

# Mean Time



## SUMMARY

Winding the clocks back robbed me of an hour of daylight while I wandered around through a part of town I wouldn't normally be in, grieving the end of our relationship.

Rain, which can't be put back together, fell against the desolate streets while my heart kept agonizing over all the wrong choices we both made.

If only the sky, which was growing darker, could have erased more than a single hour from the day, then I wouldn't have said those things to you, nor would you have said those things to me.

In any case, we'll both be dead eventually, far past any light at all. These are waning days and never-ending nights.

with their loss and the frustrating reality that some wounds, like that rain, are "unmendable."

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12



## TIME AND MORTALITY

The poem's title, "Mean Time," is a play on words: time is "mean," or cruel, in the sense that it marches on relentlessly, regardless of people's desires. No matter how much the speaker regrets the exchange of words that led to their breakup, they can't go back and do things differently. The poem illustrates that people are powerless when it comes to time, which they can neither reverse nor pause nor keep from flowing endlessly forward. Thinking about the "darkening sky" and impending long winter nights, the speaker seems to mourn not just the end of a relationship but the eventual end of *everything*—including the final loss of all "light" that occurs in death.

When the speaker says that the "clocks slid back an hour," they're referring to daylight savings time: when people turn clocks back in the fall. Time itself isn't actually moving backward, of course; instead, the clocks are "stealing" light in the sense that this time change means that the sun sets earlier in the day. Darkness comes *sooner* and the nights get longer, a process that reflects the speaker's deepening sorrow.

And there's nothing the speaker can do about it! Like the "unmendable rain" falling to the ground, time flows only in one direction, and it's entirely out of the speaker's hands. The days will get shorter and shorter until, eventually, there are only "the endless nights."

These nights are [symbolic](#): they represent both the speaker's hopelessness and the total, "endless" darkness of death. Indeed, the speaker acknowledges that eventually both they and their ex-lover "will be dead, as we know, / beyond all light." Darkness arriving sooner isn't just literal, then; it suggests that time moves people inevitably towards a place where they won't be able to feel love or regret or anything at all. In this way, the poem grapples with more than just the dissolution of a love affair; it also mourns human mortality and the inevitable forward momentum of time, which does not slow down for people's feelings.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 13-16



## THEMES



### THE PAIN OF LOST LOVE AND REGRET

"Mean Time" describes a speaker walking through town while "mourning" the end of a love affair. The dark, rainy night reflects the speaker's misery as they grapple with the fact that they can never erase the bitter "words" that led to the end of their relationship. Regret only amplifies the pain of the speaker's heartache; knowing it's impossible to fix the "mistakes" of the past, the speaker feels utterly hopeless about the future.

The poem's gloomy setting mirrors the speaker's despair. The poem takes place in late fall, when people turn back the "clocks" for daylight savings time. As a result of this process, it gets darker earlier in the evening, something the speaker compares to the clocks "stealing" light. This *literal* loss of daylight represents the *symbolic* loss of the speaker's joy; their life seems less warm and vibrant without their love.

In fact, the entire world seems to reflect the speaker's heartache. The impending onset of winter—a season of cold, death, and darkness—mirrors the fact that the speaker's future appears dismal in the wake of their breakup. The sky is "darkening," the streets are "bleak," and the rain is "unmendable," incapable of being put back together after it splatters on the ground. All this [imagery](#) represents the speaker's hopelessness and irreparable heartache.

Even as the speaker agonizes over their "mistakes," trying to make sense of what went wrong and wishing they could change things, they know that it's impossible to turn back time. Just as the rain can't soar back up into the sky, the speaker can't alter the course of events that led them here. The speaker must live



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

## LINES 1-4

*The clocks slid ...  
... mourning our love.*

The poem's title, "Mean Time," is a play on words:

- Firstly, it refers to Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), the time zone in Britain. In the UK, the clocks are advanced an hour in the summer and then set back at the end of October. The poem thus takes place in the middle of fall.
- Secondly, it's a play on the common phrase, *in the meantime*, which describes a period of time in which one is waiting for something expected to happen.
- Thirdly, it can be read as [personifying](#) time as "Mean" or cruel.

