The Buck in the Snow

SUMMARY

The speaker asks the white sky, which hangs above hemlock trees whose branches are heavy with snow, if it saw a male deer and his mate at the start of the evening. The two deer were standing in the apple-orchard. The speaker definitively saw them. The speaker also saw them suddenly run away, their tails high as they gracefully leapt over a stone wall and into the snowy woods.

Now, however, the male deer is lying right there on the ground before the speaker. He is bleeding, and his hot blood burns the surrounding snow.

The speaker acknowledges the strange power of death, which can conquer such a powerful and beautiful creature. The speaker again emphasizes death's strangeness, and then goes on to imagine that, perhaps a mile away—beneath hemlock trees loaded down with snow, whose branches shift from time to time and cause snow to fall lightly to the ground—the female deer is still alive, and cautiously observing her surroundings.

THEMES

THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE

The speaker reflects on the strangeness seeing a dead buck in the snow, having observed, only a short while earlier, that same buck and his mate gracefully leaping through the snowy woods. The vivid image of the strong, vivacious buck now brought "to his knees," his blood pooling in the surrounding snow, reflects the fragility of life and the immense power of death. Life, the poem suggests, is fleeting and unpredictable, whereas death is sudden and merciless.

When the speaker first saw the buck and doe earlier in the evening, the animals were the image of life and vitality—seemingly virile and strong. The buck is described as "antlered," for example. Antlers are a buck's weapons when competing for mates and here represent the buck's physical prowess. The phrase "antlered buck and his doe" also implies that the pair are mates, and thus full of the potential to reproduce and bring new life into the world. The fact that the buck and the doe "suddenly" take flight with "long leaps" over a wall again emphasizes their sheer physical liveliness. At first, then, the animals seem quite far from death—vividly aware of their surroundings and filled with strength and promise.

Yet the next time the speaker sees the buck the animal is dead, "his wild blood scalding the snow." This blood represents the buck's fierce and powerful life force. However "wild" and hot the virile buck's blood may be, however, it is now leaking out of him and causing the surrounding snow to steam. The blood will cool and maybe even freeze in the snow, and this image thus implies the eventual power of icy death over even the most vivacious of creatures.

The speaker thus muses on the "strange[ness]" of death in that it can "bring" this lively and vigorous buck "to his knees" and "to his antlers." A buck is typically brought "to his knees" and "to his antlers" when defeated by another buck during mating season. But here, *death itself* defeats the buck, who, again, just moments before this had been filled with life.

In the end, the speaker realizes that all life is fleeting and fragile. While looking at the dead buck, the speaker thinks about how "as the moments pass," the snow falls from the hemlock trees. The world is utterly unmoved by the buck's death. Snow is, of course, also associated with winter, which is a season symbolically tied to death. This falling snow thus suggests the ever-present reality of death, and also reiterates the utterly fragility of life. There are few things as physically delicate as a snowflake, and yet soon enough these may bury the body of the once wild buck. In the end, the poem implies, death has power over all living things, and that it can come without warning.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

White sky, over ...
... in the apple-orchard?

On the level of plot, the poem begins pretty simply. The speaker saw an "antlered buck and his doe," meaning a male deer and his mate, standing in an apple orchard earlier in the evening. Even these seemingly straightforward lines, however, are filled with rich symbolism.

The speaker begins by posing a question to the sky, which is white because it is a cloudy winter day. Winter is a season symbolically associated with death (think about it: this is the time of year when the ground freezes, plants are dormant, and many animals hibernate), and thus in calling the sky "white," the speaker links the snowy sky to death as well. By directly addressing the sky directly, the speaker also personifies it, implying that the sky is a figure watching "over" the earth. Altogether, this imagery thus establishes the omnipresence of

death. That is, the white sky looking "over the hemlocks" symbolizes the presence of death constantly lurking in the background of the poem, and of life.

The speaker specifically positions the sky "over the hemlocks bowed with snow." Hemlocks are a type of evergreen trees, meaning they remain green throughout the year. The color green is associated with spring and new life. Yet these hemlocks here are "bowed with snow." On a literal level, this just means that their branches are loaded down with snow. Symbolically, though, this image of green trees sagging under the weight of winter snow again implies that supremacy of death, which rules over all of nature.

In line 2, the speaker refers to "the beginning of evening," revealing that time has passed since she first saw the animals, but not *that* much time; after all, it is still the same day. This specific language also adds to the sense of foreboding in the poem: evening is associated with darkness, which is usually associated with despair, sorrow, and death. Therefore, the "beginning of evening" represents the transition from a period of light—daytime—to a period of darkness. As it moves on, the poem itself progresses further into darkness—symbolically, into sorrow and death.

