Ceaseless (Line 5) - Perpetual; unending.

Ill (Line 6) - Bad. "For good or for ill" means the same thing as "for better or for worse."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Rooms" is a 10-line, single-[stanza](#) poem. While it does use [meter](#) and [rhyme](#), the meter varies considerably (it's best described as a kind of rough accentual verse; more on that in the Meter section of this guide) and the [rhyme scheme](#) is also rather unorthodox (more on that in Rhyme Scheme). The poem's line length also varies quite a bit; the shortest line (line 10) has eight syllables, while the longest (line 8) has 19. In other words, the poem doesn't follow the rules of any traditional form.

These formal choices serve the poem's meaning in a number of ways. Since they're unconventional, they might suggest that the speaker is indifferent to social conventions. (In many ways, the

speaker seems to have given up on life, so maybe they're not too worried about keeping a strict pattern of meter or rhyme.) The unpredictable rhythm and rhymes might also reflect the instability of the speaker's life (with its moves to various "rooms"), or even some instability in the speaker's mental state (given the poem's hints of "mad[ness]" and despair).

They might also reflect the restlessness of a speaker who's spent their life cooped up in "rooms," or at least remembers their life that way. It's helpful to know, in this context, that the word *stanza* comes from an Italian word for "room." The poem itself is confined to a single stanza, or room, and in a way, it tries to squeeze a whole life's experience into that cramped little space. It also seems to rebel against its own formal parameters, shifting in and out of rhyme and varying meter and line length wildly—to the point where the long eighth line seems to be trying to break the pattern altogether!

METER

The poem's [meter](#) fluctuates along with its line length and [rhyme](#) pattern. Lines 1-7 contain about 10 syllables apiece and might be categorized as four-beat [accentual verse](#). That means each line has roughly four strong **stressed** beats, but the *placement* of those stressed beats varies from line to line:

I remember rooms that have had their part
In the steady slowing down of the heart.
The room in Paris, the room at Geneva,
The little damp room with the seaweed smell,

Even this pattern shifts around somewhat; for example, lines 6 and 7 could have four or five strong stresses apiece, depending on whether you read the phrases "things died" and "we (two)" as having one strong stress or two. Here's one possible reading:

Rooms where for good or for ill—things died.
But there is the room where we (two) lie dead,

In lines 8-10, the pattern goes haywire. It's possible to read line 8 as containing nine strong stresses, line 9 as containing seven, and line 10 as containing only three. The syllable count jumps around, too, from 19 to 16 all the way down to eight:

Though every morning we seem to wake and might
just as well seem to sleep again
As we shall somewhere in the other quieter, dustier
bed
Out there in the sun—in the rain.

Again, it's as if the speaker feels as confined by the poem's structure as by their room and is still fighting it on some level even as they seem to have given up.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's single [stanza](#) has an unusual [rhyme](#) pattern:

AABCDDEFEF

In other words, you could divide it into a rhymed [couplet](#) ("part"/"heart"), an unrhymed couplet ("Geneva"/"smell"), another rhymed couplet ("tide"/"died") and a [quatrain](#) with alternating rhymes ("dead"/"again"/"bed"/"rain"). There's no name for this pattern; it seems improvised and organic, as if the speaker (or poet) doesn't want to be boxed into a rhyme scheme any more than they want to be trapped indoors.

All of the poem's rhymes are perfect, although the final rhyme pair—"again"/"rain"—might seem more or less exact depending on the reader's accent. Much like the wild [metrical](#) variations in lines 8-9, the inclusion of two unrhymed lines (3-4) suggests that the poet is to some degree rebelling against *all* the poem's formal constraints. This makes even more sense when readers realize that the word "[stanza](#)" comes from the Italian for "room." The poem may be confined to one stanza, but it's restless within that confinement!



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Rooms" is a reticent, slightly mysterious, and very unhappy figure.

The speaker starts the poem by reminiscing ("I remember [...]"), but by the end, they've revealed very few personal details. They never disclose their gender, age, nationality, occupation, and so on, nor do they give any hint as to the major events in their life. They suggest that they've lost some earlier energy, vitality, or passion, but they never explain why this happened or how rooms helped cause this "steady slowing down of the heart." Most surprisingly, they never specify the nature of their relationship with their current roommate, the other half of the pair described as "we (two)."

The few details they do provide suggest the faint outlines of a personal narrative. The speaker has moved around a bit, in Europe and possibly elsewhere; they've lived in "Paris," France; "Geneva," Switzerland; and somewhere near or beside the sea (the "sound of the tide"). They've experienced a series of losses; "things died" in their former rooms. (Even here, it's not clear whether *people* died or just *things*—hopes or relationships, for instance.) They now share a room with someone else, and both roommates feel terribly depressed or bored: [metaphorically](#), they "lie dead," and might as well be asleep when they're awake. This could be a couple that has lost all romantic passion, but it could also be a pair like Charlotte Mew and her sister Anne, whom Mew nursed through terminal cancer during the last year of Anne's life.

It's unclear how closely the speaker of "Rooms" is based on the poet herself. The poem could be read either as autobiographical

or as a monologue in another character's voice (Mew wrote several such monologues throughout her career). The speaker is so sparing with personal information that it's hard to say for sure. For more biographical context, see the Context section of this guide.



SETTING

The [setting](#) of "Rooms" is—you guessed it—a series of rooms! These are various places the speaker has lived in over the years, apparently while moving around Europe or the wider world. For example, they've lived in "Paris," France, "Geneva," Switzerland, and someplace beside or near the sea: "The little damp room with the seaweed smell, / And that ceaseless maddening sound of the tide."

