

A look into edna st. vincent millay's poem

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Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "What lips my lips have kissed" evokes a sad song that where a lady is regretting all the lovers she had lost. The choice of this particular poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay could be justified by the fact that readers can easily relate to it because it talks about a universal theme, which is love. Although it reeks of regret and loneliness, the poet effectively successfully used palpable symbols and words to describe the past events that transpired in her life.

In the poem, the speaker casts herself as a "lonely tree". One writer, Epstein (2001) proclaims that this poem is "a summing up of [the author's] love life to date, and an occasion to invoke the classic themes of elegy, the tempus fugit and the ubi sunt" (p. 139):

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why

I have forgotten, and what arms have lain

Under my head till morning . . .

.....

And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain

For unremembered lads that not again

Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,

Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,

Yet knows its boughs more silent than before.

It seems that the speaker in the poem is an aging lady signified by the songless tree. Indeed, she is an epitome of loneliness and regret, one that we might be tempted to read as a prototype of abandoned womanhood, pathetic and powerless. Male desire in the love sonnets where the woman as a speaker always masquerades feminine weakness and sentimentality; often beseeching, and consumed by desire. However, when a male lover speaks, it would imply " authority of suffering and, perhaps more importantly, with the authority of convention". When Millay masquerades as a male poet masquerading as a lovesick woman, the " sense of where sincerity meets gesture and how authority aligns itself with gender is confused" (Freedman, 1995, p. 113).

In its structure, the poem is classified as a sonnet that has a particular rhyming pattern: abbaabba cdedce. The poem uses alliteration and assonance. It is also rich in naturally-occurring symbols, which all readers can easily connect. The poem begins with a one-sentence octave that presents the situation in which the narrator finds herself--inside a house during the rain, reminiscing about her past and forgotten lovers.

The inverted sentence structure of the first two lines almost suggests a question rather than a statement: How many lovers were there? The alliterations in the first line additionally emphasize the repetitiveness of the narrator's sexual encounters. At the same time, the perfect tense mean that this phase of her life has been completed, and the body part symbolisms of lips, arms, and head imply her distance from the experience.

In the third line, Millay moves to the present tense, where she describes the memories of her lovers (using a ghost metaphor) aroused by the rain, a symbol for gloom and melancholia. These are the lovers that “ tap and sigh”. The narrator seems insinuating that the lovers themselves are irrelevant. For the same reason, “ Millay picks a metaphor that hints at facelessness and lack of welcome and resonates with the specific time of the midnight hour”.

The central phrase in this section is “ quiet pain,” an “ almost-oxymoron suggesting that the narrator's grief is muted or accepted” (Schurer, 2005). As signified by the forward movement of tenses, Millay gives the readers a slight glimpse of things to come as well: However, undeniably, she regrets everything and she expects no intimacy in the future.

In the end, the female narrator seems not interested in the identity of her lovers as in the memory of the emotions they allowed her to experience. Despite the sadness and regret, the narrator presented peace or redemption as a “ faint echo of the emotion of love from her youth” (Schurer, 2005). Despite the lonely themes and symbols, we can sense of equality in love; to the demand by women that they be allowed to enter the world of adventure and experiment in love which men have long inhabited. However, Millay does not sound to be any feminist to argue for that equality. She just makes it subtle, exhibits it in this poem and turns it into beauty.

Works Cited

Epstein, Daniel Mark. *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Holt, 2001.

Freedman, Diane P., ed. *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995.

Schurer, Norbert. "Millay's what lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why", *The Explicator*, 63. 2 (Winter 2005): 94-97.