The image of the "antlered buck and his doe," however, contrasts with the foreboding setting of the poem. An antlered buck, or male deer, is one that has reached sexual maturity. Moreover, this buck is paired with a "doe." The pairing represents the vigor and hope of life, and the potential of new life. Their presence in the "apple-orchard" also suggests that they are there in search of sustenance to help them survive the winter.

The first three lines thus set up a sharp symbolic contrast between death, as represented by the white sky, the "hemlocks bowed with snow," and "the beginning of evening," and life, as represented by the "antlered buck and his doe" and the "apple-orchard."

In terms of structure, "The Buck in the Snow" is not written in any particular form or meter. Rather, like many of Millay's poems, the poem is written in free verse (albeit with frequent rhyme). The lack of structure and pattern in the poem suits the content of the poem, which addresses the unpredictable and unstructured nature of death.

LINES 3-5

I saw them. ...
... bowed with snow.

The speaker does not wait for the sky's reply. Instead, the speaker reasserts the presence of the buck and the doe earlier in the evening, with the repetition of "I saw them" adding emphasis to this assertion. It feels as though the speaker is in a bit of disbelief, saying, basically, "I saw them, really." The reason for this insistence will become clear in the next stanza.

In line 3, two instances of caesura separate and emphasize the phrase "I saw them" from the rest of the line. The caesura, therefore, highlights the speaker's role as a witness. The speaker not only sees the two deer alive and well, but also watches them "suddenly go / [t]ails up, with long leaps lovely and slow, / [o]ver the stone-wall." The deer, therefore, react quickly to the speaker's presence, proving their liveliness and physical vigor.

To the speaker, their leaps are also "lovely and slow," emphasizing the animals' beauty and grace. The actual *sound* of these lines reflects that beauty too. Note the /l/ consonance that is particularly strong in line 4, imbuing the description of the deer's jumps with a gentle, lilting loveliness:

> Tails up, with long leaps lovely and slow,

Line 5 then repeats the imagery of line 1 by ending on the image of "hemlocks bowed with snow." This time, however, the imagery of line 1 is further developed as the hemlocks are now a "wood of hemlocks" rather than individual hemlock trees. The poem expands its setting into a larger, snow-covered forest; given that the setting so far has been closely linked to death, its expansion here also expands *death's* scope.

Although "The Buck in the Snow" does not follow any particular form or meter, Millay does play with end rhymes throughout the poem. For example, all the ends of the lines in the first stanza of the poem rhyme with one another. The assonant long /o/ sounds in "snow," "doe," "go," "slow," and "snow" are evocative of a moan or groan. The assonance, therefore, builds on the foreboding mood in the first stanza.

Finally, this stanza is also filled with sibilance. Note the many /s/ sounds in lines 3-5:

> Standing in the apple-orchard? I saw them. I saw
> them suddenly go,
> Tails up, with long leaps lovely and slow,
> Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks
> bowed with snow.

Sibilance evokes the sound of whispering, and thus lends a hushed quality to these lines. This reflects the poem's setting, in a quiet wood on a winter evening. The silence is also again ominous, however, since it implies a lack of noise—and thus a lack of life.

LINE 6

Now lies he ... scalding the snow.

The second stanza of "The Buck in the Snow" is an unusual one, as it is composed of only a single line. In the poem's first stanza, the speaker spoke about a moment "at the beginning of evening." In line 6, the speaker brings the reader into the present, into "Now."

While in the first stanza the buck was full of power, beauty, and grace, the same buck now lies dead before the speaker. At first, though, the buck's state is not entirely clear. Rather, the speaker only states that the buck "lies ... here." The pause created by the caesura in the middle of the line creates tension, reflecting the way that the speaker is grappling with the stark reality that a creature so full of life just a short time earlier is now dead.

The buck's "wild blood" pours out of him onto the surrounding snow, "scalding" it. The wildness of the buck's blood evokes the animal's liveliness and power. That the buck's blood is hot further emphasizes his strength and vitality, while the sibilance of "scalding the snow" evokes a hiss of steam as the buck's hot blood comes into contact with the snow. The heat of the buck's blood, a symbol for the vigor of his life, contrasts sharply with the coldness of the snow, a symbol for death.

