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[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Marya Williams English 120 Professor Israel Written assignment 2 23 October 2012 Analysis of Edna St. Vincent Millay's "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" The poem entitled [What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why] by Edna St. Vincent Millay, is a very forward thinking sonnet of its time. Most sonnets are dedicated or about one single person. This one in particular is about the memory of several lovers. This poem is written in iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme of abbaacdecde. The first part of this poem is an octave, leaving the second half to be a sestet, which follows the traditional format of an Italian sonnet. Millay in this poem uses wonderful imagery and metaphors to communicate an overall theme of change in her life. The speaker in this poem is reminiscent on her younger, more promiscuous years of her life. The very title and first line of this sonnet is "what lips my lips have kissed, and where, and when, and why/I have forgotten." From the beginning it is apparent the persona of this poem is speaking directly to her audience. She tells of past lovers she had kissed in her youth but now whom she has forgotten. The next line she states "what arms have lain under my head till morning" the words "till morning" in the line suggest her encounters were one night stands as opposed to fully developed relationships. Considering the poem was written in 1925, we know the speaker must have had these relationships in the very early 1900's. An era, where it was very uncommon for women to be sleeping around, at least women with any sort of status or respect. This is not to say Millay, or the speaker in her sonnet was a whore. It is just an example of how ahead of its time this sonnet is. She opens the next line by saying "the rain is full of ghosts tonight," the ghosts she is referring to are her past lovers. She refers

to them s ghosts because while they are no longer present in her life, their spirit and memory still lives on within her, enabling her to write this several years after these romances had occurred. In this poem Millay uses the seasons to create a metaphor comparing a time of loneliness and unhappiness, which would be winter to summer, a time of love and companionship. Another way to look at this could be that winter , to the speaker, could be seen as a time of old age, death and despair. Where as summer on the opposite end would be a time of youth and happiness. Line 9 begins with the word “ thus” and is therefore the beginning of the ending sestet. The line reads ‘ Thus in the winter stand the lonely tree”. It is not known weather the persona is speaking about herself or not, but it can be looked as her referring to her self as lonely in winter, the time of despair. In line 10, she write’s “ what birds have vanished one by one” the birds she is making reference to in this line are her previous lovers. Who were all present at one point in her younger years but eventually all left “ one by one”. The second to last line the speaker says “ I only know that summer sang in me/A little while that sings no more” summer in this sense is youth, and passion. She had had it at one point in her life, her younger years filled with many short romances. Summer however, no longer sings in her. She has lost that passion that she had, and now she stands lonely in winter. Had the speaker in this poem another chance at youth I think she would very well take it. As humans though, this cannot happen. We go through changes throughout our lives that are inescapable. The persona of the poem in her adolescence had many lovers and was filled with the passion of summer. However as she is now older she has lost that passion and has become a more likely

comparison to winter. Millay does a beautiful job in this sonnet, using metaphors and great imagery to communicate the changes in life through the changes in seasons.