

## Charlotte Mew: Rooms

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

In this short and melancholy poem, Charlotte Mew's ageing speaker reflects on her life by remembering a series of rooms - living spaces - that she has passed through. The rooms are presented as simple, bare places, listed one after the other, lacking any warm memories of moments inside. As the poem progresses, the rooms get smaller and smaller until finally the speaker and her unseen companion simply lie still, side by side, as if there's no room to move. They are simply waiting to die. The reader leaves the poem with the impression that not having the freedom to live life to the full isn't really living at all.

Written in the 1920s, only a few short years before her death, *Rooms* expresses feelings of frustration and disappointment at the lessening of life's possibilities. In 1898, Mew's father passed away, leaving Charlotte and her sister Anne in financial trouble and forcing them to downsize by renting out half their family home to make ends meet. Later, their home would be condemned, forcing the sisters to share a rented room (possibly the *little, damp room* described so pitifully in the poem). At the end of her life, Charlotte entered a nursing home – so, on one level, the series of ever smaller and more disappointing *rooms* of the poem stand in for the increasingly difficult and narrow circumstances of her life.

---

### Knowledge Check

*How well do you know this poem?*

**1. The poem opens with a rhyming \_\_\_\_\_?**

- (a) Couplet.
- (b) Triplet.
- (c) Line.
- (d) Scheme.

**2. Which of these rooms is not in the poem?**

- (a) A little damp room.
- (b) A windowless room.
- (c) The room in Paris.
- (d) Rooms were things died.

**3. That ceaseless \_\_\_\_\_ sound.**

- (a) Inevitable.
- (b) Deafening.
- (c) Maddening.
- (d) Unbearable.

**4. Alliteration / consonance made with the letters M and N is called?**

- (a) Aspirant.
- (b) Nasal.
- (c) Liquid.
- (d) Assonance.

**5. What is repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of lines of poetry?**

- (a) Diacope.
- (b) Epizeuxis.
- (c) Reiteration.
- (d) Anaphora.

**6. This is the room where we \_\_\_\_ lie dead**

- (a) (Too).
- (b) (Two).
- (c) (Both).
- (d) (All).

**7. The poem is a mix of which two kinds of feet?**

- (a) Iamb and anapest.
- (b) Iamb and dactyl.
- (c) Trochee and anapest.
- (d) Anapest and spondee.

**8. A reference to an event that happened outside the text, but is not explained:**

- (a) Simile.
- (b) Metonymy.
- (c) Allusion.
- (d) Anaphora.

**9. A symbol of time passing in the poem:**

- (a) Seaweed.
- (b) Heart.
- (c) Rooms.
- (d) Tide.

**10. The final room in the poem is a metaphor for what?**

- (a) Escape.
- (b) Happiness.
- (c) Death.
- (d) Love.

---

## Understanding and Interpretation

1. How do you interpret the line 'the steady slowing down of the heart'?
2. How many rooms does the speaker remember in the poem? What do we learn about the various rooms of her life?
3. What is your impression of '*the little damp room with the seaweed smell*'?
4. Line 6 reads: '*Rooms where for good or ill – things died*'. What is your interpretation of the word 'things' in this line?
5. What do you notice about the shape and form of the poem? Are the lines / meter regular? Are there any irregularities?
6. Do you find the ending of the poem hopeful or hopeless? Explain your thoughts:

---

## Poetry Study: *Consonance and Assonance*

*‘...the steady slowing down of the heart’*

Poems are made of words. No other choice a poet makes is more important than words, which are the bricks and mortar of the poem. Words stimulate: our ears prick up with the pleasure of listening to familiar or unfamiliar words arranged in new combinations. Sometimes, people listen to poems read in a language they cannot understand; the sentences *sound* real and arouse feelings regardless. People listening to African writer Isak Dinesen said her voice sounded like rain falling. Little children love listening to the sound of their parents reading, even if they are too young to follow the story. Just sounds, and patterns of sound, connect to our senses and stimulate our imaginations.

Poets strengthen certain aspects of language, including sound, on purpose to create effects.

**Alliteration** is one of the oldest formal devices in English poetry. Repeating an initial consonant sound used to be called **head-rhyme**; *Beowulf*, an Anglo-Saxon epic poem composed between 650 – 750AD, has 3,182 short, alliterating lines! In these lines from a fifteenth century anonymous poem, a vexed writer was kept awake by the clattering anvils of a blacksmith working at night, and he wrote:

*Swarte smeked smithes smattered with smoke  
Drive me to deth with din of here dintes.*

**Consonance** differs from alliteration only in that alliteration repeats the first letter while consonance repeats sounds within words as in this couplet by Alfred Lord Tennyson:

*The moan of doves in immemorial elms  
And murmuring of innumerable bees.*

**Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds within lines of poetry. In *Rooms*, Charlotte Mew employs assonance in line two:

*The steady slowing down of the heart.*

These long vowel sounds, created by the combination of O and W, draw out and slow down the line, creating a representation of her slowing heart.

