

Tonight I can write the saddest lines



SUMMARY

I can write the saddest poetry ever tonight.

For example, I could write something like, "the night sky is filled with distant, trembling blue stars."

The wind twirls around in the night sky, sounding like a song.

I can write the saddest poetry ever tonight. I loved her, and now and then she loved me back.

I used to hold her in my arms on nights just like this one. I kissed her so many times beneath the never-ending sky.

She loved me, and I sometimes loved her back. It was impossible not to love her deep, steady eyes.

I can write the saddest poetry ever tonight. I can't believe I don't have her—that I've lost her.

The vast, endless night seems even more vast and endless now that she's gone. Poetry falls onto my soul like morning dew falls onto the grass.

It doesn't matter that my love wasn't enough for her. It's a starry night, and she's not here.

That's all there is. I can hear a voice singing far away. Far away. My soul aches with the loss of her.

My eyes keep looking for her, wanting to bring her near. My heart looks for her too, and still she's not here.

This night is just like the ones we used to share, the same moonlight making the same trees glow white. But she and I—the people who spent those nights together—are different now.

I definitely don't love her anymore, that's for sure, but I loved her so much. My voice tried to travel on the wind so that she could hear me.

She'll be someone else girlfriend, someone else's, just like she was before my kisses. Her voice, her shining body, the bottomless depths of her eyes.

I definitely don't love her anymore, that's for sure, but then again maybe I do love her. Love goes by so quickly, and moving on takes such a long time.

Because on nights just like this one I held her in my arms, and now my soul aches with the loss of her.

Even if this be the last pain she puts me through, and these be the last sad lines I write about her.



THEMES



LOVE, MEMORY, AND HEARTACHE

Neruda's poem explores the pain and heartache following a break-up. The speaker, with one eye on the past and another on the present, tries to make sense of the fact that a relationship that seemed filled with endless love has, in fact, ended for good. Standing alone under the same star-filled night sky he used to share with his ex-lover, the speaker bitterly contrasts the love he once had with his current sadness and solitude. In doing so, the poem showcases the sorrow and confusion that accompany love's loss—and how memories of that love make it all the more difficult to move on.

The change in the speaker's romantic situation seems to have altered everything around him. Just as love once made the world seem full of joy, bliss, and intimacy, love's absence makes the world suddenly cold, barren, and harsh. The speaker and his ex-lover used to be together through nights *just like* the one on which the poem is set. Those nights—and their love—seemed like they would last forever. The sky was "endless," the speaker's lover's eyes were "infinite," and they kissed each other "again and again." It seems almost impossible, then, that this has all come to an end.

Now, however, the stars themselves "shiver" as if lonely and cold. The sky's endlessness no longer speaks of the limitlessness of love, but of an "immense" and stark emptiness. The world itself, of course, *hasn't* changed. Rather, the lovely prism through which the speaker perceived his life and his surroundings has been shattered. Heartbreak, the poem thus suggests, makes the world feel menacing and alienating.

Still, the speaker can't seem to stop comparing two moments in time—*then* and *now*—as if to make sense of how a love that seemed endless can so suddenly be destroyed. He keeps circling back to the bare facts of his loss: he had a love, and now it's gone. It's as though through the plain repetition of these facts the speaker hopes, in vain, to dispel the emotional power that the break-up holds over him.

The speaker even tries to *rationalize* the loss, noting that his ex was with someone else before him and will be with someone new after him. But these efforts are hardly convincing precisely because the speaker is so utterly fixated on the break-up. He contradicts himself, too, saying at one point that he doesn't love her any longer before admitting that "maybe" he does.

In trying to make sense of his loss, the speaker is just returning again and again to the very memories that fuel his heartache. So long as he can't let go of the past, the poem implies, he can't move on—hence the poem's most famous line: "Love is so short,

forgetting is so long." To this, a third might be added: "understanding is impossible." It baffles the speaker to think that two people so passionately in love could ever stop loving each other, but it's a mystery that the speaker can't solve. That's why, ultimately, all the speaker can hope to do is try to forget his lover over time. Like a wounded animal, he has to wait for the healing process to run its course.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32



THE POWER OF POETRY

The poem finds its speaker in emotional turmoil, suffering the pangs and pains of a recent break-up. Though the speaker would probably give anything to be back with his lover, the poem suggests that there is, at least, a valuable by-product of all this heartache: poetry. That is, the poem itself implies that strong emotion inspires rich, authentic, and beautiful poems.

The speaker is the first to admit that he's sad, drowning in a pool of sorrow, confusion, and self-pity. Such are the consequences of love, the poem suggests. But the speaker also hints that these emotions grant him a new power, one that links suffering to creativity.

Take a look at the poem's main refrain: "Tonight I can write the saddest lines." The key-word here is "can"; like some special power-up in a video game, the separation has perhaps unlocked a new level of sadness with which the speaker can compose his poetry. And after writing a number of painfully honest lines, the poem re-states the idea that difficult emotional experience helps to make these lines possible. Illustrating this, the speaker compares the relationship between emotion and poetry to a natural process, through, appropriately enough, a deeply poetic image: "And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture." Emotion and poetry, the simile implies, go together as naturally as dew and grass.

That said, just because the speaker is mainly saying that he *can* write the "saddest lines," that doesn't necessarily mean that he will or even that he should. It's up to the reader whether the lines actually in this poem are these "saddest lines" that the speaker mentions; the speaker himself places one of these lines in quotation marks, as if these are only an *example* of what he's talking about. Perhaps that line—"The night is starry / and the stars are blue and shiver in the distance"—is meant to *gesture* to a *style* of writing that, while valuable, doesn't quite do full justice to his sorrow.