The speaker builds on this personification of time in the first two lines of the poem itself, saying that the "clocks," wound back for daylight savings time, "stole light" from the speaker's "life." Turning back the clocks means that the sun sets earlier; literally, then, there is less *daylight*. Symbolically, though, this loss of light reflects the loss of happiness, comfort, etc. Time becomes a robber in the poem, a thief of joy. (The dwindling "light" in the speaker's life also gestures toward human mortality—a theme the speaker will touch on at the poem's end.)

By the end of the stanza, it becomes clear that the speaker is going through a breakup. Devastated by this loss of love, the speaker's despair colors the way they experience the world. That is, they see their own sorrow reflected in the darkness that surrounds them. The mention of "the wrong part of town" might mean that the speaker is in a dangerous area or simply that they're somewhere they're not supposed to—in their former's lover's neighborhood, perhaps.

The poem features natural, conversational language. This makes it feel modern and intimate, as though readers are getting a glimpse directly into the speaker's thoughts. Note, too, how the sounds of these opening lines enhance their meaning:

- The quiet /s/ [alliteration](#) of "slid" and "stole" evokes time's slipperiness and stealth.
- The [consonance](#) and alliteration of the liquid /l/ sound ("clocks slid," "stole light," "life") has a similar effect, conveying time's fluid motion.
- The alliteration and [assonance](#) of "light" and "life" call attention to the thematic link between these words; light is essential to life. The [slant rhyme](#) between "life" and "love" hints that love is a deeply important part of life as well.
- Finally, the [enjambment](#) of lines 1-2 pushes the

reader forward without pause, mimicking the speaker's listless wandering and the way time slips through their fingers.

## LINES 5-8

*And, of course, ...  
... all our mistakes.*

The speaker opens the second stanza by saying that "of course" the "unmendable rain" is falling. That "of course" suggests that the speaker is all too aware of how [clichéd](#) this all is—this heartbroken stroll through dark and dreary weather. The phrase also makes it sound like the world is out to get the speaker, who feels like they can't catch a break on this gloomy evening.

The rain is "unmendable" in the sense that it can't be stopped once it begins to fall, nor can it be put back together after it splatters onto the "bleak streets." The /ee/ [assonance](#) in "bleak streets" evokes the intensity of the speaker's grief, as does the use of [pathetic fallacy](#) in these lines: the speaker is projecting their own feelings of pain and hopelessness onto their surroundings. It's the *speaker's* life that feels "bleak," and the *speaker's* heart that is "unmendable"; the damage is done, and the relationship can't be saved.

The speaker says that their heart "gnaw[s] / at all our mistakes." To "gnaw" on something is to chew on it persistently, as a dog might do with a bone. The word conveys the speaker's agony; their heart seems to have a will of its own here, and the speaker simply can't stop thinking about all the things that led to the end of their relationship.

The string of [enjambments](#) across lines 5-8 creates momentum, pulling the reader down the page in a manner that evokes the relentless fall of the rain to the pavement. Only the last line of the stanza is [end-stopped](#), coming to a firm pause after the word "mistakes" and thus emphasizing the speaker's feelings of regret.

## LINES 9-12

*If the darkening ...  
... heard you say.*

The speaker again plays with the idea of daylight savings time: turning the clocks back has erased an hour of daylight, making the "darkening sky" arrive earlier in the evening. The speaker says that if only the darkness could "lift / more than one hour"—that is, erase even *more* of this day than it already has—then "there are words" that neither they nor their lover would ever have spoken. In other words, the speaker wishes the past few hours never happened; they clearly regret this bitter exchange with their lover. The repetitive language also emphasizes that *both* parties said things that resulted in the relationship ending.

