

Recognition



SUMMARY

People lose track of things, the speaker says, adding that she's allowed herself to get out of shape. She's had three children but she isn't close to any of them.

She can't really recall a time when her body didn't feel so heavy. It must have been years, she says. Now her face is puffy from carrying so much remorse.

When she puts on makeup, it just comes off. Loving her husband has become nothing more than a habit, the reasons *why* she loves him having disappeared into thin air. He becomes agitated, she says, before noting that she tried to cover all the basics in one run to the store.

It was silly to try to do this, she admits, but she'd been crying all morning. Now she's thinking about quiche (a kind of savory egg custard.) Years ago, a fair-haired boy had lifted her in his arms and promised her the entire world.

She says she remembered this while she was standing on the scale that morning (presumably to weigh herself), which is why she'd been crying (presumably because she'd gained weight). She then mentions shallots, or small onions (and a common quiche ingredient; readers might imagine her checking things off her grocery list). Mannequins (or pale, smooth-skinned women) were posing in a store window.

This made the speaker feel all blocked up and like her youth was gone. Squandered. She'd left her purse somewhere and moved her hands clumsily searching for it. The salesgirl stared at her without sympathy. She thought of a kind of red wine. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

She thinks of cheese and tissues. Then reminds herself that her memory is real, that she really did lay laughing in her undergarments in the moist grass. But this was years ago. Flustered, she hurried out of the store.

She came across her own reflection and saw a fretful, frumpy, middle-aged woman staring right back at her. Her reflection stared right at her and said she was sorry, so very sorry.

and a man she "love[s]" for reasons she no longer understands. The poem sharply [juxtaposes](#) her present misery with the joy she felt as a young woman. Recalling these happier times, she grows teary-eyed, "rush[es]" from the store, and "bump[s] into" her reflection in a mirror—which she seems not to recognize at first, as it bears no resemblance to her younger self. The poem shows how aging can bring the terrible "recognition" that life has "[gotten] away from one," and implicitly warns against the kind of complacency or acquiescence that brings "regret" down the line.

The speaker's "habit"-driven routine strikes her as terribly unfulfilling. She "do[es]n't even know" her own children, suggesting that, for whatever reason, she doesn't have a good relationship with them. Her husband/partner, meanwhile, she loves only "through habit," the "proof" having "evaporated" (or disappeared). In other words, she no longer knows *why* she loves this person.

She nonchalantly intersperses these sad details about her personal life with mundane comments on her shopping trip ("Quiche," "Shallots"), implying that she has accepted this loneliness as part of her reality. That is, the revelation that she isn't close with her family is granted no more weight than the items on her grocery list.

Contrasting with this present dissatisfaction is the bright joy of her youth, which seems only to intensify her current misery. She remembers a time when "A blond boy swung [her] up / in his arms and promised the earth." That is, when they were young, this man (perhaps the same man she now loves out of "habit") swept her off her feet and made her believe in their future together. She has to insist to herself this moment "*did happen*," suggesting that it feels so distant now that it's hard to believe she was once this happy, hopeful young woman.

Flustered, she then runs outside and "bump[s] / into an anxious, dowdy matron" in a "mirror." This wording implies that she doesn't recognize herself at first—she's startled by this agitated, frumpy old woman staring back at her. She seems to be addressing herself in the last line of the poem; muttering "I'm sorry sorry sorry," she finally "Recogni[zes]" herself.

This "Recognition" of her own unhappiness—and her apology to herself—warns the reader against the kind of complacency that will result in "regret." This ending suggests that, if one isn't careful, life can quickly slip by, leaving only regrets for the opportunities one "let [...] go." By dramatizing the speaker's misery, the poem stresses the importance of not letting one's life (including one's loved ones) "get away."

Where this theme appears in the poem:



THEMES



AGING, RELATIONSHIPS, AND REGRET

"Recognition" explores the way people can become unrecognizable to themselves as get older. The poem's speaker is a middle-aged woman experiencing a rush of emotional memories while grocery shopping. Her mind jumps around from the task at hand to thoughts about her children

- Lines 1-32



AGING AND WOMANHOOD

In addition to broadly illustrating the dangers of complacency and regret, "Recognition" nods toward the specific challenges that aging women can face in a world that prizes feminine youth and beauty. Despite having fulfilled many of the traditional expectations for women, including motherhood and marriage, the speaker is clearly miserable. She says that she doesn't "even know" her three children and that she loves her husband only out of "habit." The speaker also doesn't see herself reflected in the "creamy ladies" that "pose" in display windows and is treated without "compassion[]" by a younger "shopgirl." As a middle-aged woman, the poem implies, the speaker has been cast aside by much of society and confined to a dull, passionless existence of domestic drudgery. Yet in offering a glimpse into the speaker's mind, the poem insists that even "dowdy matrons" are complex human beings who have loved and lived deeply.