Looking at it this way, the speaker testifies to his newfound ability while subtly undermining it with a hint of [irony](#). The poem is remarkably raw and bare in the way it expresses itself, as if the speaker wants to simultaneously *poeticize* the break-

up—turn it into a work of art—and question whether there is much point in doing so. Even if the speaker can write sad lines, it's up for debate whether those lines can ever fully capture the pain of his loss.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Line 5
- Line 11
- Line 14
- Line 16
- Lines 31-32



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Tonight I can ...
... in the distance."*

The poem opens with a line that will become its [refrain](#). From this one line, the reader learns three important facts:

1. It's night-time;
2. The speaker is a poet;
3. And something emotionally traumatic has happened.

The key word here is "can," indicating that the speaker's experiences have granted him this ability to write the saddest poetry around. That doesn't necessarily mean that the speaker actually *will*, or even should, write "the saddest lines"! It's simply *possible*, and the [end-stop](#) here creates an echoing emptiness, a sense of detachment as though the speaker is merely stating the facts.

Lines 2 and 3 then directly *respond* to this opening, showing an "example" of one such very sad line. The fact that the speaker presents this example in quotation marks emphasizes that it's just that: an *example*, not necessarily the speaker actually writing "the saddest lines."

As for that line itself: on its face, a "starry" night is nothing unusual, but it pre-emptively shows the speaker finds painful reminders of lost love all around. Stars, so often the glinting backdrop to young lovers, in this image seem cold and alienated. They're blue, and line 3 [personifies](#) them as "shiver[ing]" in the distance. This perceived distance relates to the schism between the speaker and his ex-lover.

And with that, the speaker closes the quotation marks, leaving it to the reader to decide whether the rest of the poem follows this example or not. Given that line 4 similarly focuses on the sky and also uses personification, it seems fair to interpret the rest of the poem as more of the "saddest lines" mentioned in

line 1. But it's worth noting how that "can" in the first line introduces a note of doubt and hesitancy to the whole poetic process.

LINES 4-6

*The night wind ...
... loved me too.*

In line 4, the speaker focuses on how the "night wind" seems to revolve (or twirl/swirl) in the sky while singing. In [personifying](#) the wind (treating its whooshing sound as "singing"), the speaker's surroundings again seem to be alive. It's as though the whole world has changed in response to the speaker's heartbreak.

- There could also be some [irony](#) at play here. The verbs here suggest dancing, pleasure, and carefree happiness—all of which are notably *absent* from this current scene. In the night wind's singing, the speaker probably hears more of a lament than anything joyful.

Line 5 then repeats the poem's [refrain](#). This can be thought of as a kind of ceremonial bell that ring out throughout the poem to mark the speaker's newfound loneliness. Instead of jumping into another overtly poetic line about the night sky, however, the speaker continues in a very straightforward tone. And line 6 feels all the more tragic precisely *because* it feels so raw and unadorned with fancy [metaphors](#) or [imagery](#); it's presented like a plain, painful statement of fact:

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

Here, it's important to take a step back and remember that this poem is actually a translation; Neruda's original was written in Spanish. And in that original Spanish text of the poem, the firm, matter-of-fact tone arguably comes across all the more strongly. To understand why, readers must first understand that there are actually two past tenses in Spanish (versus just one in English):

1. The simple preterit, which is used to talk about completed actions or things with clear beginnings and ends;
2. And the imperfect, which is often used to talk about actions that were repeated over a period of time, actions that were interrupted, and feelings—including love!

Here, and throughout the poem, the speaker uses the simple preterit tense of the verb "to love" rather than the imperfect. This, in turn, grants this love a definite sense of having a specific end-point in time. In other words, it's an action that has been completed, not one that the speaker just vaguely *used to do* in

the past. It's *done*—which makes the poem feel more final and painful.

This also builds a [juxtaposition](#) between two points in time: *then*, when the speaker and his ex were together, and *now*, the "tonight" on which this poem is being written. There is also a contrast between the two lovers' respective attitudes—he *loved* her, but she only "sometimes" loved him.

LINES 7-10

*Through nights like ...
... great still eyes.*

The speaker casts his mind back to the good old days, when he and his lover would passionately embrace under the stars on nights just "like this one." Again, then, the speaker [juxtaposes](#) *then* with *now*—the night as it was with his beloved, and the night as it is now that he's alone.

Once again, the verb tense makes things a bit more striking in the Spanish version of the poem:

- Both "held" in line 7 and "kissed" in line are in the simple preterit, which, again, feels like a deliberate (and even unusual) choice.
- This makes both words sound like they have a very definitive end-point, as opposed to being something that the speaker merely used to do over an undefined period of time.

The world "endless," meanwhile (another translation could be "infinite") speaks to the limitlessness of the speaker's love at the time. The speaker thus seems a bit confused and disbelieving here. He kissed his beloved so many times under a night sky just like this one—so why is it that the world feels so remarkably different? How, the speaker seems to be wondering, can that love be gone?

Line 9 is then another plain statement of fact, continuing the poem's trend of lurching from more obviously *poetic* lines to straightforward, stark expression. It's as though the urge to be poetic and the need to be authentic are working in tandem, keeping each other in check. This line sounds almost like a kind of affirmation, the speaker attempting to say, in more eloquent terms, *well, that's the way these things go*.

Also note that the roles are reversed here: whereas in line 6 it was the speaker's beloved who only "sometimes" loved him back, now it's the speaker who only "sometimes" loved her. The speaker seems conflicted and confused. And in the very next line, he contradicts himself! Wrenched back towards painful memory, he wonders how anyone possibly couldn't have loved his ex's "great still eyes." The sense of stillness here again suggests the speaker's disbelief that something so sturdy and infinite as his love has now gone for good.