At the same time, the fact that the stanza begins with "If"

highlights the fact that time *doesn't* work this way. What's done can't be undone, and the speaker is now faced with the reality of a future shaped by these regrettable words.

Once again, the poem uses [enjambment](#) to create momentum. The swift flow of the poem down the page mirrors the way time seems to slip through the speaker's hands, much like that "unmendable rain."

Note, too, that while the first two stanzas contained [slant rhymes](#) between their second and fourth lines ("life"/ "love," "streets"/"mistakes"), this stanza contains a full rhyme: "day"/ "say." This full rhyme feels more emphatic and creates more obvious musicality, which ratchets up the poem's intensity as it nears its conclusion.

### LINES 13-16

*But we will ...  
... the endless nights.*

Things get even bleaker in the final stanza. The speaker knows that they can't erase the past; time only moves forward. As fall turns to winter, the days will keep getting shorter as the nights get longer. To the despairing speaker, these dark, lonely nights feel "endless."

Thinking about the march of time makes the speaker think about mortality. Just as the fall steals daylight, time steals the [metaphorical](#) "light" of the speaker's life. Eventually, time will take it *all*: the speaker and their beloved both "will be dead" and "beyond all light."

On the one hand, the speaker might be talking about the death of the relationship: "we will be dead" could mean that "we"—as in, "you and I as a unit, a couple"—will cease to exist. But the speaker also means this literally: one day both parties will actually die. The darkness the speaker anticipates in the poem's final line refers not just to the long nights of winter, but also to the [symbolic](#) "endless night[]" of death.

Where the previous two stanzas were mostly [enjambéd](#), lines 13, 14, and 16 are all [end-stopped](#). This slows the poem down, making it almost seem as though the speaker is dragging their feet in the face of a lonely, loveless future. Note, too, the [juxtaposition](#) of "shortened days" and "endless nights." This reflects the idea that life is fleeting and finite while death lasts forever.

Listen to the blunt /b/ [alliteration](#) and /d/ [consonance](#) throughout this final stanza:

But we will be dead, as we know,  
beyond all light.  
These are the shortened days  
and the endless nights.

These heavy, pounding sounds add weighty intensity to the poem's closing moments, evoking the speaker's dread and

despair. In the end, the speaker isn't just mourning a relationship; they're mourning the fact that life is brief, death unavoidable, and the passage of time relentless.



## SYMBOLS



### LIGHT

Light in the poem refers to more than literal daylight. It also [symbolizes](#) joy, love, and life itself. When the speaker says that the clocks "stole light from my life," they're not just talking about the fact that daylight savings time results in it getting dark outside earlier in the evening. They're also saying that they feel robbed of happiness in the wake of their breakup. Life feels darker and duller without their beloved by their side. The speaker builds on this symbolism in the poem's final stanza, when they declare, "we will be dead, as we know / beyond all light." Death is a state of total darkness. In death, the speaker will be cut off from "light"—joy, warmth, vitality—entirely.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The clocks slid back an hour / and stole light from my life"
- **Lines 13-14:** "But we will be dead, as we know, / beyond all light."



### DARKNESS

If light in the poem [symbolizes](#) love, joy, and life, then darkness symbolizes the opposite: death and despair. The darkening days of later autumn mirror the speaker's deepening sadness over the end of their relationship. The "shortening days" and lengthening nights of winter represent the speaker's hopelessness; the speaker looks into a future that they imagine will be devoid of love.

Thinking about the changing seasons and the unstoppable motion of time prompts the speaker to look ahead to the day when both they and their ex-lover will both be dead, "beyond all light." In addition to representing an empty, lonely future, the "endless nights" that close the poem also symbolize the final darkness of death.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The clocks slid back an hour / and stole light from my life"
- **Line 9:** "the darkening sky"
- **Lines 14-16:** "beyond all light. / These are the shortened days / and the endless nights."