The poem suggests how women are often made to feel invisible and undesirable as they grow older. The speaker repeatedly criticizes her looks, saying, for example, that she struggles "to remember a time / when my body felt light." This is likely both a comment on how she [metaphorically](#) feels weighed down by the burdens of life and how she literally has gained weight over time.

She adds that her "face is swollen / with regrets" and, in her estimation, beyond help; she tries to look better by wearing "powder" but it won't stick to her skin. It seems she feels like there's no point in trying to improve her appearance with makeup.

The speaker says that the specific memory of a young man lifting her up "in his arms" also "came back to" her while she was standing "on the scales." This suggests that she was weighing herself when she suddenly thought of this romantic moment (though the plural "scales" might also refer to weighing produce at the grocery store). That she then "wept" perhaps suggests grief over the number on those scales—that is, "recognition" of the physical fact that she was no longer the young woman who could so easily be "swung" about by her lover.

Seeing reminders of youth upset her, the poem implies, because they remind her of her own age. Upon noticing a group of "creamy ladies" (models or mannequins) posing in a "window," the speaker herself feels "clogged and old" and laments the "waste" of her own life. She feels the young "shopgirl" gaping at her without any sympathy she fumbles for her purse, again implying the way that society tends to discard women over a certain age.

In the end, the speaker can't believe that the "dowdy matron" in the mirror is her own reflection, and she apologizes for letting

herself "go." The implication is that she's lost her chance for romance, excitement, and even simple "compassion" simply by getting older.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-9
- Lines 14-24
- Lines 26-32



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*Things get away ...
... even know them.*

"Recognition" begins with the speaker admitting that her life hasn't exactly turned out the way she'd hoped. "Things" have gotten away from her, she says, adding that she's "let" herself "go." In other words, she's stopped looking after her appearance. The "Things" that have gotten away from the speaker thus seem, in part, related to her looks and/or health.

The speaker then suddenly jumps to talking about her children:

Children? I've had three
and don't even know them.

These three children, it seems, are more "things" that have gotten away from the speaker. Either she's literally not close with them or she doesn't "know" them in a deeper, more philosophical sense. The [enjambment](#) between lines 3 and 4 makes the revelation that the speaker doesn't know her children feel all the more sudden and abrupt.

Also note the [diacope](#) of the word "know" in lines 2 and 4: the speaker "know[s]" that she has stopped caring for her body, but she *doesn't* "know" her own children. This repetition might suggest that she's given up trying to *look* good because she doesn't *feel* good—that her unhappiness about her relationships has affected her ability to take care of herself.

The poem is written in [free verse](#), allowing the reader to feel as if they're actually right there inside the speaker's head, listening to her interior monologue.

That said, the poem is still musical. Notice the way that long /o/ [assonance](#) ("go," "know," "don't") lends rhythm and intensity to these opening lines, for example, as does the subtle internal [slant rhyme](#) between "Children" and "know them."

The short, regular [quatrains](#) (four-line stanzas) also give the poem a certain predictability even as the speaker's thoughts shift around. This steady stanza form might evoke the way a person's life may *look* totally normal on the surface even as,

internally, they're deeply out of sorts.

LINES 5-8

*I strain to ...
... put powder on,*

In the second stanza, the speaker says that she "strain[s] to remember a time / when [her body] felt lighter." The word "strain" implies that she is actively *trying* to "remember" something that's out of reach. The word "lighter," meanwhile, can be interpreted literally and figuratively. That is, the speaker seems to feel weighed down both emotionally and physically. The poem will allude to the speaker's weight throughout, implying that it's a sore subject; her physical state, in turn, reflects the heaviness of her inner life.

The speaker adds that it's been "Years" since her body was free of this weight. In other words, she's felt like she's been trudging through life for a very long time. And now, her "face is swollen / with regrets." When she looks in the mirror, she sees the toll her life and decisions have taken on her.

The poem's lines are short, but they feel even shorter because of the persistent use of [caesura](#). In lines 7-8, for example, periods after "Years" and "regrets" chop the lines up, emphasizing the significance of these words:

Years. My face is swollen
with regrets. I put powder on,

Frequent caesura also means the poem never really gets carried away: there is a slowness, a heaviness, to the lines because the speaker keeps stopping and starting. This echoes the emotional heaviness of the speaker.

The speaker goes on to say that she "put[s] powder" (or makeup) "on," suggesting that she is trying to cover up these "Years" of "regrets." The speaker's appearance isn't necessarily the *source* of her unhappiness, but it's perhaps easier for her to try to make herself look good than it is for her to address the root of what's wrong in her life.

LINES 9-12

*but it flakes ...
... all the essentials*

No sooner does the speaker put on some powder than it just "flakes off." This makeup is too little too late, like putting a bandaid on a gaping wound. Touching up her appearance isn't going to magically wipe away her "regrets."

The speaker then abruptly switches gears, again evoking the way one's train of thought can make sudden twists and turns:

[...] I love him,
through habit, but the proof
has evaporated. [...]

