



University of Glasgow Scottish Literature
in the Classroom

Poems by Carol Ann Duffy for National 5 and Higher English:
'Havisham'

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Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on poems by Carol Ann Duffy. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

'Havisham' from Mean Time by Carol Ann Duffy. Published by Anvil Press Poetry, 1993. Copyright © Carol Ann Duffy. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Teaching resource written by Pip Osmond-Williams. Thanks also to Rhona Brown, Jennifer Farrar, Maureen Farrell, Corey Gibson, Ronnie Young, and teacher colleagues across Scotland for their guidance and support.

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Context

Poem overview

The poem is written from the perspective of Miss Havisham, a character from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. In the novel, Havisham is abandoned on her wedding day, and the poem explores the intense emotional and psychological impact of betrayal. Although the event itself is not described, it dominates the speaker's thoughts and emotions, showing how a single moment can shape a person's identity and outlook. Through violent imagery, fragmented thoughts and obsessive language, the poem presents a mind fixated on the past and consumed by grief, rage and the desire for revenge.

- Stanza 1 introduces the speaker's obsessive hatred of her former lover and her desire for revenge, showing how the betrayal dominates her thoughts.
- Stanza 2 depicts the speaker's isolation and stagnation as she remains trapped in the past, surrounded by decay and reminders of her abandoned wedding.
- Stanza 3 blurs fantasies of intimacy with sudden violence, showing how love and hatred are intertwined in the speaker's mind.
- Stanza 4 culminates in disturbing and grotesque imagery that subverts traditional symbols of marriage and romance, emphasising the depth of the speaker's bitterness and emotional corruption.

Author background

Carol Ann Duffy (1955–) is a poet and playwright of Scottish-Irish heritage. The eldest of five children in a Roman Catholic family, Duffy was born in the Gorbals in Glasgow, a working-class area that was undergoing significant change in the postwar period. Although Duffy spent only her early childhood in Glasgow before the family moved to England, she has often spoken about the strong emotional and imaginative impact of her Scottish roots.

Duffy began publishing poetry in her early twenties. In 2009, she became the first woman, the first Scottish-born poet, and the first openly LGBTQ+ writer to be appointed as the UK's Poet Laureate, serving until 2019. Her writing often explores identity, gender, love,



Image: Carol Ann Duffy.
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memory and power and engages with contemporary social and political issues alongside personal experience.

Publication details

‘Havisham’ was originally published in *Mean Time* (1993), which won the Forward Poetry Prize and the Whitbread Poetry Award. The collection draws on different scenes from childhood through to adulthood to explore themes such as love, loss, relationships, memory and time.

Online resources

[BBC Bitesize](#) provides a revision guide for students on ‘Havisham’.

[Carol Ann Duffy](#) on the Scottish Poetry Library’s website includes a biography, a bibliography of Duffy’s work, and a selection of her poems.

[YouTube](#): A reading of ‘Havisham’ produced by Literature Today.

The version of 'Havisham' printed here and published on the [Scottish Poetry Library website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

'Havisham'

by Carol Ann Duffy

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it
so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days
in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall; the dress
yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;
the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this

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to me? Puce curses that are sounds not words.
Some nights better, the lost body over me,
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear
then down till I suddenly bite awake. Love's

10

hate behind a white veil; a red balloon bursting
in my face. Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.
Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.
Don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.

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Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*

Miss Havisham is a fictional character in Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations* (1861). Abandoned on her wedding day, she lives permanently in her decaying mansion, still wearing her bridal dress beside the rotting remains of her wedding feast. As an act of revenge, Miss Havisham raises her adopted daughter, Estella, to deliberately break the hearts of the men she meets.

The character of Miss Havisham represents the corrosive effects of obsessive grief and the dangers of living in the past. She also embodies the destructive potential of revenge, manipulating Estella as a weapon to project her own trauma onto others. In a wider Victorian context, Miss Havisham reflects anxieties about female dependency on marriage and the limited roles available to unmarried women. As a jilted bride, she exists outside social norms, and her bitterness exposes the vulnerability of women whose identity and security were closely tied to marriage.