Despite the buck's seemingly wild, untamable nature, the animal is still dead. His blood is cooling in the snow, an image that reflects the victory of death over even the most vivacious of creatures. The buck's power and vigor has thus proven to have been an illusion, masking the fragility and unpredictability of the animal's existence. Indeed, the poem's turn again to snow-related imagery emphasizes the ever-present reality of death in the world.

By setting apart line 6 in its own stanza, Millay highlights its importance in the poem. All creatures, the poem seems to suggest, from the buck to the evergreen hemlocks, eventually succumb to death. Moreover, the stanza breaks before and after line 6 highlight tone and content shifts after the first stanza. The first stanza referred to past events when the buck was still alive. Although the imagery of the first stanza was foreboding at times, the imagery also established the hope and beauty embodied by the deer's physicality. The second stanza, however, focuses on the harsh reality of death.

LINES 7-8

How strange a ...
... in the snow.

Lines 7 and 8 mark the beginning of the poem's third and final stanza. The stanza break between the second and third stanza marks a shift in tone and content. While the second stanza focused on the harsh reality and shock of seeing the dead buck, the third stanza muses more philosophically on the nature of death and life.

In lines 7-8, the speaker thinks about the "strange" power of death. This idea develops upon one established in the previous two stanzas: that no matter how powerful or vigorous a creature may seem, death will always win in the end.

The speaker realizes that death can "bring[] to his knees, bring[] to his antlers / [t]he buck in the snow." To bring someone to their "knees" is to conquer them. In a match between two bucks for a mate, for example, one buck may bring another buck to his knees in order to make that buck submit. To bring a buck to his "antlers" intensifies his submission, as he has not only lowered his body, but also his face to the ground. Line 7, therefore, highlights the fact that the buck has submitted to death. The anaphora of "bringing to his" emphasizes the buck's total defeat.

The enjambment at the end of line 7 also isolates the imagery of "[t]he buck in the snow" in its own line. As the snow is a symbol for death, the image of the buck in, and therefore surrounded by, the snow again stresses the buck's submission.

LINES 9-11

How strange a ...
... feather of snow—

In lines 9-11, the speaker reiterates again the strangeness of death, before imagining what the doe—the buck's mate—might be doing.

Line 9 begins with a repetition of the phrase "How strange a thing," another example of anaphora. The use of anaphora emphasizes the "strangeness" of death, in that it is able to conquer even the most seemingly vigorous and powerful of lives. Line 9 is then interrupted by a caesura, indicating a shift in the speaker's thoughts.

After the caesura, the speaker imagines what the doe might be experiencing at that moment. The speaker's musings that the doe may be "a mile away by now" are hesitant, rather than certain. Indeed, line 9 is interrupted by another caesura before "it may be." These hesitant starts and stops in the line highlight the speaker's uncertainty—which contrasts with the confidence of the first stanza, when the speaker insists, twice, that the speaker "saw" the deer. The image of the dead buck seems to have shaken the speaker, who now sees that life is unpredictable and fragile; as such, the speaker speaks more tentatively.

In lines 10-11, the speaker goes on to describe the setting in which the doe may be. The speaker first envisions "heavy hemlocks," a phrase bound together by the alliterative /h/ and assonant /eh/ sounds. The hemlocks are "heavy" because they are loaded down with snow, an image that evokes earlier phrases of "hemlocks bowed with snow." The imagery of the "heavy hemlocks," therefore, highlights again the pervasive power of death. The adjective "heavy" can also describe an emotional state of grief, sorrow, or defeat. The image of the "heavy hemlocks" thus also evokes the sorrow of the buck's death.

The speaker further develops the emotional and physical "heaviness" of the hemlocks in line 11. As time passes, the speaker imagines, the hemlocks might "Shift their loads a little." A "load" is a heavy or bulky object that is carried. Therefore, the word "load" emphasizes that the snow, a symbol of death, the

hemlocks carry is a burden.

As the hemlocks "[s]hift," the speaker muses, they may "let[] fall a feather of snow." This imagery is set apart from the beginning of line 11 by a caesura in the form of a comma. This caesura emphasizes the seeming contradictory nature of the snow. In the first half of line 11, the snow is a heavy "load" and burden on the hemlocks. In the second half of line 11 after the comma, the snow is imagined as a light "feather of snow."

As snow is a symbol for death, these seemingly contradictory images stresses the strangeness of snow, and, thus, the strangeness of death. Death can conquer even the most vigorous of creatures, but death itself is can be a subtle presence. It does not rely on brute displays of strength to assert its power. This image also suggests death's indifference to life, in that the snow continues to fall and, ostensibly, will soon enough cover the dead body of the buck.