Perhaps the thought of putting on makeup, of making herself more traditionally alluring, triggers thoughts of a man in her life. This is presumably her husband, someone the speaker has been with for so long that her feelings for him have become a force of "habit" rather than active, passionate love. The "proof" of their love has evaporated, dried up; she doesn't know why she loves him anymore (or perhaps he's changed from the man she fell for), and she's only with him now out of routine.

The speaker seems to be going along with the way things are because it's easier than changing. The poem's form reflects this, with its steady, plodding [quatrains](#). Even the poem's narrow appearance on the page seems to suggest that the speaker is living her life like a horse with blinders on—that she isn't looking around her and making choices based on what she sees and feels, but is instead just doing what she's supposed to do. She's boxed in, perhaps, by society's expectations for women—to be a good mother, to be attractive, to stay with her man even when she's no longer sure why she's with him.

The speaker goes on to say that man "gets upset." It's unclear whether he "gets upset" in response to the fact that she's really only going through the motions of loving him, or whether she's only going through the motions of loving him *because* he "gets upset." The vagueness of the phrase makes it sound like this is simply a personality trait: this man's thing is to become sad and/or angry.

In line 12, the speaker says that she "tried to do all the essentials." Because of the stanza break, it isn't clear yet what she is referring to, but because she was just thinking about her relationship with this man, the reader might assume she is referring to the "essentials" of a relationship. Perhaps she is saying that she's done her best as far as her relationships are concerned, that she's done everything she was supposed to do.

LINES 13-16

*on one trip. ...
... promised the earth.*

Stanza 4 continues where stanza three left off, completing the sentence that began in line 12:

I tried to do all the essentials
on one trip. [...]

The completed sentence reveals that the speaker is out shopping or running errands. She then interrupts herself, calling herself "Foolish" for thinking she could get everything done in one go. She adds, "but I was weepy all morning"—that "but" suggesting that she tried to make this an efficient trip in *response* to her sadness. While readers don't yet know why she was "weepy," these lines imply that she *dealt* with her sadness not by sitting with it but by running errands—going through the mundane motions of life.

At this point, it's becoming clear that the speaker's thoughts are highly associative—that she isn't moving in a strictly [narrative](#) or linear way. One moment she's explaining that she's been emotional "all morning," the next she's thinking about a particular food she might buy or make ("Quiche" is a kind of savory, egg-based custard), and the next she's thinking about a "blond boy" from long ago.

Note the immediacy of the word "Quiche," which is presented without any explanation, as if the speaker just thought of it or saw it in the middle of thinking about other things. There's a firm full-stop [caesura](#) before the speaker sharply jumps into a memory of young love:

Quiche. A blond boy swung me up

This sudden [juxtaposition](#)—between the spareness of "Quiche" and the more expansive memory that follows—highlights how different life feels now that the speaker is older. Once, the speaker was light enough for a "blond boy" to swing her "in his arms." And once, she had hope for the "promise" of the future. The bouncy /b/ [alliteration](#) in "blond boy" adds some lyrical flourish to this moment, making this sweet memory seem more vivid and intense.

Either she lost touch with this blond boy of her youth, or he's since turned into the man who's always getting "upset" and whom she loves only out of "habit."

LINES 17-20

*You see this ...
... held a pose*

The speaker then explains that this memory from long ago—this memory of young love—"came back" to her as she "stood on the scales." This phrasing is decidedly ambiguous:

- On one level, this sounds like the speaker started thinking about being swung around by this boy while weighing herself earlier in the day. Perhaps she "wept" because she was no longer the carefree, lighthearted girl of this memory.
- And yet, people stand on a *scale*, not "scales." The plural "scales" sounds more like the mechanisms people use to weigh produce at the grocery store. Since the speaker has already mentioned "Quiche," it's also reasonable to assume that she's not actually weighing herself but in fact feels this memory rushing back while grocery shopping.

In any case, the speaker's standing "on the scales" is ultimately more *figurative* than literal: the speaker is "weighing" her life and life's decisions and finding the results less than satisfactory.

The slippery /s/ [alliteration](#) in "stood" and "scales" encourages the reader to really slow down and consider this strange

phrasing. It also sounds like air hissing out of a tire or popped balloon, subtly evoking the way the speaker's life has let her down.

The speaker's language then becomes fragmented once again, as she says that she "wept" before mentioning "Shallots." Again, the poem is ambiguous:

- It isn't clear whether the speaker was crying while standing on a literal scale earlier in the day, or whether she's crying at a grocery store now while weighing "Shallots" (a kind of small onion often used in quiche, which readers already know is on the speaker's mind).
- Nor is it clear whether the "Shallots") are the thing making her cry, or whether the act of crying made her think of "Shallots" because chopping onions makes people cry!

There's no clear progression between one thought and the next here, only layers and layers of possible [connotations](#) and interpretations. The reader is left to decipher how these things do or don't connect.