Image: Miss Havisham (1898) by Charles Green. Scanned image by Philip V. Allingham. Source: [Victorian Web](#).

Gothic tradition

The Gothic tradition emerged in the eighteenth century. Gothic texts often blur boundaries – between past and present, life and death, innocence and guilt, reality and the supernatural – to create a sense of instability and unease. A key idea within the tradition is the ‘uncanny’, a term used to describe the unsettling feeling of the familiar being made unfamiliar. Gothic works often feature desolate or ruined settings, supernatural occurrences, emotional extremes, and psychological terror. The genre acts as a way of exploring cultural and psychological conflicts and anxieties, particularly during periods of social change.

The character of Miss Havisham embodies many classic Gothic traits: she lives in a crumbling mansion, is obsessed with the past, has a haunting presence, and demonstrates psychological extremities. In her poem, Duffy transforms a Victorian Gothic figure into a modern study of trauma, rage and divided selfhood.

Full analysis

Speaker

The poem is written from the perspective of the fictional character Miss Havisham. The first-person narrative creates an intense and confessional tone. The speaker's voice is bitter, angry and obsessive, reflecting the psychological damage caused by betrayal and abandoned love. The tone shifts between despair, rage, dark humour and grotesque fantasy, highlighting the speaker's instability and emotional extremes.

Form and structure

'Havisham' is written in four stanzas that each have four lines (quatrains), which separate different images or shifts in mood. The poem does not use a regular rhyme scheme or rhythm and the line lengths are uneven, reflecting the speaker's emotional instability. Fragmented lines, abrupt pauses and enjambment reflect the speaker's fractured thoughts and obsessive anger. Line breaks are often placed to emphasise shocking or violent moments, while stammered sounds and irregular syntax give a sense of immediacy and psychological chaos.

Lines 1–2

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it

The opening line establishes a tone of violent emotional conflict. The shift from affectionate language ('Beloved sweetheart') to a coarse insult ('bastard') juxtaposes love and hate, highlighting the speaker's divided self.

The reference to the betrayal and the passage of time ('Not a day since then') suggests that, emotionally and psychologically, the speaker remains stuck in the moment of her abandonment. The phrase also indicates the speaker's feelings are not momentary; her anger is obsessive and sustained. This highlights the enduring impact of betrayal.

'Wished' sounds childish or harmless, yet the finality of 'dead' emphasises the violence of the speaker's sentiment. 'Prayed' implies religious devotion, which intensifies the

extremity of the speaker's feelings: her hatred has become her guiding system of belief. This reflects a key Gothic theme of irrational passion overwhelming reason and morality.

Lines 3–4

so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

The speaker's body reflects her emotional trauma, showing how love has transformed into a corrosive force. 'So hard' suggests both physical effort and emotional force behind the speaker's hatred. The imagery of her eyes externalises emotional corruption through physical transformation. The colour green is a symbol of envy, jealousy, sickness and poison, while a pebble is a hard, cold, lifeless object.

The speaker's hands are reimagined as instruments of strangulation, reinforcing how love has mutated into aggression. The comparison of veins to ropes suggests her own body is a weapon. 'Could' suggests that the capacity for violence is within her. This reflects fantasy and obsession, a key Gothic technique: the horror exists in the imagination as much as in reality.

Lines 5–6

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days
in bed cawing Nooooo at the wall; the dress

The one-word sentence 'Spinster' is stark and isolating, with the speaker's identity defined by marital rejection. This term carries connotations of loneliness and undesirability, reinforcing the themes of loneliness and shame.

'I stink and remember' combines physical revulsion with obsessive memory. 'Stink' evokes decay, reinforcing Gothic motifs of rot and stagnation, while 'remember' signals the speaker's inability to escape the past. 'Whole days' conveys her depression and obsession, experiencing no relief from the emotional pain that overwhelms her.