LINES 11-14

*Tonight I can ...
... to the pasture.*

The speaker returns to the poem's [refrain](#), reiterating his ability to write "the saddest lines" and, in doing so, reiterating his deep, unrelenting pain.

As the speaker keeps circling back to this thought, it's interesting to consider what triggers it. In the preceding line, the speaker imagines his ex-lover's eyes. There is something intimate about that moment, even though it is pure recollection (i.e., his ex isn't actually there with him). It's almost like the speaker has to redouble (or triple) his effort to write the poem in such moments, as if the sadness he feels threatens to derail the whole poetic process.

What follows are three grammatically similar statements, which use [parallelism](#) in both the original Spanish and this English translation:

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.

The repetitiveness of the grammar makes this moment more intense, listing out all the ways in which the speaker can experience different aspects of his loss. He can think about and feel her absence, and "hear" the night, which was once immense with romance and passion, and now swells with alienation and regret.

The repetition of "immense," meanwhile (which is technically [anadiplosis](#) because it falls at the end of one clause and the start of the next), makes the sky seem all the more distant, cold, and foreboding.

Notice the [caesura](#) at work in both lines, bringing the poem to a near halt after "have her" and "immense night." Each pause in the poem offers a brief moment for the speaker's feelings to resonate and reverberate, for the emotional pain to be expressed and, then, in short pauses, *felt*. The lingering pace of the poem, of course, matches the speaker's fixation on the break-up.

Line 14 is then one of the most overtly poetic sentences in the poem and, appropriately enough, comments on poetry itself. Through [simile](#), the speaker links raw emotion with the composition of poetry. That is, pain and poetry are in a kind of symbiosis, with poetry falling on the "soul" as readily as "dew" falls to the grass.

LINES 15-16

*What does it ...
... not with me.*

After the striking [simile](#) about poetry, souls, and dew, the speaker returns to his straightforward, matter-of-fact tone. Here, it seems he's attempting to rationalize his way out of his feelings (which is, of course, unlikely to work).

"What does it matter" that they broke up, he wonders, when both reader and speaker know full well that it matters a great deal! Specifically, the speaker says that his love "could not keep her." He believes that his love wasn't enough for his ex to stick around and be with him, which is a very sad thought indeed.

In the next line, the speaker reiterates that the night is filled with stars. Again, the night looks just like it did when he used to stand beneath it with his beloved, yet now the speaker is alone—and this simple fact has changed everything.

It's as though the speaker is trying to draw on the immensity of the night sky—indeed, the universe itself—to reframe what's happened to him as a mere speck on the canvas of space and time.

LINES 15-20

*What does it ...
... not with me.*

The speaker begins line 17 with a frank, straightforward declaration: "That is all." And as the poem continues, the speaker again flips between matter-of-fact statements that seek to come to terms with his loss and more poetic lines that *express* that loss.

When he says "this is all" (line 17), it's as though the speaker tries to minimize the impact of the break-up. This is all—this is just what happens. Or, maybe, the speaker is saying something like "that is *everything*." The fact that his lover is gone is the only thing that matters.

In any case, this attempt at rationalization instantly gives way, in the space of the same line, to a [symbol](#) of the speaker's alienation: he hears (or perhaps imagines) the voice of someone singing "in the distance." This singing is not directed at him, a fact that only emphasizes his loneliness and the quiet surrounding him in his lover's absence. Indeed, that's why the poem repeats that this singing takes place "in the distance." The singing belongs to some other place, some other time, and does nothing to soothe the speaker's troubled mind. The second "in the distance" is also fragmented by the preceding [caesura](#) and the [end-stop](#) that comes at the end of line, making it like a kind of diminishing echo, a sound fading into the night.

This distant singing having reminded the speaker of his solitude, he turns inward and declares that his "soul is not satisfied"—is not happy, content, at peace—in his lover's absence (something the reader has almost certainly picked up on by now!).

His soul unsatisfied, the speaker's "sight" and "heart" both reach out for his ex-lover, to "bring her closer." He seems aware that doing so is futile, and the [personification](#) of his various

body parts suggests that he's not doing this entirely on purpose. That is, his heart and eyes seem to have a will of their own, and can't help but look and long for the speaker's beloved. And then, the deflating reality hits home again: "she is not with me."

LINES 21-24

*The same night ...
... touch her hearing.*

The speaker reiterates that nothing about his surroundings has *literally* changed. The "night" itself is the same, the moonlight making the "same" trees appear white. The [diacope](#) of "same" here emphasizes the idea that everything in the physical world is just as it was back when the speaker and his lover were together.

This idea creates stark [juxtaposition](#) with the following line, in which the speaker declares that he and his beloved are "no longer the same"—that is, they are no longer the people they were back when they stood together under the starry sky, near those "whitening trees." This speaks to the poem's thematic idea that the pain of heartbreak can completely upend a person's world, even if it looks on the outside like nothing has changed.

The next line then repeats the phrase "no longer," drawing a connection between the change in the speaker and his lack of love for his ex. Yet barely a beat passes before the speaker returns to the past, insisting that, while he may "no longer love" this woman, he once loved her deeply. The fact that the speaker so quickly retreats into the past should make readers question whether he's really certain that he "no longer" loves his ex in the present. At the very least, he seems pretty conflicted about it!