These lines are filled with assonance of short /eh/, long /oh/, and /ah/ sounds, plus consonance of /h/, /l/, /f/, and /m/ sounds:

> Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
> Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow—

The result is that these lines feel intensely lyrical. The delicate /h/, /l/, and /f/ sounds evoke the stillness and fragility of the snowy scene, while the humming /m/ sounds suggest a sort of heaviness, evocative of the pull of death itself.

LINE 12

Life, looking out ... of the doe.

The poem's final line again uses personification. Here, the speaker personifies life itself, granting it the capacity to see. Specifically, the speaker is envisioning life "looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe."

A creature that is "looking out attentive" is one that is watchful and cautious of their surroundings. The doe is thus careful, observant, aware of the threats that surround her in the snowy wood. It is also significant that this "Life" is hiding behind, and seeking shelter in, the "eyes of the doe." Life itself, the poem implies, is aware of its own fragility, and of the power that death has over it. The world that the doe and life look out on is not a friendly one, but rather is one that is filled with danger. The personification in line 12 thus has an effect similar to that of the personification in line 1. Both moments emphasize the power and omnipresence of death.

SYMBOLS

SNOW

Winter is a season traditionally associated with death. It is a time when many animals hibernate and many plants are dormant; it is inhospitable, barren, and cold. In the poem, the winter landscape plays into this symbolism: the backdrop of snow represents the ever-present reality of death.

For example, in line 6, the buck's hot, "wild blood" scalds—or burns, scorches—the snow. The blood represents the animal's strength and vigor, which turns to hissing steam when it comes into contact with the cold snow. The snow will cause the blood to cool and eventually freeze, representing death's triumph over life.

Millay further deepens this symbolism in line 11 when she describes "a feather of snow" falling from the hemlock trees. This image emphasizes the delicate nature of the snow. Snowflakes, though fragile, will soon bury the body of the buck. Death, the image implies, is so powerful, and life so delicate and tenuous, that death need not rely on the same kind of strength and force that characterizes animals like the "antlered buck" in order to assert its dominance.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "White sky," "hemlocks bowed with snow,"
- **Line 5:** "the wood of hemlocks bowed with snow."
- **Line 6:** "his wild blood scalding the snow."
- **Line 8:** "The buck in the snow."
- **Lines 10-11:** "Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass / Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow—"

THE ANTLERED BUCK

A buck is a male deer. The fact that this buck is antlered means that he has reached maturity. Antlers not only attract mates, but can also be used to compete against other males. An antlered buck is therefore at the prime of his life, a powerful and virile animal. In "The Buck in the Snow," the antlered buck represents vitality itself.

In the first stanza, for example, note how the buck and his doe gracefully leap over a stone wall. This underscores that they are lively and energetic creatures. However, no matter how powerful or vigorous the buck may seem to be, he is still ultimately conquered by death. In stanza 2, the buck lies dead in the snow. Although his blood is hot, again emphasizing his vigor, the buck is still dead. And though he was once "wild," he has now been tamed by death. Death, therefore, conquers all life, no matter how powerful that life may seem to be.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "antlered buck"
- **Lines 4-5:** "long leaps lovely and slow, / Over the stone-wall"
- **Line 6:** "Now lies he here, his wild blood scalding the snow."

- **Lines 7-8:** "How strange a thing is death, bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers / The buck in the snow."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Imagery is an important part of "The Buck in the Snow," used by the poet to engage the reader and set the scene, and also to establish important symbolism.

In the first stanza, Millay uses imagery to create a rich setting for the poem. The speaker describes a quiet, wintry landscape filled with snow. There are evergreen "hemlocks bowed with snow," an "antlered buck and his doe," an "apple-orchard," and a "stone-wall." This imagery seems idyllic and peaceful, a simple scene of a buck and his mate, two animals in the prime of their lives. When the deer leap, the speaker observes that their "long leaps" are "lovely and slow," a description that emphasizes the animals' power and grace.

At the same time, however, some of this imagery is also foreboding. In line 1, the speaker addresses a "White sky," implying that the sky above is not clear and blue but rather cloudy and filled with the potential for snow. Snow arrives with the winter, a barren season symbolically associated with death. The landscape's abundant snow and the watchful white sky, therefore, suggest death lurking in the background of the otherwise lovely, peaceful scene.

In keeping with this, the hemlocks in the scene are "bowed with snow." Hemlocks are an evergreen tree, meaning that they do not lose their leaves in the winter; their presence suggests the perseverance of life even in the harshest of seasons, yet here the trees sag under the weight of the snow—under the heavy presence of death.