### Activity

This table presents examples of **consonance and assonance** made through the repetition of certain letters. Can you find an example of each type of alliteration in *Rooms*? Suggest specific effects created by Charlotte Mew:

Type of alliteration / consonance and general effects	Example(s) from <i>Rooms</i>	Specific Effects
<p><b>Nasal: N, M.</b></p> <p>The blocking of air inside the mouth and nasal cavity creates the ‘N’ and ‘M’ sound. Nasal is historically used to create strong, negative emotions such as reluctance or denial. However, it can also be soft, dreamy, and musical, like the sound of humming.</p>	<p><i>I <u>r</u>em<u>m</u>ber ro<u>m</u>s...</i></p>	<p>The opening line contains strong nasal sounds, creating a stifling effect right from the start of the poem. The way sound is trapped in the nose to create nasal sounds mimics the idea of the speaker being ‘trapped’ in a series of rooms throughout her life.</p>

<p><b>Aspirant: H</b></p> <p>Aspirant alliteration is created by expelling air all the way through the mouth. The breath can be audibly heard as the 'H' sound is being said. As such this sound is good for expressing a release of emotion, such as a heavy sigh, or a sudden indrawn breath. It is classed as soft.</p>	<p><i>... that <u>h</u>ave <u>h</u>ad their part</i>  <i>In the steady slowing down of the <u>h</u>ear<u>t</u>.</i></p>	
<p><b>Assonant EE.</b></p> <p>A long, high pitched sound that can create the effect of a whine or cry. Long EE can also create weather effects, such as a keening wind, or the sound of animals.</p>		
<p><b>Assonant OO</b></p> <p>Long OO sounds can be used to create a multitude of effects. As the sound is deep and round, it easily suggests a mournful sound. However, it can also be rich, musical or vibrant. In some poems, the OO sound can summon eerie or supernatural images. It is normally low pitched.</p>		
<p><b>Sibilant: S, Z, Sh.</b></p> <p>Sibilance draws out the 'S' sound, creating a hissing noise. This is sometimes associated with evil. In modern poetry, the 'S' can represent many things such as the sound of the wind, the movement of water, a tearing sound and other effects. It is classed as a soft sound.</p>		

---

## Poetry Study: *types of repetition*

*'Out there in the sun – in the rain!'*

*Rooms* is a poem that relies on **repetition** to convey the impression that life itself is tedious, dull, and repetitive. The most obvious example is simply the repetition of the word 'room(s)'. Repeated five times in the poem (six counting the title) Charlotte Mew's speaker barely elaborates on the detail of each room. Instead, **repetition** creates the effect of monotony and dismal tedium as the speaker just moves from one featureless room to the next.

### Activity

You might be surprised to learn about the variety of techniques involved in repetition. Simply repeating words is just the beginning. Where the words appear on the line, whether there are any words in between, and even the structure or grammar of the lines can vary the way repetition is used. In the activity below, try to match the type of repetition with its technical name and an example from the poem. Mew uses repetition relentlessly so the rooms seem overwhelming to her speaker – and for the reader as well!

Type of Repetition	Technical Name	Example from <i>Rooms</i>
Two lines or phrases have the same grammatical structure: 'we chased her... we caught her...'	Anaphora	<i>Out there in the sun – in the rain!</i>
Repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of lines of poetry: 'sure of the sky... sure of the sun...'	Diacoep	<i>... things died... where we (two) lie dead.</i>
Repetition of words or phrases at the end of lines of poetry: 'The room in Paris, the room in Geneva...'	Parallelism	<i>The room in Paris, the room in Geneva...</i>
Repetition of words or phrases with a small number of intervening words: 'the berries redden up to Christmas time, what's Christmas time...'	Antithesis / antithetical parallelism	<i>I remember rooms... The room in Paris... The little damp room... Rooms...</i>
Two balanced grammatical structures containing opposite or contrasting ideas: 'one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'	Epistrophe	<i>The room in Paris, the room in Geneva, the little damp room...</i>

---

### Discussion Point: *mirror or mould?*



Charlotte Mew (right) as a child

The words ‘mirror’ and ‘mould’ come from the study of drama texts. **Mirror** is the term used when the setting *reflects* the character’s personality (a bit like ‘pathetic fallacy’ in novels and poems); **mould** refers to a character *being shaped* by the setting instead.

Discuss these ideas in relation to the poem *Rooms*. Does the poem suggest that people’s surroundings make them unhappy (mould); or instead do you think that our surroundings reflect the unhappy feelings and experiences people bring to them (mirror)? This may seem a little bit like a chicken-and-egg problem – but what evidence is there in the poem for one idea over the other?

---

### Study Questions

*Practice writing analytical paragraphs by including embedded quotation and comment on the effect of words, images, or poetic and literary devices.*

1. How does the opening couplet establish a melancholy tone for the poem?
2. How do the first few lines of the poem make it seem like life has been a disappointment to the speaker?
3. Examine the presentation of the ‘*little damp room*’ (lines 4 and 5). How does the speaker make this room seem particularly unappealing?
4. How does the poem create the impression that the speaker has lived a restricted or limited life?
5. Discuss the **metaphors** in line 7 and 8 (*‘But there is the room...’*):
6. Do you detect any **irony** in the final two lines?

---

### Did You Know?

Charlotte was the eldest of seven children: three of her brothers died in infancy. Two more were committed to mental asylums, leaving just Charlotte and her sister Anne. When Anne developed cancer, Charlotte cared for her until she died in 1926. It’s entirely possible that the unseen companion sharing the last little room in the poem is Charlotte’s sister, Anne.