This is also true for the "creamy ladies" the speaker catches sight of through a "window." The poem doesn't explain whether these are real women "h[olding] a pose" (doing yoga, perhaps, or modeling) that the speaker saw earlier in the day, perhaps on her way to the grocery store, or whether they are maybe even mannequins that she sees while shopping.

All this ambiguity makes the speaker seem scattered and distracted, as poignant memories mix with mundanities in the speaker's mind.

LINES 21-24

*which left me ...
... Claret. I blushed.*

The speaker goes on to explain that catching sight of these "creamy ladies" made her feel "clogged" (or blocked up) and "old." Their creaminess suggests youth, smoothness, and beauty—things the speaker no longer has. She's perhaps "clogged" in the sense that she no longer allows herself to really feel things, instead just going through the motions of life. "The waste," she continues, perhaps referring to her own youth, which she now thinks of as having been misspent.

The poem never gets into the exact details of why the speaker feels so much regret. For example, it's unclear if she wishes she'd never had children or if she wishes she'd raised them differently and remained close to them. It isn't clear whether it's the things she *did* or the things she *failed to do* that fill her with such remorse. The specifics are left up to the reader's imagination.

The speaker has been so distracted that she doesn't even notice she didn't bring her "purse" with her until she gets to the

checkout and "fumble[s]" (or grasps awkwardly) for it. She feels the "shopgirl" starting at her without pity, implying that this younger woman has little respect or patience for the speaker.

Notice the abundance of [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#) in these lines:

which left me clogged and old.
The waste. I'd forgotten my purse,
fumbled; the shopgirl gaped at me,
compassionless. Claret. I blushed.

This stanza *sounds* intense, which reflects the intensity of this moment for the flustered, frazzled speaker.

Note, too, how many of the repeated sounds have a sort of thickness or stickiness to them. Those back-of-throat /cl/ and /g/ sounds in particular evoke the speaker's feeling of being "clogged." Fricative /f/ and plosive /p/ sounds, on the other hand, suggest of the speaker's "fumb[ling]" nervousness. All in all, this [cacophony](#) of sounds alerts the reader that the speaker is reaching some sort of breaking point.

In line 24, the speaker describes the "compassionless[ness]" of the salesperson and then says "Claret. I blushed." "Claret" is a kind of red wine, so once again it is unclear whether she is referring to an item she is trying to buy or whether she is using the word associatively: perhaps "blush[ing]" stains her cheeks dark red. The [caesurae](#) created by periods after "compassionless" and "Claret" grind the poem to a dramatic halt.

LINES 25-28

*Cheese. Kleenex. ...
... flush, and bumped*

Stanza 7 begins as haltingly as stanza 6 ended, the full-stop [caesurae](#) here creating a plodding, stop-start rhythm:

Cheese. Kleenex. It did happen,

It sounds like the speaker is naming the items on her shopping list, perhaps trying to keep herself grounded in the present as she grows increasingly flustered.

Yet her memories still slip forward. She assures herself that "*It did happen*," likely referring to her sweet interactions with the "blond boy" from earlier in the poem. Physically she's standing at the checkout, but mentally she's in another time and place altogether. She says that she "lay in [her] slip" (or undergarment) "on wet grass, / laughing," evoking a scene of tender intimacy with this boy of her youth. She follows this memory up with the blunt "Years," reminding herself that this all happened a long, long time ago.

Either because of embarrassment at having "forgotten [her] purse" or because of the emotions that are threatening to

overcome her, the speaker "rush[es] out" of the store. She describes herself as being "blind in a hot flush." The word "blind" suggests that tears are obscuring her vision, while the "hot flush" evokes her embarrassment. "Hot flush" also sounds similar to "hot *flash*," which the speaker, a middle-aged woman, may very well be experiencing. Note the /b/ [alliteration](#), /sh/ [consonance](#), and /uh/ [assonance](#) in lines 27-28:

*[...] I had to rush out,
blind in a hot flush, and bumped*

These sounds add intensity to this moment of the poem, preparing the reader for the poem's emotional climax.

LINES 29-32

*into an anxious, ...
... sorry sorry sorry.*

After rushing away from the checkout, the speaker "bump[s]" / into an anxious, dowdy matron. "Dowdy" means unfashionable and frumpy, while "matron" refers to a middle-aged woman.

The speaker says that this woman reaches out and "touche[s]" the cold mirror," staring back at the speaker. This woman is, in fact, the speaker's own reflection—someone the speaker doesn't seem to recognize at first but slowly accepts.

Calling the mirror "cold," in this context, likely refers not to the temperature of the glass but to its unfeeling revelation: the mirror doesn't hold the truth of who the speaker is from her. She's confronted head-on with the reality of who she has become—and she doesn't like what she sees. Following this "recognition" of the reality of her life, she ends the poem by apologizing profusely to herself.