As that last phrase suggests, the speaker wasn't necessarily happy in these settings. If they enjoyed the beautiful, glamorous cities of Paris and Geneva, they don't say so explicitly. And they seem to have hated the room near the sea: the sound of the waves drove them crazy (figuratively or literally).

The speaker's current setting is a room they live in with another person. The relationship between these two characters is unclear: are they lovers? spouses? family? Regardless, they're so weary, listless, and/or depressed that they seem to "lie dead." Waking or sleeping, they feel so detached from life that they might as well be in the grave—the [metaphorical](#) "bed" or room they're headed toward.

The description of all these rooms is sparse or nonexistent, and that's part of the poem's point. The reader has no way of knowing how large these rooms were/are, what they looked like, or whether they might have contributed in any way to the speaker's unhappiness. In the end, they were *rooms* first and foremost: confined, domestic spaces as opposed to, say, the wild outdoors. Something in the speaker's personality, life experience, or social context seems to make them unhappy regardless of their setting at any given time.

Finally, the poem isn't explicitly tied to any historical period; its few concrete location markers are either centuries old (Paris and Geneva) or as old as the earth itself (the "ceaseless" tide). As a result, the poem's setting and voice seem "timeless"—appropriately enough, since the speaker feels detached from the ordinary world. In fact, the speaker feels almost as if they're in the most timeless setting of all: the grave.

her poems are relatively traditional (they use both [meter](#) and [rhyme](#)); in others, they're experimental and idiosyncratic, incorporating unusual rhythms, syntax (word arrangement), and personas. Her body of work was small—only about 70 poems in total—but it won acclaim from some of the major writers of her time, including the poet Ezra Pound, the poet/novelist Thomas Hardy, and the novelist Virginia Woolf.

"Rooms" was published in Mew's posthumous collection *The Rambling Sailor* (1929). This was effectively Mew's second collection, following *The Farmer's Bride* in 1916 (which was republished in expanded form as *Saturday Market* in 1921). It was assembled by Mew's friend Alida Monro after Mew died by suicide in 1928.

The poem's form and style reflect the era in which Mew wrote. Though "Rooms" uses meter and rhyme—the tools that dominated 19th-century poetry, as well as most English-language poetry in earlier centuries—it uses them unconventionally, somewhat like the 20th-century Modernists. Starting in the first decade of the 1900s, many English-language poets began straying from traditional meter and rhyme schemes or abandoning them altogether (writing in [free verse](#)). These experimental techniques helped define what is now called "[Modernist](#)" poetry.

"Rooms" also contains two lines (8-9: "Though every [...] bed") that are much longer and looser than the others surrounding them; such variations were common in the Modernist verse of Pound, T. S. Eliot, and others, but were highly unusual among earlier generations of poets. In some ways, then, "Rooms" reads like a poem of the Victorian or Edwardian era (the stretch of UK history from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s). In other ways, it reads like a product of the decade in which it was actually published: the 1920s, when Modernism flourished.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Rooms" doesn't explicitly refer to historical events or contain any details that link it to a particular period. Still, the poem subtly reflects the world Charlotte Mew lived in. Its reticence about personal details (e.g., the relationship between the speaker and their roommate) might partly reflect the repressive, buttoned-up Victorian culture in which she came of age. Since that culture was notably repressive toward women and queer people (Mew appears to have had same-sex attractions), the *poet's* experience might inform the *speaker's* feelings of confinement—their view of life as a series of dull "rooms."

Mew's suicide was an especially tragic ending to a life shadowed by loss. Two of her brothers died when she was a small child; another brother and a sister were committed to mental hospitals when she was in her 20s. Shortly before she turned 30, her father died, leaving her family in financial trouble. Her mother died in 1923, and her last surviving, non-institutionalized family member, her sister Anne, died in 1927



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Charlotte Mew (1869-1928) was born in Victorian England and lived into the age of literary Modernism. In some respects,

after a bout with cancer. Mew lived with and nursed Anne during her illness, and she took her own life a year after Anne's death.

For these reasons, some critics have read "Rooms" as an autobiographical poem. Its terse remark that "things died" (line 6) may stand in for a lifetime of losses, and particular details in the poem can be linked with Mew's experience. For example, Mew did visit Paris (see line 3) at least once; reportedly, she hoped to pursue a romance with a female friend there, but her hopes were disappointed. And it's tempting to read the "two" who "lie dead" in line 7 as Anne and Charlotte herself: the one dying of cancer, the other battling suicidal depression. But because the poem's details are so sparse, and because Mew was also known for her dramatic monologues (poems written in the voice of a character), it's hard to know how true to life "Rooms" is.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Charlotte Mew's Life and Work](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/charlotte-mew) – A biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation.
- [More About the Poet](https://www.modernistarchives.com/person/charlotte-mew) – A profile of Mew at the Modernist Archives Publishing Project.

- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giV_TcZr7N4) – Listen to a reading of "Rooms."
- [More by Mew](https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Mew%2C+Charlotte+Mar) – Browse original editions of Mew's work at the Internet Archive.
- [A Meditation on Mew and More](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69033/islands-apart-a-notebook) – An essay by Eavan Boland that reflects on Mew's life and "the definitions of a poet."

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHARLOTTE MEW POEMS

- [The Farmer's Bride](#)
- [The Trees are Down](#)



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