

Summary and analysis of 'Tonight I can Write the Saddest Lines' by Pablo Neruda

Pablo Neruda is a much acclaimed writer from Chile. This poem was written in Spanish in 1924 and later translated into English in 1969. This poem is celebrated for its imagery and symbols to present the pain of jilted lover. It is about memories of a lost love and the pain they can cause. Throughout the poem the speaker recalls the details of his love that is now broken. He continually juxtaposes the past with his ladylove with the loneliness he experiences in the present. It is written in the style of monologue with the repetition of the line “Tonight I can write the saddest lines” three times to emphasise his sorrow.

The first line of the poem leaves the readers with a curiosity to know the reason for the poet’s sadness. The images like shattered night and shivering of the blue stars in the distance indicate his melancholic mood. He decides to write a poem at night which brings a dark imagery and his sad mood. The shattered night and the shivering stars project the turmoil the poet experiences in his life. The night wind becomes his companion as it revolves in the sky and sings. Moreover the night enables him to write which he could not write till then. He confesses that he loved her and the unnamed woman also loved him for some time. His memory takes him back to a similar night when he held her in his arm. He admits that he was in love with her deeply and says that her great still eyes will make anyone to fall in love with her.

The writer feels that he can write the saddest lines that night as he knows that she is no longer with him. Without her the night seems to be immensely lonely. But his writing replenishes his soul like dew drops to the pasture. He feels upset that in spite of everything, his love could not have her and without her his soul is lost. The night is traumatized as she is not with him. He hears someone singing in the distance, which also indicates that he is alone as he could hear it from the distance. Now he mentions his longing to get reunited with his ladylove as; his sight searches for her, to go to her and his heart too looks for her. Again he mentions that night is similar to the other night when they were together. Suddenly he declares that he does not love her but he loved her greatly earlier. He even tried to send the wind to touch her hearing. But she is another’s now and to express his pain of losing her, the poet states it that her voice, body and infinite eyes will be another’s. Again he declares that he no longer loves her but contradicts himself by stating that he may love her. His words, love is short but forgetting is long, reveals his love for her. The night leaves him with the memory of his ladylove and her loss leaves his soul disturbed. He concludes the poem with a determination that this is the last pain she gives him and this is the last poem he writes for her. He hopes that with this painful attempt of writing he wishes to get out of her memory.

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.

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.

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.”