Listen to how [repetitive](#) the end of the poem is:

*and stared at me. Stared
and said I'm sorry sorry sorry.*

The [diacope](#) of "stared" emphasizes the importance of the speaker really *looking* at herself. The insistent [epizeuxis](#) of "sorry" that concludes the poem evokes the speaker's intense, overwhelming regret over her life choices.



POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses various kinds of [repetition](#) to add momentum and emphasize certain words and ideas.

In the first stanza, for example, the repetition of "know" in lines 2 and 4 draws attention to the contrast between what the speaker does and doesn't "know": she "know[s]" she's out of shape, but she doesn't "know" her "children"—they're strangers

to her.

The poem relies on frequent [parallelism](#) as well. Take lines 8-11, where the repetition of the format "I [...] but [...]" suggests that there's something similar about the speaker applying makeup that "flakes off" and loving a man "through habit" even as "the proof / evaporates." In each of these situations, the speaker presents something presumably good about her life—making an effort with her appearance, loving her husband—only to quickly undermine it:

[...] I put powder on,
but it flakes off. I love him,
through habit, but the proof
has evaporated. [...]

Note, too, just how many sentences the speaker begins with the word "I." This reminds readers that they're listening to the speaker's internal monologue, getting a peek into her thoughts.

Those thoughts themselves are often repetitive, creating echoes across the poem that emphasize the speaker's despair. For example, the speaker repeats the word "Years" in lines 7 and 27. Each time, the word appears as its own sentence fragment, followed by a full-stop [caesura](#) and cut off from any kind of explanation:

Years. My face is swollen
[...]
laughing. Years. I had to rush out,

The speaker clearly feels "Years" removed from a version of herself that makes any sense to her, from a version of herself she can "Recogni[ze]." Similarly, the [polyptoton](#) across lines 14 and 19 (the repetition of the root word "weep" in "weepy" and wept") calls readers' attention to just how miserable the speaker feels.

Finally, [diacope](#) and [epizeuxis](#) add intensity to the poem's final conclusion:

and stared at me. Stared
and said I'm sorry sorry sorry.

The diacope of "stared" emphasizes the importance of the speaker finally recognizing what she's become: unhappy and unfulfilled in what should be the prime of her life.

Epizeuxis (the repetition of "sorry") then ends the poem dramatically, driving home the speaker's profound sense of regret.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I've," "know"

- **Line 3:** "I've"
- **Line 4:** "know"
- **Line 5:** "I"
- **Line 7:** "Years"
- **Line 8:** "I"
- **Line 9:** "but," "I"
- **Line 10:** "but"
- **Line 12:** "I"
- **Line 14:** "weepy"
- **Line 19:** "wept"
- **Line 24:** "I"
- **Line 26:** "I"
- **Line 27:** "Years," "I"
- **Line 31:** "and," "stared," "Stared"
- **Line 32:** "and," "sorry sorry sorry"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) fills this [free verse](#) poem with rhythm and intensity.

The poem's first half doesn't feature much alliteration. Brief examples, such as the /b/ sounds of "blond boy" in line 15, emphasize the images at hand, here suggesting the importance of this bright memory of young love.

As the poem progresses, however, alliteration becomes much more common. The poem effectively ramps up the intensity of its language as the speaker gets more absorbed in her memories and overwhelmed by her present surroundings.

In line 18, for example, /s/ alliteration calls attention to the image of the speaker as she "stood on the scales." The emphasis here is important because the imagery is actually rather strange: it isn't clear whether the speaker is recalling standing on a literal "scale" or whether she's weighing produce at the grocery store and conflating *that* experience with her feelings of wanting to be "lighter" in her "body." Because the poem doesn't move in a strictly linear fashion, there is no way to be sure. The poem trusts the reader to come to their own conclusions, but the slippery /s/ alliteration encourages careful reading.

The alliteration in lines 22-25 is particularly powerful:

[...] I'd forgotten my purse,
fumbled; the shopgirl gaped at me,
compassionless. Claret. I blushed.
Cheese. Kleenex. [...]

There's plenty of broader [consonance](#) here too:

[...] I'd forgotten my purse,
fumbled; the shopgirl gaped at me,
compassionless. Claret. I blushed.
Cheese. Kleenex. [...]

Altogether, these lines are overflowing with thick, clunky sounds. It's like the volume has been turned up on the poem, calling attention to the speaker's nervous embarrassment at this moment.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "put," "powder"
- **Line 15:** "blond," "boy"
- **Line 18:** "stood," "scales"
- **Line 20:** "creamy"
- **Line 21:** "clogged"
- **Line 22:** "waste," "forgotten"
- **Line 23:** "fumbled"
- **Line 24:** "compassionless," "Claret"
- **Line 25:** "Kleenex"
- **Line 28:** "blind," "bumped"
- **Line 31:** "stared," "Stared"
- **Line 32:** "said," "sorry," "sorry," "sorry"

ASSONANCE

Despite being written in [free verse](#), "Recognition" is a very musical poem. This is thanks to its abundant [assonance](#), which, like [alliteration](#), adds rhythm and emphasis to the speaker's story.