The imagery of the second stanza brings that sense of foreboding to fruition. In line 6, the buck, so lively just a short time earlier, lies dead before the speaker, "his wild blood scalding the snow." The imagery here establishes the sharp contrast between the heat of the buck's "wild blood," essentially representing his life force, and the coldness of the snow, representing death. There is also an implied striking visual contrast between the redness of the blood and the pure whiteness of the snow. These contrasts—between red and white, between heat and icy cold—reflect the symbolic opposition between life and death.

The third stanza of the poem confirms the power of death over life. In lines 7-8, the speaker describes death "bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers / The buck in the snow." A buck that has fallen to his "knees" and "antlers" is a buck that has lost a fight. This image thus illustrates death's conquest of the mighty buck—again establishing the power of death over all life, no matter how virile and strong that life may seem.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 3-5
- Line 6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-12

REPETITION

Repetition occurs frequently throughout "The Buck in the Snow." Millay uses repetition to draw attention to the poem's symbolism, enhance the musicality of the poem's language, and create a sense of rhythm across lines.

The most obvious repetition is of course the word "snow," which appears in the poem's title and then repeats five times within the poem. Snow represents death in the poem (see the guide's Symbols section for more), and its frequent repetition thus implies the omnipresence of death, the fact that death is everywhere.

The first and last line of stanza 1 also repeat the phrase "hemlocks bowed with snow." Hemlocks are a type of evergreen tree, meaning they do not shed their leaves (rather, their needles) in the winter. As such, their presence suggests the ability of life to persevere through harsh and inhospitable conditions. Here, however, the hemlocks sag under the weight of the "snow," which is again a symbol of death. The poem seems to suggest, through this repetition and symbolism, that life must always submit to and be conquered by death.

In line 3, the repetition of "I saw them," an example of anadiplosis, suggests the speaker's insistence. That is, the speaker is *certain* that the deer were in the "apple-orchard" earlier in the evening. In hindsight—knowing that the buck currently lies dead before the speaker—this might also reflect the speaker's disbelief that this animal, the very image of life earlier in the day, is now dead.

In the final stanza, the speaker muses on the "strange[ness]" of death, in that it can "bring[] to his knees, bring[] to his antlers / [t]he buck in the snow." The use of repetition, specifically anaphora, creates a relentless rhythm across lines 7-9, evoking the relentlessness of death as it conquers all life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hemlocks bowed with snow"
- **Line 3:** " I saw them. I saw them"
- **Line 5:** "hemlocks bowed with snow"
- **Line 6:** "snow"
- **Line 7:** "How strange a thing," "bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers"

- **Line 8:** “snow”
- **Line 9:** “How strange a thing”
- **Line 10:** “hemlocks”
- **Line 11:** “snow”

CAESURA

Millay uses caesura in "The Buck in the Snow" in order to create variation in the poem's rhythm, emphasize certain ideas and phrases, and mirror the experiences described in the poem.

In the first stanza, the speaker asks the "White sky" if it saw the buck and his doe in the apple-orchard. Then, in line 3, without waiting for a response, the speaker goes on to confirm sight of the deer. There are two caesuras in line 3, thereby creating a variation in the rhythm of the line. The caesuras slow down the reading of the line and add emphasis to the speaker's assertion of seeing the deer. The caesuras therefore add a sense of adamance to the speaker's assertion of the deer's existence at "the beginning of evening."

This assertion, however, is overturned by the second stanza, in which the speaker comes across the buck's dead or dying body. The caesura in line 6, between "here" and "his," similarly slows down the reading of the line, adding a sense of solemnity to the scene.

In line 7, the two instances of caesura add a start-stop feel to the line. The interruptions to the line might be taken as mirroring the fact that death abruptly interrupts to life. In line 9, the speaker then muses on the doe's actions at that moment. The speaker's musings are imagined. Therefore, the two caesuras in line 9 evoke the halting quality of the speaker's speech, which, in turn, evokes the uncertainty of the speaker's imaginings. The speaker can only imagine that the doe has survived. Survival, the poem makes clear, is never certain.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “sky, over”
- **Line 3:** “apple-orchard? I,” “them. I”
- **Line 4:** “up, with”
- **Line 6:** “here, his”
- **Line 7:** “death, bringing,” “knees, bringing”
- **Line 9:** “thing,—a,” “now, it”
- **Line 11:** “little, letting”

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs often in "The Buck in the Snow." Millay uses alliteration to enhance the musicality of the poem's language, and to draw readers' attention to certain ideas and phrases.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes seeing a buck and a doe "Standing in the apple-orchard." As the speaker watches them, however, the deer flee from sight. In line 3, the alliteration (technically sibilance) of swift /s/ sounds in "Standing," "saw," and "suddenly" mirror the swift departure of the deer, creating a rush of air that moves through the poem.

