

A wholesome glimpse
into memories of past
lovers: "once more
into my arid days li...



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Edna St. Vincent Millay centers her poems “ Once More into My Arid Days Like Dew” and “ I Think I Should Have Loved You Presently” around memories of past lovers, yet they have very different themes and focuses that, when put together, give a wholesome message about the different types of memories and lovers. “ Once More Into” uses imagery and a sad tone to explain the way painful memories about long-term lovers can affect us by bringing fleeting joy, only to leave us with the realization that those moments are gone; meanwhile, “ I Think I Should” has a nonchalant tone while explaining that some memories of fleeting moments might make us regret the way we acted with ephemeral loves, but that they cannot be changed.

“ Once More Into” reveals that recurrent memories of a past lover make her feel like they are there, just for a fleeting moment, but that as she realizes they are long gone, those memories only bring her pain and sadness. The first line, “ Once more into my arid days like dew” (1) emphasizes that these memories come repetitively, if not daily, like dew, yet they are memories of something that could never happen now, as seen when Millay compares them to “ wind from an oasis, or the sound /of cold sweet water bubbling underground” (2-3). It becomes clear that these thoughts and memories are painful and about someone, more than likely a lover since this is a sonnet, when Millay says, “ the thought of you /Comes to destroy me” (4-5). The reason why these memories are so painful to her is simply because they “ renew /Firm faith in [their] abundance” (5-6), meaning they make her feel like her lover is still with her, yet she quickly realizes that this is impossible as she describes it as “ one other mound /Of sand, whereon no green thing

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ever grew” (7-8) Although she clearly is saying that she is reminded that those moments will never occur again, the imagery of growth within “abundance” (6) and “green” (8) hints that her past lover is not dead, it was simply someone she could not grow and develop a relationship with. She shows the readers her pain by with the imagery of her falling, and getting up pitifully, and having “stinging eyes” (13). However, “colored phantom” (10) shows that although they are long gone, they still have color and are still lively, another hint at the fact that it is about a past lover, not a deceased love. Millay then goes on to end the sonnet with “Once more I clasp – and there is nothing there” (14), which shows again that she is in pain and desperate, but that no matter how she feels, her lover is gone.

“I Think I Should” uses a lighter tone in talking about the same topic, a memory of a past lover, showing that the main difference between the focus of both poems is the nature of the relationship she had with the lovers. In “Once More Into,” the pain and remembrance of her lover shows us that it was someone she had developed strong feelings for and had gotten attached to, but in “I Think I Should,” she regrets not having acted upon her feelings to develop a relationship with a lover who never turned into anything more than an ephemeral fling. The tone difference, the somberness versus the nonchalant attitude, serves to highlight that although memories are what they are, a recollection of the past, the subject of those memories can bring up different feelings and thoughts. She also underlines that there can be many types of “past lovers,” such as flings versus actual relationships where feelings are developed. But the similarity between the topics is evident as

Millay says, “walk your memory’s halls” (“I Think I Should,” 12) and “the
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thought of you” (“ Once More Into,” 4), just as the repetitiveness of those memories is made clear in “ one more waking from a recurrent dream” (“ I Think I Should,” 10) and “ once more into my arid days like dew” (“ Once More Into,” 1).

In “ I Think I Should,” Millay makes it clear that she regrets not having told a past lover how she truly felt, and that she “ should have loved [them] presently, /And given in earnest words [she] flung in jest; /And lifted honest eyes for [them] to see” (1-3). Instead, they had a brief sexual affair, which was why they liked her in the first place. “ Caught your hand against my cheek and breast” (4) tells the readers that the poem indeed is about a past lover since the hand touched her breast, but catching the hand also signifies making them stay, something Millay was not able to do. The word choice with “ beneath your gaze, /Naked...and shorn of pride” (6-7) has vivid sexual imagery, another reminder of this being about a past lover with whom she had a fleeting sexual affair. Her use of “ recurrent dream” (10) and “ memory’s hall” (12) allows the readers to understand that this is all a memory and that the lover is long gone, and that although Millay wishes she had told them how she felt, she realizes that she cannot change the past and does not regret their fleeting moments together, seen when she says, “ Cherish no less the certain stakes I gained” (11). However, she also acknowledges that she has changed since then, by describing herself as “ a ghost in marble of a girl you know” (13); she is now a mature woman looking for a stable relationship, which is hinted at by her usage of the word “ marble” (13). With the last line, she tells the readers that had he stayed for longer, she would have fallen in love with him by saying “ would have loved
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you in a day or two" (14). This last line also indicates that their moments together only lasted a few hours. But no matter what her feelings were at the time, she knew he would never love her back, since she says, " all my pretty follies...that won you to me" (5-6). All in all, she regrets not having been honest and not having it last longer than a few hours, but she knew he would not love her back, had she fell for him.

The importance of these two poems lies within the fact that Millay was openly writing about past lovers and sexuality, something rarely done by women at the time. They allow readers to get a wholesome view at different types of emotions elicited from memories and are easy to understand, as well as relate to, since most readers have been through a similar love situation, making her poetry relevant over one hundred years after it was written.