In the first stanza, for instance, long /o/ assonance creates [internal rhyme](#):

Things get away from one.
I've let myself go, I know.
Children? I've had three
and don't even know them.

There's almost a sing-song rhythm here that suggests the speaker's resignation to her situation. That is, the repetitive sounds of the language evoke the way the speaker has accepted her mundane, repetitive life; it sounds like she's gone over all this before.

And listen to the way long /o/ and /ay/ sounds weave through lines 20-23:

creamy ladies held a pose
which left me clogged and old.
The waste. I'd forgotten my purse,
fumbled; the shopgirl gaped at me,

While subtle, these repeated sounds add intensity and momentum to the poem in order, reflecting the speaker's building agitation. As previously noted, these lines are also filled with alliteration and broader [consonance](#), making them even more striking to the reader's ear.

Similarly, short /uh/ sounds (and some /sh/ consonance and /b/

alliteration) towards the end of the poem suggest a flurry of emotion:

[...] I had to rush out,
blind in a hot flush, and bumped

All those /uh/ sounds almost create a stuttering feeling that's appropriate for the scene at hand: the speaker is so embarrassed or distracted that she bolts from the checkout in a panic.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "go," "know"
- **Line 4:** "don't," "know"
- **Line 5:** "time"
- **Line 6:** "lighter"
- **Line 11:** "gets," "upset"
- **Line 20:** "ladies," "pose"
- **Line 21:** "old"
- **Line 22:** "waste"
- **Line 23:** "gaped"
- **Line 24:** "compassionless. Claret."
- **Line 25:** "Cheese," "Kleenex," "happen"
- **Line 26:** "grass"
- **Line 27:** "laughing," "rush"
- **Line 28:** "flush," "bumped"

ENJAMBMENT

"Recognition" uses frequent [enjambment](#), which adds momentum, anticipation, and frantic energy to the poem.

Listen to the enjambment between lines 3-4:

Children? I've had **three**
and don't even know them.

Cutting this line in half creates a little moment of suspense after the speaker says that she's had three children. Because there's no pause after line 3, the revelation the speaker doesn't "know" her children then comes swiftly, even abruptly; there's no time for readers to sit with the knowledge that she has kids before she essentially writes those kids off.

Elsewhere, enjambment allows lines to wind down the page in a way that evokes the speaker's meandering thoughts, which twist without warning from one image to the next. At the same time, frequent [end-stops](#) and [caesura](#) prevent the poem from ever picking up any real momentum. Take lines 7-8:

Years. My face is **swollen**
with regrets. I put powder on,

In general, the poem's mixture of enjambment and caesura fills

the poem with a stop-start rhythm that conveys the speaker's fractured, disjointed mental state.

The longest string of enjambment occurs across lines 28-32, creating a bit of speed as the poem nears its conclusion. Since the speaker is describing "rush[ing]" from the checkout in a state of confusion, it makes sense that these lines themselves "rush" down the page:

blind in a hot flush, and bumped
into an anxious, dowdy matron
who touched the cold mirror
and stared at me. Stared
and said I'm sorry sorry sorry.

All this enjambment allows the reader to experience the speaker's flurry of emotion and her surprise when she encounters herself as a stranger in the "mirror." The firm caesura after "me," meanwhile, grants a pause in which the speaker finally recognizes herself.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "three / and"
- **Lines 5-6:** "time / when"
- **Lines 7-8:** "swollen / with"
- **Lines 10-11:** "proof / has"
- **Lines 12-13:** "essentials / on"
- **Lines 15-16:** "up / in"
- **Lines 17-18:** "me / as"
- **Lines 19-20:** "window / creamy"
- **Lines 20-21:** "pose / which"
- **Lines 28-29:** "bumped / into"
- **Lines 29-30:** "matron / who"
- **Lines 30-31:** "mirror / and"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Stared / and"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem [juxtaposes](#) the excitement and hope of the speaker's youth with the disappointing monotony of her present. Juxtaposition also highlights the difference between the speaker's exterior actions (shopping for groceries, putting on makeup) and what's going on *internally*.

The poem's first half establishes just how dull and unfilling the speaker feels. Her "face is swollen / with regrets" and she can't "remember a time / when [her] body felt light." Her relationship with her husband lacks passion and excitement, her love now just a force of "habit."

By contrast, the speaker was once filled with hope for the future. She was light enough for a "blond boy" (perhaps a younger version of her husband) to swing her "up / in his arms," carefree enough to happily "lay in [her] slip on wet grass." She listened as this boy "promised [her] the earth." These images of

youthful romance, joy, and intimacy sharply contrast with the speaker's lonely reality in the present, where she essentially feels like a stranger to her children, her husband, and herself.

