

# Literary response #4



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Literary Response #4 Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem 'What Lips My Lips Have Kissed?' is one woman's poignant and forlorn examination of past romantic encounters. In the opening lines of the poem Millay states, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,/ I have forgotten, and what arms have lain/ Under my head till morning;" (Millay, 1-3). Here the speaker is looking back on her past romantic encounters and has noted that she has forgotten all of the times she has lain within a lover until morning. In this instance, the speaker's emotional state is reminiscent, yet not entirely despondent.

As the poem develops the speaker's emotional state takes on a more somber and forlorn tone. Millay writes, "but the rain/ Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh/ Upon the glass and listen for reply;/ And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain/ For unremembered lads that not again/ Will turn to me at midnight with a cry" (Millay, 3-8). In these lines Millay uses the image of the ghosts in the rain to symbolize the speaker's past lovers. One can envision the speaker looking out at the rain and attempting to recollect these past individuals. Upon realizing that the speaker will never again share a moment of love and intimacy with these past lovers the speaker's emotional state is punctuated by a quiet pain. The image of the rain as the ghosts of past lovers is highly effective as rain has an immediate visceral effect of creating the emotion of sadness and slight depression; when coupled with the image of past lovers that the speaker will never again be able to spend time with, it is not difficult for the viewer to not only understand, but also feel this somber emotional state.

As the poem advances and ultimately concludes the speaker's emotional state is explored in greater depth, with more complex images. Millay writes, <https://assignbuster.com/literary-response-4/>

“ Thus in the winter stands a lonely tree,/ Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,/ Yet know its boughs more silent than before:/ I cannot say what loves have come and gone;/ I only know that summer sang in me/ A little while, that in me sings no more” (Millay 9-14). In referring to the lonely tree, the speaker is actually referencing herself. The image of winter conveys both the passage of time, as well the coldness that accompanies the speaker’s loneliness. While previously the speaker’s emotional state was perceived as slightly somber, this image of winter is starkly dark and despondent. This despondency is advanced in the following image of birds that once frequented the tree that have now gone; the birds here represent the lovers that once were intimate with the speaker that have now gone. The poem concludes by comparing summer to the speaker’s youth that was replete with friends and lovers who have now gone. Ultimately, the speaker’s emotional state is one of profound loneliness and despair at the passage of youth and time.

#### References

The American Tradition in Literature, 12th Edition. Authors George Perkins and Barbara Perkins.