Line 24 adopts a similar approach to lines 18-20, the speaker describing how his "voice" has called out for his ex, trying to "find the wind to touch her hearing." This is a poignant, pained way of describing the journey of sound: the speaker's voice reached out through the air, making it vibrate, hoping to find the ex-lover's ears. The sound of his voice thus goes on a kind of futile journey, with a suitcase full of the speaker's desperate emotions.

LINES 25-26

*Another's. She will ...
... Her infinite eyes.*

The speaker keeps going back and forth between longing for his beloved and asserting that their relationship is over for good. Having just poetically said that his voice tries to travel on the wind to his ex, he now comes back to reality and seemingly makes an attempt to rationalize his situation once more.

The speaker declares that his ex dated people before the speaker, and thus it seems natural that will date people after

the speaker. The [diacope](#) of "another's" here reads like the speaker trying to convince himself of a painful reality:

*Another's. She will be another's. As she was before
my kisses.*

But this is a short-lived attempt to make peace with his feelings! His own mention of "kisses" quickly draws the speaker back into melancholic desire.

Line 26 swells with this desire, as the speaker finds himself picturing various parts of his beloved's body. The [metaphorical](#) "bright[ness]" of her body contrasts with the empty darkness of the night, and suggests the warm afterglow of making love. The lover's eyes, meanwhile, are "infinite" because they seemed to speak of endless love and depth of feeling.

LINES 27-30

*I no longer ...
... has lost her.*

Again, the speaker repeats himself, declaring: "I no longer love her, that's certain"—a phrase first seen in line 23. Most readers will take the "that's certain" with a massive dose of cynicism at this point; the speaker's fixation on his beloved, desire to reach out to her, and seeming emptiness without her all point to the fact that the speaker is certainly not over this person!

Readers quickly get confirmation of this idea. The speaker immediately rejects the very certainty he just claimed by adding "but maybe I love her." He can't be "certain" that he doesn't love her *and* think that "maybe" he does. In short, he's full of confused and conflicting feelings (readers who've been through their own break-ups can probably sympathize!)

Line 28, the most famous in the poem, then gets to the heart of the matter:

- Love, which once seemed endless, now seems "so short." Love didn't last, despite feeling infinite at the time.
- By contrast, the process of "forgetting" that love feels like it will never end.

The poetic devices in line 28 are part of what make this phrase so memorable and powerful. First, notice how each idea takes place either side of a [caesura](#):

Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

This break in the line reflects the break-up of the lovers themselves. There's also [parallelism](#) (and more specifically [antithesis](#)) here, with the identical grammatical structure on either side of the caesura. Readers can see that this parallelism exists in the original Spanish just as clearly:

Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

The line feels instantly memorable, and encapsulates the pain and confusion that infuse the entire poem. The speaker thought that his love was endless, but it proved short-lived; the process of forgetting his beloved, meanwhile, seems to go on and on.

LINES 29-32

*Because through nights ...
... write for her.*

Lines 29 to 30 [repeat](#) lines from earlier in the poem (namely lines 7 and line 18) nearly word for word. The poem's circularity shows that the speaker essentially feels the same as he did at the poem's start: heartbroken. This emphasis on the "soul" being dissatisfied shows that this pain goes right to the core of the speaker's being.

There is a slight difference here, however: line 29 adds with the word "because" at its start:

Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms

This empathizes the fact that the *reason* the speaker is so sad is that he once had love, and now it's gone.

Finally, the speaker ends the poem by declaring that, despite his pain, this very poem will be the last time he writes about his beloved. He *could* write the saddest lines, but he's going to stop now and refuse to let her cause him any more pain.

Or is he? After all the confusion and contradictions throughout the poem, there's no real reason why readers should believe the speaker when he says this. It's also worth comparing the last two lines of Merwin's translation with how they appear in the original Spanish:

- In this English translation, the speaker sounds quite definite—as though he is determined to move on from the "suffer[ing]" caused by his ex. He promises that these will be the "last verses" that he writes for her. There's an air of defiance in the English here, though it could be read as misplaced and naive.
- In the Spanish, the speaker is more doubtful. Specifically, the speaker uses the subjunctive form of the verb "to be." Without getting into a Spanish grammar lesson, the use of the subjunctive allows for a bit more doubt than the firmer "will be." It could arguably be translated as the speaker saying that these *may* be the "last pain[s]" and "verses."

Either way, it's clear that the speaker is in deep pain!

The mention of "verses" also links the poem back to its opening line, in which the speaker states that, now he knows this kind of emotional suffering, he "can write the saddest lines." This

reference back towards poetry suggests that there may be something redemptive in the act of composing the poem that may even turn his pain into something useful.

That said, it's also possible to question whether the poem has really brought any solace at all, or if it has just added nuance and variation to the raw trauma of the speaker's sudden loneliness. The [diacope](#) of "last" gives the ending a sense of finality while simultaneously questioning whether anything is really as final as it seems.



SYMBOLS



THE WIND/SINGING

The wind in the poem represents the speaker's lonely longing for his ex-lover. It spins restlessly in the sky, twirling and turning about in a way that evokes the speaker's own confusion and conflicting thoughts. The speaker also notably links the wind to the human voice throughout the poem, again suggesting that it represents his desire to call out to his beloved. He even mentions his "voice" trying to "find the wind" in order to reach his ex-lover's ears, to no avail.

The wind doesn't carry the speaker's voice to his lover, but it does carry someone else's voice to the speaker. In line 17, the speaker hears—or imagines—an actual person singing:

[...] In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.