In line 4, the speaker observes the deer taking "long leaps lovely and slow, / Over the stone-wall." While the flight of the deer is swift, their leaps are "long" and "slow." The alliteration of the long, smooth /l/ sounds in "long," "leaps," and "lovely" mimic the long, smooth gliding leaps of the deer.

In the third stanza, the speaker imagines the surviving doe standing beneath hemlocks that "Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow." The alliteration of soft /l/ and /f/ sounds in "loads," "little," "letting, "fall," and "feather" evoke the delicate quality of falling snowflakes. In turn, the fragility of the snowflakes, symbolic of death, emphasizes the even *greater* fragility of life, represented by the body of the buck slowly being buried under the snow. The alliteration of "The Buck in the Snow," therefore, enhances the imagery, experiences, and themes of the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “sky,” “snow”
- **Line 2:** “Saw,” “beginning,” “buck”
- **Line 3:** “Standing,” “saw,” “saw,” “suddenly”
- **Line 4:** “long,” “leaps,” “lovely,” “slow”
- **Line 5:** “stone,” “wall,” “wood,” “with,” “snow”
- **Line 6:** “lies,” “he,” “here,” “his,” “scalding,” “snow”
- **Line 7:** “bringing,” “bringing”
- **Line 8:** “buck”
- **Line 9:** “mile,” “by,” “may,” “be”
- **Line 10:** “heavy,” “hemlocks”
- **Line 11:** “loads,” “little,” “letting,” “fall,” “feather”
- **Line 12:** “Life,” “looking”

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs frequently throughout "The Buck in the Snow." Millay uses consonance to enhance the beauty of the language, draw attention to particular ideas or phrases, and evoke experiences described in the poem.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes seeing deer leap "Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks bowed with snow." The consonance of loping /w/ sounds in "stone-wall," "wood," "bowed," "with," and "snow" mimics the bounding and leaping actions of the deer. The consonance, therefore, enhances the visual imagery of the poem.

In the second stanza, the sibilance of hissing /s/ sounds in "scalding" and "snow" draws attention to the imagery of the dead or dying buck, mirroring the hissing of the buck's hot blood as it hits the cold snow. This emphasizes the contrast between the buck's blood, which represents life, and the icy snow, which represents death.

In the third stanza, the speaker muses on the surviving doe. The speaker imagines that perhaps "Life" is "looking out attentive

from the eyes of the doe." The consonance of sharp, staccato /t/ sounds in "out" and "attentive" evoke the anxious watchfulness of the doe. The consonance, thus, continues to enhance the experiences described within the poem for the reader.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "White," "sky," "bowed," "with," "snow"
- **Line 2:** "Saw," "not," "beginning," "evening," "antlered," "buck"
- **Line 3:** "Standing," "apple," "saw," "saw," "suddenly"
- **Line 4:** "up," "long," "leaps," "lovely," "slow"
- **Line 5:** "Over," "stone-wall," "wood," "hemlocks," "bowed," "with," "snow"
- **Line 6:** "lies," "he," "here," "his," "wild," "blood," "scalding," "snow"
- **Line 7:** "strange," "thing," "death," "bringing," "knees," "bringing," "antlers"
- **Line 8:** "buck"
- **Line 9:** "mile," "by," "may," "be"
- **Line 10:** "heavy," "hemlocks," "moments"
- **Line 11:** "Shift," "loads," "little," "letting," "fall," "feather," "snow"
- **Line 12:** "Life," "looking," "out," "attentive," "from"

ASSONANCE

As with consonance, assonance occurs in almost every line of "The Buck in the Snow." In each case, Millay uses assonance to emphasize certain phrases or ideas and to intensify the experiences described in the lines.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes seeing a buck and his doe leap "lovely and slow, / Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks bowed with snow." The assonance of long, drawn out /oh/ sounds in "slow," "Over," "stone-wall," and "snow"mirror the long and slow leaps of the deer. The assonance slows down the pacing of the line, further emphasizing the "lovely and slow" quality of these leaps.