## POETIC DEVICES

## PERSONIFICATION

The speaker [personifies](#) time in the first two lines of the poem. Describing the process of daylight savings, the speaker says, "The clocks slid back an hour / and stole light from my life." This personification builds on the poem's title, "Mean Time," which is a play on words suggesting that time itself is cruel. The early sunset caused by winding the clocks back mirrors the speaker's pain; the speaker has lost not just literal sunlight but the [symbolic](#) light of love and happiness.

Personifying time conveys the speaker's sense of helplessness. The speaker is angry with themselves for saying certain "words" to their former lover, but they know they can't go back and mend the "mistakes" of the past. They level their anger at time itself, resenting its relentless march towards darkness and, eventually, death.

The clocks aren't really stealing anything, of course; it's human beings setting them back and robbing the speaker of an hour of daylight. Time only *feels* sneaky and cruel when viewed through the lens of the speaker's despair. Indeed, the speaker's pain casts the whole world into a dark and dreary light, and the poem is filled with examples of [pathetic fallacy](#): moments when the speaker projects their own feelings onto their surroundings. For example, the speaker describes the "rain" as "unmendable"—incapable of being fixed, just like their relationship and/or their broken heart. Likewise, calling the streets "bleak" reflects the bleakness of the speaker's own life following their breakup.

## Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "The clocks slid back an hour / and stole light from my life"

## PARALLELISM

There are two important moments of [parallelism](#) in "Mean Time." The first appears in lines 11-12, after the speaker thinks about erasing an argument that presumably ended their relationship:

there are words I would never have said  
nor have heard you say.

The language here is very similar, and it highlights the fact that *both* parties are to blame for this breakup: they *both* spoke words that cannot be taken back or forgotten. The issue isn't just that the speaker themselves "said" hurtful words; it's that they "heard" hurtful words come from their former partner.

The poem also ends with a moment of [antithesis](#):

These are the shortened days  
and the endless nights.

As the days get shorter, the nights, by default, must get longer. Beyond describing the transition from fall to winter—which entails dwindling daylight—these lines hammer home the speaker's seemingly insurmountable despair. The loss of daylight represents the loss of love and joy. To the heartbroken speaker, those nights feel positively "endless," their relentless darkness representing the speaker's relentless pain.

## Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "have said"
- **Line 12:** "have heard"
- **Lines 15-16:** "the shortened days / and the endless nights."

## ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) fills the poem with musicality and subtly emphasizes certain images and ideas. In the opening stanza, for example, the shared long /i/ sounds of "light" and "life" emphasize the thematic connection between these words: time is stealing both "light" *and* "life" from the speaker. (Note that these words feature [alliteration](#) as well, further emphasizing their connection.)

Assonance then lends the following stanza some lilting music. There are the short /eh/ sounds of "unmendable," "fell," and "felt"; the long /ee/ sounds of "bleak streets"; and the round /aw/ of "gnaw" and "all." Note that there's plenty of [consonance](#) here too, as with the /f/ and /l/ sounds of "fell" and "felt."

These sonic devices heighten the poem's language, making the scene feel more dramatic and conveying the intensity of the speaker's pain.

## Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "light," "life"
- **Line 3:** "walked," "wrong"
- **Line 5:** "unmendable"
- **Line 6:** "fell," "bleak," "streets"
- **Line 7:** "felt," "gnaw"
- **Line 8:** "all"
- **Line 10:** "day"
- **Line 12:** "say"
- **Line 14:** "light"
- **Line 16:** "nights"

## ENJAMBMENT

Frequent [enjambment](#) pulls the reader down the page, evoking the forward march of time. In stanza 1, for example, the enjambment of lines 1 and 2 helps convey the way time slips

through the speaker's fingers. The poem moves swiftly from one line to the next without pause, mimicking the very "sliding" of the clocks being described:

The clocks slid back an hour  
and stole light from my life  
as I walked [...]