This "singing" recalls the "singing" of the wind mentioned at the beginning of the poem, and thus again evokes the speaker's loneliness and longing. The fact that this singing is so far away, however, highlights that this singing is *not* for the speaker. It's not like this is his lover calling out for him; it's a totally unrelated event. This makes the speaker feel small and irrelevant, now stripped of the sense of grandeur and beauty that accompanied his previous love affair.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The night wind revolves in the sky and sings."
- **Line 17:** "In the distance someone is singing. In the distance."
- **Line 24:** "My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing."



THE NIGHT SKY

Poets have long used the night sky as a backdrop for scenes of romance, desire, and longing, and the speaker leans into that [symbolism](#) here.

The night is associated with lovers' liaisons, its glinting stars

providing just a hint of light to shine on their kissing faces. And that's what the night once symbolized for the speaker, too: his love itself, which seemed as endless, as infinite, and as comforting as the star-filled sky above.

This is why he's so baffled, then, to be standing under the same sky while feeling so alone. Now, the night sky is like an echo chamber in which the speaker hears the lonely tones of his own heartache. Even the stars seem to shiver in the distance, representing the speaker's new *emotional* distance from his lover. The sky is endless, but not in the way that love once seemed endless. Rather, its endlessness and immensity now represent the feeling that his heartache will never go away.

Of course, the speaker repeatedly emphasizes that the sky itself hasn't *literally* changed; *he's* the one who's different, and the surrounding world looks as it always has. The shifting symbolism of the night sky, then, speaks to the way that love—and its loss—can entirely shift one's perspective.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "The night is starry / and the stars are blue and shiver in the distance."
- **Line 4:** "The night wind revolves in the sky and sings."
- **Line 8:** "I kissed her again and again under the endless sky."
- **Line 16:** "The night is starry and she is not with me."



POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) gives readers a sense of the speaker's troubled mind. It does this either by fragmenting sentences, or by balancing different elements of a sentence to give what's being said the sound of cold, hard logic. For example, take a look at the full stops in lines 12 and 17:

To think that I do not have **her**. To feel that I have lost her.

[...]

This is **all**. In the distance someone is **singing**. In the distance.

Full stops like these slow the poem down to a near halt, dramatizing the speaker's inability to fully comprehend the break-up. It shows him dwelling on things; the short, declarative statements make it seem like the speaker is trying to reason out what happened, to convince himself, bit by bit, that his relationship is really and truly over.

The pauses in lines 25 and 26 work similarly:

Another's. She will be another's. As she was before

my kisses.

Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

The pauses created by all these caesurae (which combines in line 26 with [asyndeton](#)) again suggest that the speaker is trying very hard to slowly, steadily reason out what happened, to remind himself of his current, lonely reality, and even to contain his emotional response to that reality. Those pauses prevent the poem from gaining much momentum, in turn suggesting that the speaker is trying to keep it together; he could write "the saddest lines," but he also doesn't want to let his feelings spill out of him uncontrollably.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Write, for example, "The"
- **Line 6:** "her, and"
- **Line 9:** "loved me, sometimes"
- **Line 12:** "her. To"
- **Line 13:** "night, still"
- **Line 17:** "all. In," "singing. In"
- **Line 22:** "We, of," "then, are"
- **Line 25:** "Another's. She," "another's. As"
- **Line 26:** "voice, her," "body. Her"
- **Line 28:** "short, forgetting"

END-STOPPED LINE

Almost every line in the poem is [end-stopped](#). This grants the poem a slow, lingering, and deliberate sense of pacing. The speaker seems to be trying to contain his emotions; though he declares that he has the power to "write the saddest lines," he doesn't actually seem to do that. Instead, he keeps things relatively direct and straightforward, as though trying to get—and keep—a handle on his situation.

If the whole poem were [enjambéd](#), its momentum would roll down the page, gaining speed and urgency like a snowball. Keeping things clearly end-stopped prevents this from happening; it arguably prevents the speaker from snow-balling into inescapable despair.

Each end-stop, in turn, carves out an empty space in which the speaker's thoughts can linger for a beat. Take lines 5-6:

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

The full stops that conclude these line leave no room for argument, and reinforce the idea that this relationship is over for good. This speaker is presenting his situation as clearly and steadily as possible.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lines."
- **Line 3:** "distance."
- **Line 4:** "sings."
- **Line 5:** "lines."
- **Line 6:** "too."
- **Line 7:** "arms."
- **Line 8:** "sky."
- **Line 9:** "too."
- **Line 10:** "eyes."
- **Line 11:** "lines."
- **Line 12:** "her."
- **Line 13:** "her."
- **Line 14:** "pasture."
- **Line 15:** "her."
- **Line 16:** "me."
- **Line 17:** "distance."
- **Line 18:** "her."
- **Line 19:** "closer."
- **Line 20:** "me."
- **Line 21:** "trees."
- **Line 22:** "same."
- **Line 23:** "her."
- **Line 24:** "hearing."
- **Line 25:** "kisses."
- **Line 26:** "eyes."
- **Line 27:** "her."
- **Line 28:** "long."
- **Line 30:** "her."
- **Line 32:** "her."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem frequently [juxtaposes](#) two moments in time: *then*, when the speaker and his lover were still together, and the *now*, the "tonight" during which the speaker composes the poem.

Any contrast between these moments in time, the speaker makes clear, is due to the shift in the speaker's own perspective; the actual world around him has not changed, and the fact that it nevertheless *feels* entirely different speaks to just how much the *speaker's loneliness* has affected him.

The sky was "endless" when the speaker held his beloved in her arms, for example, yet now seems "more immense without her." Whereas the sky once seemed to reflect the speaker's limitless love, now it reflects that love's *absence*. Throughout the poem, the juxtaposition between these two night skies—one marvelously infinite, the other icy and alienating—again reflects how much the end of this relationship has hurt the speaker.