In the second stanza, the buck is no longer leaping over the wall, but rather lying dead or dying in the snow. The assonance of higher pitched /i/ sounds in "lies" and "wild" contrast with the assonance of long, low-pitched /oh/ sounds of line 5. The contrast emphasizes the opposition between life, as described in stanza 1, and death, as described in stanza 2.

Assonance is particular prominent in lines 10-11. The speaker imagines that the doe is standing beneath the trees, from which snowflakes gently fall. Note the assonance of the /eh/, /ah/, and /oh/ sounds here, which slow down the lines:

> Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
> Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow—

Combined with the clear consonance here, these two lines feel intensely musical and lyrical. Their beauty is eerie, however, given that the doe is vulnerable—the surrounding snow suggesting the many surrounding threats.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "White," "sky," "over," "snow"
- **Line 2:** "beginning," "evening," "antlered," "and," "doe"
- **Line 3:** "Standing," "go"
- **Line 4:** "leaps," "lovely," "slow"
- **Line 5:** "Over," "stone," "snow"
- **Line 6:** "lies," "wild"
- **Line 7:** "thing," "is," "bringing," "his," "bringing," "his"
- **Line 9:** "strange," "mile," "away," "by," "may," "be"
- **Line 10:** "heavy," "hemlocks," "that," "as," "moments," "pass"
- **Line 11:** "loads," "letting," "feather," "snow"
- **Line 12:** "Life," "eyes," "doe"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs three times in "The Buck in the Snow." Millay uses enjambment in order to play with the rhythm of the poem, imbuing it with a sense of unpredictability that mirrors the unpredictability of death.

In the first stanza, the speaker asks the sky if it saw the "antlered buck and his doe / Standing in the apple-orchard." The enjambment at the end of line 2 breaks apart the sentence its imagery:

> Saw you not at the beginning of evening the antlered buck and his doe
> Standing in the apple-orchard?

On the one hand, this helps the poem continue its pseudo-rhyme scheme by allowing line 2 to end on another long /oh/ sound. But this splitting up of the image also introduces new detail into the scene being described, allowing it to unfold before the reader—as if the speaker were zooming out on the scene. This scene seems peaceful enough, but the enjambment suggests that the speaker's words are tumbling forward, that the speaker is a bit frantic and trying to get the words out quickly. Perhaps this implies that the speaker is looking for reassurance regarding this earlier scene, adding more detail in the hopes that the sky will say that it saw the deer too.

In the third stanza, the speaker muses on the "strange[ness]" of death. The speaker acknowledges that death can "bring[] to his knees, bring[] to his antlers / [t]he buck in the snow." The enjambment at the end of line 7, after "antlers," for a moment allows the image to remain broad and lofty before suddenly collapsing into the concrete image of the dead deer—an unshakable reminder of life's fragility.

Finally, the enjambment at the end of line 10 reflects the line's content. The speaker mentions the "moments" that "pass," and

the white space after "pass" seems to enact this movement, to create a sense of time stretching across the page.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "doe / Standing"
- **Lines 7-8:** "antlers / The"
- **Lines 10-11:** "pass / Shift"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification occurs two times in "The Buck in the Snow"—once at the beginning and once at the end of the poem. In both cases, Millay uses personification to enhance the imagery of the poem and to highlight specific themes.

In the first stanza, the speaker directly addresses the "White sky" and asks if it saw the deer in the apple-orchard. The speaker thus presents the sky as a figure with the ability to watch over the ground below. Additionally, the fact that the sky is "white" suggests that it may bring more snowfall. Snow is associated with death in the poem; an expansive white sky, therefore, suggests the omnipresence of death, that death is watching over the world below.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker personifies "Life" by imagining it looking out at the world from within the doe's eyes. Life becomes a cautious and watchful figure, hiding within the deer. These attributes demonstrate life's awareness of the danger and threat that death poses; life must be vigilant, because death is everywhere.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "White sky, over the hemlocks bowed with snow, / Saw you not at the beginning of evening the antlered buck and his doe / Standing in the apple-orchard?"
- **Line 12:** "Life, looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe."

VOCABULARY

Hemlocks (Line 1, Line 10) - A type of evergreen tree.

Antlered (Line 2, Line 7) - A creature with antlers. The buck, or male deer, has antlers, meaning he has reached sexual maturity.

Buck (Line 2, Line 8) - A male deer. The speaker sees a male and female deer in the apple-orchard.

Doe (Line 2, Line 12) - A female deer, implied here to be the buck's mate.

Scalding (Line 6) - Burning or searing; the buck's hot blood seems to burn the snow.