Enjambment works similarly in the next stanza, evoking the motion of that "unmendable rain" as it falls to the "bleak streets" below as well as the speaker's inability to stop agonizing over "all our mistakes" for even a moment. And the [end-stop](#) at the end of this stanza feels all the more final and blunt on the heels of so much enjambment.

The next stanza again features three enjambed lines in a row, echoing the sensation of time moving quickly away from the speaker. In the last stanza, though, there is only a single enjambment:

These are the shortened days  
and the endless nights.

More end-stops slow the reader down in the poem's final moments, adding weight to the speaker's discussion of mortality.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "hour / and"
- **Lines 2-3:** "life / as"
- **Lines 5-6:** "rain / fell"
- **Lines 6-7:** "treads / where"
- **Lines 7-8:** "gnaw / at"
- **Lines 9-10:** "lift / more"
- **Lines 10-11:** "day / there"
- **Lines 11-12:** "said / nor"
- **Lines 15-16:** "days / and"

## CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#), like [assonance](#), adds music and emphasis to the poem. In the first stanza, hissing /s/ sounds convey the sinister stealth with which the clocks "slid back" and "stole light" from the speaker's "life" (note that these words are also an example of [alliteration](#) and [sibilance](#)). The liquid /l/ sounds of this stanza—"slid," "stole," "light," "life"—add to the effect, subtly evoking the fluid flow of time. Meanwhile, the alliteration of "light," "life," and "love" emphasizes the connection between these concepts. Light, in the poem, [symbolizes](#) both life and love—two things time steals from the speaker.

In the final stanza, the heavy /d/ and /b/ sounds—"But," "dead," "beyond," "shortened days," "endless"—sounds suggest the pull of the speaker's despair.

#### Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "clocks," "slid," "back"
- **Line 2:** "stole," "light," "life"
- **Line 4:** "love"
- **Line 5:** "unmendable"
- **Line 6:** "fell," "bleak"
- **Line 7:** "felt"
- **Line 9:** "darkening," "sky," "could"
- **Line 10:** "day"
- **Line 11:** "words," "would"
- **Line 12:** "have," "heard"
- **Line 13:** "But," "we," "will," "dead," "we"
- **Line 14:** "beyond"
- **Line 15:** "shortened," "days"
- **Line 16:** "endless"



## VOCABULARY

**The clocks slid back an hour** (Line 1) - The speaker is referring to daylight savings time. In the UK (and elsewhere), clocks are set forward an hour in the summer, resulting in later sunsets. The clocks are then wound back in the fall, resulting in earlier sunsets.

**Unmendable** (Line 5) - Irreparable; broken beyond repair. The speaker can't fix or stop the rain and more than they can mend their own heart.

**Bleak** (Line 6) - Desolate; inhospitable and bare.

**Gnaw** (Line 7) - Chew at relentlessly (as a dog might with a bone).



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Mean Time" consists of four [quatrains](#), or four-line stanzas. These don't follow a regular [meter](#), and the poem's language feels conversational and contemporary. Frequent [enjambment](#) within stanzas pulls readers down the page, subtly mimicking the way time moves forward as "light" and happiness slip through the speaker's fingers.

### METER

"Mean Time" doesn't use a regular [meter](#). (There is, arguably, a very subtle [rhyme scheme](#) at work, meaning it's not entirely [free verse](#).) The lack of meter makes the poem's language feel intimate; it flows smoothly and conversationally, as if the reader is hearing the speaker's innermost thoughts.

### RHYME SCHEME

On first read, "Mean Time" doesn't appear to follow a [rhyme](#)

[scheme](#).

Stanzas 3 and 4 do, however, each contain an end rhyme between their second and fourth lines: "day" and "say" in stanza 3, and "light" and "nights" in stanza 4. This creates an ABCB rhyme scheme. These rhymes lend musicality and emphasis as the poem nears its conclusion, making it feel more emotional and memorable.