The poem again uses juxtaposition in lines 21-22:

The same night whitening the same trees.
We, of back then, are no longer the same.

Again, there is nothing *literally* different about the environment surrounding the speaker on this night. The speaker and his beloved are the ones who have changed; they are "no longer" the people they once were, and this shift has, in turn, shifted everything else.

Finally, the starkest juxtaposition is also the poem's most famous line:

Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

This line is also an example of [parallelism](#) and [antithesis](#): the grammatical structure of each clause is exactly the same, yet they express opposing ideas. Placing these two notions side by side highlights the crux of the speaker's dilemma: his love is over, but he just can't move on.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "Tonight I can write the saddest lines. / I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too. / Through nights like this one I held her in my arms. / I kissed her again and again under the endless sky."
- **Line 13:** "To hear the immense night, still more immense without her."
- **Lines 21-22:** "The same night whitening the same trees. / We, of back then, are no longer the same."
- **Line 23:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her."
- **Lines 27-28:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her. / Love is so short, forgetting is so long."
- **Lines 29-30:** "Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms / my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."

PARADOX

Line 27 seems to contain a [paradox](#), as the speaker insists at once that he definitely doesn't love his ex, but also might still love his ex:

I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her.

Of course, these two things can't both be true! It's impossible for something to be both a certainty *and* a maybe. And, at this point in the poem, readers have every right to take any declaration of certainty with a big grain of salt; the speaker has spent many lines repeating the fact that he's no longer with his beloved, and this fixation implies that he still has at least some feelings for her.

It's thus ultimately not surprising that the speaker ties himself up in this kind of paradoxical knot; his emotions are pulling him all over the place! The revision of certainty into doubt demonstrates that his feelings are still incredibly raw, and that

for all the speaker's attempts to rationalize what has happened, he's still in a state of confusion and chaos. The paradox shows the speaker's desire to move on, but also his current inability to do so.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her."

PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) brings the speaker's environment to life. Instead of making the speaker less lonely, however, this personification only serves to emphasize his own sense of isolation.

The first instance of personification comes as one of the speaker's own "examples" of the "saddest lines" that he is now able to write:

the stars are blue and shiver in the distance.

Shivering is an action associated with being cold (although it's worth noting that it can apply to animals as well as humans). Here, the speaker seems to be projecting his feelings onto the sky—an example of [pathetic fallacy](#) that reflects how cold the speaker feels now that the warmth of love has gone. The next line then picks up on this personification, describing the "night wind" as "sing[ing]." The wind's movement and voice reflect the speaker's own restless longing.

Personification also reinforces the speaker's sense of conflict and confusion, as he imbues various parts of himself with a will of their own. Instead of simply saying that he isn't happy, for example, the speaker says twice that "soul" isn't content. This makes it seem as though his longing for his beloved is lodged deep within—that it's part of his very essence.

The speaker also grants his "sight," "heart," and "voice" their own agency:

My sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.
[...]
My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

These lines are kind of [metaphor](#), [synecdoche](#), and [personification](#) all rolled into one! The speaker's heart and the voice are like characters in and of themselves, desperately seeking out what has been lost. Part of the speaker rationally accepts that his relationship is over, but the personification here implies that the speaker isn't in full control of his feelings.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the stars are blue and shiver in the distance."
- **Line 4:** "The night wind revolves in the sky and sings."
- **Line 18:** "My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."
- **Line 19:** "My sight tries to find her"
- **Line 20:** "My heart looks for her"
- **Line 24:** "My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing."
- **Line 30:** "my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) works alongside the poem's more general [repetition](#) to evoke the speaker's anguish; he's conflicted, in pain, and seemingly unable to move on, returning again and again to memories that simply hurt him.

For example, look at the parallelism of lines 12-13, where the speaker repeats the same sentence structure over and over again:

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.
To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.

(Note that, in the original Spanish, there is no "to" in infinitive verbs, meaning this isn't really [anaphora](#); these clauses begin: "Pensar," "Sentir," "Oír.")

The speaker moves from *thought* to *feeling*, seeming to internalize his loss (also note that "I do not have" and "I have lost" are essentially synonyms—they mean mostly the same thing). The next line then hammers home how lonely and isolated the speaker feels without his lover by his side.

Similarly, the speaker uses parallelism to talk about how his "sight," "heart," and "voice" each try to reach out to his lover, seemingly of their own accord. Notice how each of these lines essentially expresses the same desire to be in contact with the speaker's ex:

My sight tries to find her as though to bring her closer.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.
[...]
My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

This parallelism, in turn, reflects how desperately the speaker longs for his beloved, even as he keeps telling himself that "she is not with [him]."

The parallel thoughts and sentence structures that fill the poem create a sense of a speaker trying to convince himself of reality—as though if he says the same thing in the same way

enough times, he will stop missing his ex. Sometimes, however, this parallelism does just the opposite, highlighting the stark [juxtaposition](#) between the speaker's past and his present. Take lines 23 and 27:

I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her.
[...]
I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her.

These lines are almost exactly the same grammatically, yet their meanings are entirely different. In the first instance the speaker insists that he's over his lover, while in the second he says that he's not. The parallelism of these lines highlights their difference in meaning, in turn calling attention to the speaker's conflicted state of mind.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too."
- **Line 9:** "She loved me, sometimes I loved her too."
- **Lines 12-13:** "To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her. / To hear the immense night, still more immense without her."
- **Line 16:** "The night is starry and she is not with me."
- **Line 19:** "My sight tries to find her"
- **Line 20:** "My heart looks for her, and she is not with me."
- **Line 23:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her."
- **Line 24:** "My voice tried to find the wind"
- **Line 26:** "Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes."
- **Line 27:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her."
- **Line 28:** "Love is so short, forgetting is so long."
- **Line 31:** "this be the last pain that she makes me suffer"
- **Line 32:** "these the last verses that I write for her."