Likening the speaker to a crow ('cawing') highlights the dehumanising impact of the betrayal. 'Nooooo' mimics a prolonged cry or wail and the breakdown of articulate, rational thought.

The isolation of ‘the dress’ at the end of line 6 emphasises its symbolic weight. Typically, a wedding dress symbolises hope and new beginnings. Here, it represents betrayal and the speaker’s life stuck permanently in the past.

Line 7

yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;

The ‘yellowing’ dress symbolises faded hope and lost purity, suggesting that the promise of marriage has rotted over the years. The verb ‘trembling’ personifies the dress, giving it human-like fear and vulnerability.

The conditional ‘if’ reveals hesitation and uncertainty, highlighting the speaker’s fear of confronting painful memories. The wardrobe becomes a confined space of fear, preserving the past that the speaker cannot escape.

Lines 8–9

*the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this
to me? Puce curses that are sounds not words.*

‘Slew’d’ means something twisted or abruptly turned, suggesting that the mirror reflects a distorted image of the speaker. ‘Full-length’ implies total exposure: she is forced to confront all of herself and acknowledge what she has become.

The separation in ‘her, myself’ creates a fractured sense of identity, as though the speaker no longer recognises the woman in the mirror. The commas disrupt the flow of the line, mirroring her unstable thoughts. The enjambed question ‘who did this / / to me?’ emphasises her sense of victimhood and shock. These structural choices convey a fragmented self, damaged by betrayal.

Puce, a dark purple-red, carries connotations of blood and decay. The colour imagery links passion with something unhealthy and tainted. ‘Curses that are sounds not words’ highlights the limits of language under extreme emotion. The speaker’s anger is so intense that it reduces speech to inarticulate noise, emphasising how betrayal has overwhelmed reason and control.

Lines 10–12

Some nights better, the lost body over me,
my fluent tongue in its mouth in its ear
then down till I suddenly bite awake.

The phrase ‘Some nights better’ suggests the speaker experiences temporary relief from her bitterness, but this comfort comes only through fantasy. Her past lover is reduced to something purely physical but also absent (‘the lost body’). The repeated pronoun (‘its mouth’, ‘its ear’) dehumanises the lover; by objectifying him, the speaker is trying to take back some form of power over him.

The sensual imagery of ‘my fluent tongue’ suggests that, in her fantasy, the speaker is confident, in control and articulate. This contrasts with the reality (lines 8–9), where she questions who she is and her speech is reduced to curses and noise.

The abrupt interruption (‘till I suddenly’) highlights how quickly fantasy can collapse. Violent language (‘I bite awake’) disrupts the imagined intimacy, linking passion with physical harm. This moment suggests that even in her dreams the speaker cannot escape her rage, with desire quickly turning destructive.

Lines 12–13

Love’s
hate behind a white veil;

The enjambed phrase ‘Love’s // hate’ is structurally significant. It visually represents the division of the speaker’s emotions. The juxtaposition of ‘Love’ and ‘hate’ suggests the speaker’s emotional ambivalence, as desire and affection are entangled with resentment and bitterness.

A ‘white veil’ symbolises innocence and purity, aligning with the traditional image of a bride. However, a veil also represents concealment. The speaker’s hatred and suppressed rage exist ‘behind’ the outward appearance of romantic love. The veil may also represent how societal expectations of marriage mask the darker reality of betrayal and emotional damage.

Lines 13–14

a red balloon bursting
in my face. Bang. I stabbed at a wedding cake.

The light and celebratory image of ‘a red balloon’ symbolises romantic hope or passion. ‘Bursting’ suggests something sudden and uncontrollable, while ‘in my face’ carries connotations of humiliation. The colour red symbolises both love and violence, reinforcing the poem’s recurring link between desire and anger.