One could say that the poem actually follows an ABCB rhyme scheme throughout. The end rhymes in the first stanza are decidedly [slant](#): "life" and "love," however. And in stanza 2, the rhymes are even more subtle, if one even calls them rhymes at all ("streets" and "mistakes" share [consonance](#), so there's at least an echo there if not a true rhyme).



## SPEAKER

The speaker is someone who has just gone through a devastating breakup. They are wandering the streets of their city obsessing over what went wrong and wishing they could go back in time and do things differently. The fact that they can't erase the past makes them despair about the future, which they imagine is made up of "endless nights."

The poem doesn't specify the speaker's identity in any way. Though the poet undoubtedly draws from her own experiences of lost love, the poem contains no overtly autobiographical details.



## SETTING

The poem is set on a rainy night in the middle of fall, when the "clocks" are turned back an hour for daylight savings time. As a result, the speaker is confronted with a sky that's "darkening" earlier than usual, making them feel as if the clocks have stolen "light from [their] life."

The speaker mentions being in "the wrong part of town," suggesting that they don't normally frequent this part of the city; in the aftermath of their breakup, they find themselves somewhere unfamiliar and, perhaps, dangerous. ("Wrong part of town" might also mean that the speaker is in their ex's neighborhood—a part of town that they're no longer supposed to be in.) When they describe "unmendable rain" falling "to the bleak streets," this is an example of [pathetic fallacy](#): the speaker projects their emotional landscape onto the world.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Carol Ann Duffy's "Mean Time" was published in her prize-winning 1993 collection of the same name, which touches on themes of childhood, memory, love, and, unsurprisingly, the

passage of time. The title has multiple meanings: it refers to Greenwich Mean Time, the time zone used in Britain; it evokes the phrase "in the meantime"; and it suggests that time itself is "mean," cruelly marching forward.

Duffy's poetry is known for being straightforward yet effective, accessible yet insightful. She often writes in [free verse](#) and uses relaxed, conversational language. Her literary influences are diverse, including modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, Romantic poets like John Keats and William Wordsworth, and free verse poets like Sylvia Plath, whose exploration of women's interior lives would prove foundational to Duffy's own poetry. A lesbian writer in an often conservative, male-dominated literary culture, Duffy herself has blazed trails in her exploration of women's and LGBTQ narratives in contemporary UK poetry.

Born to working-class parents in Scotland, in 2009 Duffy became the first woman, the first Scottish poet, and the first openly LGBTQ person to become Poet Laureate of the UK. Along with Seamus Heaney, she is now one of the most widely taught poets in UK schools and her work is renowned for its empathy and sharp-edged insights into contemporary life.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Mean Time" was written in the 1990s, but it doesn't directly reference any historical events or figures. It does nod to the modern world in the first stanza with its description of turning the clocks back, however. The United Kingdom began observing what it calls "British Summer Time" in 1916, winding the clocks forward an hour as part of an effort to conserve coal during World War I (starting the day earlier means there's an extra hour of sunlight later on). To this day in the UK, as well as many other nations, the clocks are moved forward an hour in the spring in order to take advantage of the daylight. The clocks then "slide back," reverting to Greenwich Mean Time, in the fall.



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poet's Life](#) — Check out a Poetry Foundation biography of Carol Ann Duffy. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [A Review of Mean Time](#) — Check out a review of the collection in which "Mean Time" was published. (<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-between-the-me-and-the-mass-mean-time-carol-ann-duffy-anvil-6-95-pounds-1487148.html>)
- [A Lincoln Review Conversation](#) — An interview in which Duffy speaks about her poetry and recites several of her poems. (<https://youtu.be/n5PVSMfwW2U>)
- [Poems About Breakups and Heartbreak](#) — A Book Riot

roundup of 25 poems about partings of the heart.  
(<https://bookriot.com/poems-about-breaking-up/>)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- [A Child's Sleep](#)
- [Anne Hathaway](#)
- [Before You Were Mine](#)
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- [Work](#)



## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### CHICAGO MANUAL

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