REPETITION

[Repetition](#) appears throughout the poem, evoking the way in which the speaker's mind keeps circling back on itself. He's *trying* to move on, but all this repetition suggests that he's stuck in the past, reliving his trauma over and over again. In this way, the poem's repetition works much like its [parallelism](#) (and, indeed, the two devices often overlap quite a bit).

The most obvious repetition is that of the poem's first line, which reappears, word for word, three times in the poem—becoming a [refrain](#) of sorts. Each time the line repeats, it's like a bell marking the sadness of the occasion. It draws the speaker back to the rawness of his pain, as though the intervening lines are just a mere attempt at distracting himself.

The speaker repeats other phrases and lines throughout the poem as well. "The night is starry" from line 2, for example,

reappears in line 16, again calling attention to the fact that the night itself looks as it always has—and how it did back when the speaker was still with his lover. Line 18, meanwhile ("My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."), gets repeated as line 30. As with the poem's opening line, this repetition emphasizes just how lonely and sad the speaker is.

Another form of repetition in the poem is [diacope](#), which similarly creates the sensation of the speaker being confused, conflicted, and unable to move past his pain. Take line 6:

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

And then line 9:

She loved me, sometimes I loved her too.

Both lines repeat the word "loved," which is written in the simple preterit tense in the original Spanish—emphasized the fact that this love is definitively over. And not only do these lines feature diacope, but they're also an example of parallelism and [juxtaposition](#). They feature the same grammatical structure, but in the first instance it's the *speaker* whose love is constant, and in the second, it's his beloved whose love is *constant*. This again suggests that the speaker is conflicted and confused.

Diacope can also work as a kind of language *intensifier*. In lines 21 and 22, for instance, the repetition of "same" emphasizes the fact that nothing has *literally* changed in the world around the speaker. The appearance of the "same" word (get it?) in the next line then draws attention to how *different* the speaker himself is:

The **same** night whitening the **same** trees.
We, of back then, are no longer the **same**.

In line 26, the repetition of the phrase "in the distance" works similarly, creating a sort of echo that makes the speaker seem all the more isolated from this "singing":

This is all. **In the distance** someone is singing. **In the distance**.

As one final example, take line 13:

To hear the **immense** night, still more **immense** without her.

This is [anadiplosis](#) (which is more noticeable in the original Spanish text). The repetition of "immense" makes the night sky seem, well, "more immense"—even more vast and foreboding.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Tonight I can write the saddest lines."
- **Line 2:** "The night is starry"
- **Line 5:** "Tonight I can write the saddest lines."
- **Lines 6-6:** "I / her, and sometimes she / me too."
- **Line 6:** "loved," "loved"
- **Line 9:** "She loved me, sometimes I loved her too."
- **Line 11:** "Tonight I can write the saddest lines."
- **Line 12:** "To think," "To feel"
- **Line 13:** "To hear," "immense," "immense"
- **Line 16:** "The night is starry"
- **Line 17:** "In the distance," "In the distance"
- **Line 18:** "My soul," "is not satisfied that it has lost her."
- **Line 19:** "My sight"
- **Line 20:** "My heart"
- **Line 21:** "same," "same"
- **Line 22:** "same"
- **Line 23:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but how I loved her."
- **Line 25:** "Another's," "another's"
- **Line 26:** "Her," "her," "Her"
- **Line 27:** "I no longer love her, that's certain, but maybe I love her."
- **Line 30:** "my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."

SIMILE

The poem uses just one [simile](#), which shows in up in line 14:

And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture.

The word "verse" here refers to poetry itself, while "dew to the pasture" refers to the beads of condensation that form on grass early in the morning. Poetry, in this comparison, is like a delicate dew that condenses on the speaker's soul.

This is hardly the first time that the speaker has referenced poetry within the poem itself! The speaker repeatedly says throughout the poem that he is now able to "write the saddest lines," implicitly because of the sorrow he feels over the loss of his lover. Pain and sorrow, in other words, have granted him the power to create the saddest poetry of all time.

The poem thus links poetry with emotion, suggesting that there's a kind of natural symbiosis between them. And that's exactly what the simile conveys, using the lovely, natural [imagery](#) of dew on grass to illustrate how easily poetry now comes to the speaker.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture."

**VOCABULARY**

Dew (Line 14) - Condensation that forms on grass over night.

Pasture (Line 14) - A pasture is a grass-covered area of land set aside for animals to graze (e.g., cows).

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

"Tonight I can write" doesn't have a traditional poetic form. It has a fairly regular look on the page though, unfolding for the most part through two-line stanzas that might be thought of as unrhymed [couplets](#). The straightforward, simple form matches up with the speaker's straightforward, simple tone.

Lines 1 and 4, however, are single lines all on their lonesome. Starting the poem off with these lonely lines might evoke the speaker's own loneliness for the reader. With that in mind, perhaps the poem's reliance on couplets [ironically](#) highlights that the speaker is no longer part of a couple.

The poem is also an example of meta-poetry—that is, a poem about poetry itself. The speaker clearly marks himself out as a poet up top, declaring his power to "write the saddest lines" thanks to his heartache. It's up to the reader, however, to consider whether these *are* those lines that the speaker is now able to write.