The poem hammers home this contrast in lines 14-16, where the mundanity of grocery shopping interrupts the speaker's happy reverie:

but I was weepy all morning.
Quiche. A blond boy swung me up
in his arms and promised the earth.

The juxtaposition between that no-nonsense "Quiche" and the intensely romantic image of the speaker's youth conveys just how much the speaker's life has changed over "Years."

Similarly, thoughts of "Cheese" and "Kleenex" interrupt the speaker's bittersweet memories of "lay[ing] in [her] slip on wet grass, / laughing." The ordinariness of this grocery list contrasts with the intensity of the memory.

Note how there's a strong, full-stop [caesura](#) every time the speaker mentions grocery items—"Quiche," "Shallots," "Claret," "Cheese," "Kleenex." These pauses make the juxtaposition between the speaker's past and present all the more biting, yanking the reader from the speaker's thoughts and forcing them to sit with the mundanities of the present.

The poem also highlights the speaker's "dowdy," matronly appearance by setting her apart from younger women. In lines 19-21, the speaker sees "creamy ladies h[olding] a pose" in a "window." These figures might be real women or they might be mannequins; either way, they make the speaker feel "clogged and old." She also seems to feel alien to the younger, "compassionless" "shopgirl," who has little patience for the speaker's distracted fumbling for her purse. These other women seem only to remind the speaker of how different she has become from her younger self.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-11
- Lines 14-32



VOCABULARY

Evaporated (Lines 10-11) - Ceased to exist; disappeared.

Quiche (Line 15) - A savory egg custard dish with a crust, similar to a pie or tart.

Shallots (Line 19) - A *shallot* is a kind of small onion (often used in quiche!).

Clogged (Lines 20-21) - Blocked or obstructed by something.

Fumbled (Lines 22-23) - Groped clumsily or awkwardly.

Shopgirl (Line 23) - The girl tending the shop; a salesperson.

Gaped (Line 23) - Gawked; stared openly.

Claret (Line 24) - A kind of red wine. *Claret* can also refer to the dark maroon color of that wine.

Slip (Line 26) - An undergarment worn beneath a dress or skirt.

Dowdy matron (Lines 28-29) - A frumpy and unfashionable middle-aged woman.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Recognition" consists of 32 lines of [free verse](#) broken up into eight [quatrains](#), or four-line stanzas.

The use of steady quatrains lends the poem a sense of orderliness and structure that's at odds with the speaker's mental state: she's overwhelmed, emotional, and distracted as she makes her way through the grocery store. Frequent [enjambment](#) between lines and across stanzas creates some tension within the poem's form. The poem's lines attempt to break free of their quatrain containers, reflecting the way the speaker's thoughts interrupt her mundane grocery trip.

Readers might also consider "Recognition" a dramatic monologue, the poet taking on the voice of a distinct character and addressing an unseen listener. That "Children?" in line 2 makes it seem like the speaker is having a conversation with someone, though it's also possible that she's just talking to herself.

METER

The poem is written in [free verse](#), so it doesn't use a regular [meter](#). This is fitting for a poem that follows the inner workings of the speaker's mind. People's thoughts tend to be fragmented and associative—not perfectly measured and melodious! The poem's natural rhythms allow the reader to feel as if they're actually *inside* the speaker's mind.

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "Recognition" doesn't use a [rhyme scheme](#). As with the poem's lack of meter, this lack of predictable rhyme creates a more natural and intimate [tone](#), as if the reader is actually privy to the speaker's innermost thoughts, perceptions, and memories. Rather than the speaker *telling* or *performing* a narrative, this poem allows the reader to glimpse the speaker's thoughts as they flit around in time and settle on different subjects.

the deep dissatisfaction she feels in her life and her relationships. She has "three [Children]" whom she hardly "know[s]," and though there is a man in her life whom she says she "love[s]," she's no longer sure *why* she loves him: "the proof / has evaporated," she says, adding that they're only still together out of "habit."

The speaker is "weepy" and self-deprecating, calling herself "Foolish" and "dowdy." She compares herself to "creamy ladies" (either models or mannequins) posing in a window who make her feel "clogged and old." She's so distracted by how unhappy she is that she forgets to bring her purse with her to the store and "fumble[s]" around looking for it while the checkout girl stares at her without sympathy.

Eventually, the speaker ends up rushing from the store in a "hot flush," overcome with emotion. She then bumps into her own reflection, which she doesn't even recognize as herself at first. She repeatedly apologizes to her reflection, acknowledging that she's let herself down.



SETTING

The poem's setting is a grocery store. The first few stanzas aren't very clear about where the poem is taking place, but at the end of stanza 3/the beginning of stanza 4 the speaker says, "I tried to do all the essentials / on one trip." This, combined with various specific words such as "Quiche" in line 15, "Shallots" in line 19, "Claret" (a kind of red wine) in line 24, and "Cheese" and "Kleenex" in line 25 make it clear that the speaker is shopping for food and household supplies.