The abrupt sentence ‘Bang’ mimics the sound of an explosion, creating a sudden, jarring effect that reflects the violent collapse of the future the speaker once imagined for herself. At the same time, its flat, blunt delivery makes the violence feel emotionless, suggesting that the speaker has become numb after years of obsession and resentment.

The speaker transforms a symbol of union and shared happiness into an object of violence (‘I stabbed at a wedding cake’). The verb ‘stabbed’ is deliberately brutal and suggests displaced aggression. Unable to harm the man who abandoned her, the speaker directs her anger at symbols of love and marriage instead.

Lines 15–16

Give me a male corpse for a long slow honeymoon.
Don’t think it’s only the heart that b-b-b-breaks.

The imperative ‘Give me’ conveys both desperation and command. The disturbing image of ‘a male corpse’ completely inverts the traditional idea of a honeymoon, which symbolises intimacy, celebration and new beginnings. Instead of longing for reconciliation or healing, the speaker imagines possessing a dead body, something she can completely control.

The adjectives ‘long’ and ‘slow’ imply prolonged indulgence. This intensifies the unsettling tone and reveals how the speaker’s love has transformed into a desire for domination and revenge.

Ending the poem on a fractured word (‘b-b-b-breaks’) reinforces the theme of psychological breakdown. The stammer may imply sobbing, rage, or instability, showing that the speaker’s pain disrupts even her speech. While ‘heartbreak’ is a familiar cliché associated with romantic disappointment, the poem challenges this idea by suggesting

that betrayal damages more than emotion alone. The speaker's mind, identity and sense of self have been shattered.

The fragmented stammer also suggests repetition, implying that the speaker's emotional pain is not a single moment of collapse but an ongoing cycle of breakdown.

Discussion Prompts

Introductory

- What do you know, or what can you find out about, the fictional character Miss Havisham? Why might Duffy choose Miss Havisham as the speaker for this poem?
- How does the opening line establish the speaker's emotional state?
- How is time represented in the poem?
- How do the speaker's feelings about her former lover shape your impression of her character?

Techniques

- Why does Duffy use first-person narration?
- How do enjambment and line breaks reflect the speaker's psychological state?
- Identify examples of violent or grotesque imagery. What do they reveal about the speaker?
- What is the effect of the stammer in 'b-b-b-breaks'?
- How does the use of colour imagery contribute to mood and theme?
- How does Duffy use short sentences to create tension or intensity?

Themes

- How are identity and self-perception affected by betrayal in the poem?
- How does the poem explore the relationship between desire and violence?
- In what ways are obsession and revenge presented through the speaker's thoughts and fantasies?
- How does the poem explore the destructive power of love and heartbreak?
- How are wedding symbols used to show the speaker's feelings of betrayal and anger?

Practice Questions

National 5

Look at lines 1–4.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet creates a clear impression of the speaker's feelings. (4 marks)

Look at lines 5–8.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet presents the speaker as lonely or unstable. (2 marks)

Look at lines 9–12.

By referring to one example of language, explain how the poet creates a shift in mood or emotion. (2 marks)

Look at lines 13–16.

By referring to two examples of language, explain how the poet makes it clear that the speaker has a negative view of marriage. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by Duffy, show how the poet explores powerful emotions. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy's 'Havisham' might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- 'Originally'
- 'Mrs Midas'
- 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
- 'Medusa'
- 'Before You Were Mine'

Higher

Look at lines 1–4.

Analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the strength of the speaker's feelings. (2 marks)

Look at lines 5–12.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language conveys the impact of the relationship on the speaker. (4 marks)

Look at lines 13–16.

By referring to at least two examples, analyse how the poet's use of language creates a disturbing ending. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and at least one other poem by Duffy, discuss how the poet uses challenging situations to explore central concerns. (10 marks)

NB. Poems that Carol Ann Duffy's 'Havisham' might be compared with for the 10-mark question are:

- 'Originally'
- 'Mrs Midas'
- 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
- 'Medusa'
- 'Before You Were Mine'

Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