METER

This poem does not use regular [meter](#), making it a departure from the poems found in Neruda's previous book, *Crepusculario*. The lines are roughly the same length on the page, though they vary in the amount of syllables. The speaker insists he has the power to "write the saddest lines," and the poem's lack of meter might suggest that genuine grief can't be contained by a steady rhythm. That is, the speaker organizes his thoughts into lines, but doesn't make them *too* neat and tidy—perhaps because doing so would betray the raw emotion that he's feeling.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). This, combined with the poem's lack of [meter](#), makes the poem feel raw and authentic. It's as though the speaker is more concerned with being truthful than with putting an impressive technical display. Note that such starkness of expression was considered quite radical for Neruda's time, and formed part of the poem's (and the book's) popularity!

**SPEAKER**

According to the poet, the poem's speaker is Neruda himself. That said, readers don't actually get much autobiographical

information from the poem text apart from the fact that the speaker is a poet, and that he (or she—there's no actual gendering in the poem!) is heartbroken over the loss of a lover. The intensity with which the speaker feels—and expresses—this heartbreak also marks him out as a young person, firmly in the grip of "tormented adolescent passions" (Neruda's own description from his memoirs).

The speaker is caught between his raw pain and this compulsion to write, and this plays out in the poem through two distinct types of sentences. Sometimes, the speaker uses plain, matter-of-fact statements. Take line 16:

The night is starry and she is not with me.

The straightforward language isn't meant to make the speaker seem detached, but rather to evoke the raw intensity of his pain—as though to say this line in another (perhaps more conventionally poetic) way would somehow be inauthentic.

But in other moments, the speaker does indeed turn to more conventionally poetic language. The speaker is conscious of this tendency, pointing to it directly in lines 2 and 3. In these lines, it's as though the speaker wants to *transform* his pain into something more valuable: poetry. In the end, however, doing so doesn't seem to rid the speaker of his pain.



SETTING

The setting is both specific and vague: it's a cold, starry night and the wind is blowing. The speaker could be standing under this starry sky anywhere on earth; what matters is that he's standing there alone.

The speaker used to hold his beloved under the same night sky, whose depth, at the time, seemed to speak to the endless, infinite nature of their love. Now, however, those same stars feel distant and cold. The sky's endlessness no longer suggests the limitlessness of young love, but the emptiness of being alone.

This solitude has transformed the speaker's environment—even as the speaker himself insists that nothing about the physical world around him has changed. The "same trees" still glow in the same moonlight, yet because the speaker is no longer with his beloved, the world seems newly harsh, cold, empty, and alienating.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Pablo Neruda published *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (*Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*) in 1924 at the age of 19. The poem is simply called "Poem 20" in

that collection, and appears as the second-to-last poem in the book (just before the "[The Song of Despair](#)").

Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair charts the joys and pains of young love, and draws heavily on Neruda's own experiences. He deemed the collection "a painful book of pastoral poems" dealing with the "most tormented adolescent passions, mingled with the devastating nature of the southern part" of Chile.

The book was ahead of its time in the clarity and rawness of its expression, which helped make it a bestseller. In fact, it remains the best-selling Spanish-language poetry collection of all time, and has been translated into numerous languages. This particular translation was done by the American poet W.S. Merwin in 1969.

Era-wise, the poem comes towards the end of the Spanish-language *Modernismo* movement, which had some differing principles from the English-language Modernist movement. While *Modernismo* advocated poetry that spoke to national identity, ancient (European) mythology, and complex meters, Neruda's poem hints at the rejection of some of these ideals.

Neruda here is closer to the principles of the *Ultraist* movement, avoiding what the 1922 Ultraist manifesto calls "ornamental artefacts" (that is, tired and/or pretentious poetic habits). Neruda was also influenced by the raw emotion of one of his early mentors, fellow Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, whose poems often dealt with the loss of love; Mistral in fact encouraged the young Neruda's love of literature.

After the success of this book, Neruda went on to have a long, varied, and fruitful career in literature, culminating in winning the Nobel Prize in 1971. By the time of his death in 1973, Neruda had written more than 40 volumes of poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pablo Neruda's poetry is often closely associated with his homeland, Chile. Though there are no specific references to Chile in this poem, the country's presence can be felt in its scenery. The poems in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* often draw on Chile's vast natural landscapes to inform its own *emotional* landscape.

Neruda moved to Santiago, the Chilean capital, three years before the publication of *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Following the book's release, he became a well-known figure and served various roles throughout his life associated with the Chilean government.

At the time of its publication, though, the book was considered controversial because of its unashamed eroticism. Many readers have also speculated over the identity of the woman/women in the book, though Neruda was relatively guarded on the subject. He suggested that the poems are addressed variously to two of his lovers.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair](https://archive.org/details/TwentyLovePoemsAndASongOfDespair-PabloNeruda/mode/2up) – The full collection translated by W.S. Merwin. (<https://archive.org/details/TwentyLovePoemsAndASongOfDespair-PabloNeruda/mode/2up>)
- [Puedo Escribir Los Versos Mas Tristes](http://www.westal.net/hp/mint/poems/puedo.htm) – Check out the poem in its original Spanish! (<http://www.westal.net/hp/mint/poems/puedo.htm>)
- [Neruda's Biography](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/pablo-neruda) – Learn more about Neruda's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/pablo-neruda>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcGWKik6Zfl) – Listen to a reading of the poem. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcGWKik6Zfl>)

- ["Romance and Revolution"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sogJXiaBM8Q) – Watch a TED-ed presentation about Neruda, deemed here a "romantic and a revolutionary." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sogJXiaBM8Q>)



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