Yet because the poem jumps around a lot, it's difficult at times to get a handle on when and where events are actually happening. For instance, in lines 19-20 the speaker sees "creamy ladies h[olding] a pose" through a "window." This might suggest that the speaker saw women doing yoga or some other form of exercise on her way into the store, or it might imply that she catches sight of some mannequins while shopping. The poem lets the reader piece these snapshots together.

Likewise, there are moments in the poem that clearly take place in another time altogether. The speaker remembers a "blond boy" who held her "in his arms and promised the earth," and she later recalls "lay[ing] in [her] slip on wet grass, / laughing." These moments are snippets from "years" ago, when the speaker was young and happy.

In bouncing around like this, the poem evokes the speaker's fragmented state of mind and the power of memories to crop up and interrupt the present.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "Recognition" is a middle-aged woman out shopping for groceries. She's clearly unhappy with her physical appearance, and this unhappiness seems to be a reflection of



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Recognition" appears in Carol Ann Duffy's second full-length poetry collection, *Selling Manhattan* (1987). *Selling Manhattan* won the 1988 Somerset Maugham Award, a major UK award for young authors. The book includes multiple dramatic monologues, including the frequently anthologized "[Warming Her Pearls](#)."

As the publisher, Pan Macmillan, writes, *Selling Manhattan* "[give\[s\] voices to those who are usually voiceless](#)."

"Recognition" is a perfect example of this, as the speaker is a middle-aged woman who doesn't see herself reflected in the "creamy ladies" who "pose" around her and who is treated without "compassion[]" by a younger "shopgirl," rendering her isolated even in a public space with another woman. While the "dowdy matron" is so often the brunt of the joke in popular culture, this poem presents the world from a middle-aged woman's point of view and allows her to be a complex human being.

Duffy has cited numerous poets as early influences for her own work, including canonical Irish and English poets like [W.B. Yeats](#) and [John Keats](#), as well as modernist poets including [Aimé Césaire](#). 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

"Recognition" was published in 1987, but it doesn't overtly refer to historical events of the time. Instead, the poem deals with an insulated, domestic world in which the speaker is thinking about her relationships, her looks, and the groceries she's going to buy.

This limited scope perhaps suggests that one source of the speaker's "regret[]" is the way she's lived her life inside of certain societal expectations only to find herself unfulfilled and unhappy in middle age. In this way, the poem is a reflection of the feminist ideologies gaining traction in England throughout the 1970s and '80s.

During this time, books like Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examined the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways in which society was reacting against the women's movement. Third-wave feminism, focused largely on identity and political power, began to emerge out of the second-wave feminism of the '60s. Duffy's

work, with its interest in women's inner selves and in corners of working-class life often neglected by the literary world, reflects the tumultuous political environment in which she came of age.

The speaker of the poem isn't a specific character, but she also isn't Duffy herself (Duffy only has one child, and the speaker has three). That said, parts of "Recognition" may be informed by Duffy's relationship with the male poet Adrian Henri.

While she now openly identifies as a lesbian, at the age of 16 Duffy entered what would become a 12-year relationship with the much older Henri. Henri was a mentor and inspiration to the young Duffy, but he was also chronically unfaithful. The couple separated in 1982, and it's possible that the speaker's feelings of having squandered "Years" of their life reflect Duffy's own feelings about having stayed in a relationship with Henri for so long.

In any case, the speaker's mid-life realization that she is miserable and unrecognizable to herself reflects countless women's experiences of being pressured into a conventional mold of domesticity only to be left feeling as if their lives were "waste[d]."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Introduction to the Poet](#) – Learn more about Duffy's life and career in this article by the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy>)
- [An Interview with Duffy for her 2009 Poetry Collection, Sincerity](#) – An interview with Duffy for the Scottish Review of Books in which Duffy discusses her life, work, influences, and her role as Poet Laureate. (<https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/11/the-srb-interview-carol-ann-duffy/>)
- [Pan Macmillan Synopsis of Selling Manhattan](#) – Read the publisher's synopsis for *Selling Manhattan*, the collection in which "Recognition" was published. (<https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/carol-ann-duffy/selling-manhattan/9781509824984>)
- [A History of the Dramatic Monologue](#) – A brief look at the history of the dramatic monologue, a form Duffy frequently uses for her poems, including "Recognition." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ferWxPUN3ig&t=10s>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

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

- [Circe](#)
- [Death of a Teacher](#)
- [Demeter](#)
- [Education For Leisure](#)
- [Foreign](#)
- [Head of English](#)
- [In Mrs Tilscher's Class](#)
- [Little Red Cap](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- [Mrs Darwin](#)
- [Mrs Midas](#)
- [Mrs Sisyphus](#)
- [Originally](#)
- [Penelope](#)
- [Prayer](#)
- [Stealing](#)
- [The Darling Letters](#)
- [Valentine](#)
- [Warming Her Pearls](#)

- [War Photographer](#)
- [We Remember Your Childhood Well](#)



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