Attentive (Line 12) - Observant; watchful; paying close attention. Life looks out from the doe's eyes, watchful and wary.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Buck in the Snow" is not written in any particular form. The 12-line poem is made up of three stanzas, which can be broken down as a:

- Quintet (five-line stanza)
- Monostich (one-line stanza)
- Sestet (six-line stanza)

"The Buck in the Snow" highlights the power of death over life and, therefore, the fragility and uncertainty of life. The poem's lack of structure and widely varied stanza lengths mirrors life's unpredictability. Life is never certain and may be cut short at any time, just as the buck's life is cut short unexpectedly in the second stanza.

METER

"The Buck in the Snow" is written in free verse. Consequently, it does not follow any traditional metrical pattern. The lack of meter suits the content of the poem, which is presented as the speaker's casual, philosophical observations and musings from one particular evening.

There are, however, occasional moments of meter. For example, take the beginning of line 3, which is written in trochaic meter (meaning it consists of feet with a stressed-unstressed, DUM-da, pattern):

Stan**ding** | **in** the | **ap**ple- | **or**chard?

This phrase thus introduces a brief moment of structure into the poem, suggesting the peace and serenity of this moment in the orchard. For a moment, the world seems steady and predictable—though this predictability disappears with the second half of the line, as the deer suddenly leap away.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Buck in the Snow" does not follow any traditional rhyme scheme, but it does frequently rhyme—and those rhymes are all on the long /oh/ sound. The rhyme scheme of the poem is as follows:

AAAAA A BACDAA

"The Buck in the Snow" asserts the power of death over life, a rather bleak and harsh idea. Life, the poem suggests, is unpredictable and, moreover, will always be conquered by death. The assonance of long, moaning /oh/ sounds in the end rhymes of so many of the lines imbues the entire poem with an appropriate sense of mournfulness.

Moreover, the setting of the poem is a bleak, wintry landscape. There are no sounds of life other than, perhaps, the wind that moves through the hemlocks, causing them to "Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of snow." The assonance of long /oh/ sounds may also evoke the mournful howling of the wind as it moves through this landscape. Therefore, the end rhymes of "The Buck in the Snow" enhance the imagery and mood of the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Buck in the Snow" is someone standing in a snowy wood and grappling with the fact that the buck the speaker saw leaping about shortly before the poem starts is now dead. The speaker has no name or gender. While it's possible that Millay herself is the speaker, there is no evidence to suggest this in the poem itself. Regardless, the speaker seems to feel an affinity with the natural world. In the beginning of the poem, for example, the speaker even directly addresses the "White sky."

The speaker begins the poem insisting that the buck was vibrantly alive "at the beginning of the evening," which perhaps suggests the speakers shock and disbelief upon seeing the animal's body bleeding out into the snow. The speaker, however, does not fall into despair at the sight of death. Rather, the speaker remains meditative and philosophical, seeming to come to terms with the power of death and the fragility of life at the end of the poem.

SETTING

The setting of "The Buck in the Snow" is a snowy winter landscape. The sky is white overhead and the time is sometime during the evening. There is an apple-orchard, a stone-wall, and a forest filled with hemlock trees, whose branches are loaded with snow. Deer occasionally roam through the landscape, though they remain watchful and wary, ready to flee at a moment's notice.

The scene seems peaceful, quiet, and even idyllic at first, but there are some foreboding details. The white sky, for instance, suggests a coming snow storm, while the fact that it is "evening" implies that the full darkness of night is on its way. In the second stanza, the speaker reveals that the body of a buck the speaker saw earlier in the evening now lies dead, his blood seeping into the snow. This striking image—the hot, red blood scorching the cold, white snow—reveals the danger lurking even in this quiet landscape, and implies the fragility and unpredictability of life.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edna St. Vincent Millay published "The Buck in the Snow" in 1928 in her collection *The Buck in the Snow, and Other Poems*. By this time, Millay had already achieved critical success as a writer, having won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and published five books of poetry. Millay had also established herself as a respected playwright.

Millay is renowned for her sonnets (such as "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why"). However, her poems written in traditional forms often flouted tradition by focusing on subjects that were unconventional at the time of her writing, such as women's sexuality and inner lives. Millay also frequently wrote poems in free verse, rejecting strict meter and rhyme scheme.

"The Buck in the Snow" is also clearly influenced by the imagist movement of the 1910s. Imagism, considered the beginning of the modernist literary movement, favors concrete images over the frequent abstractions of Romantic and Victorian writing. The succession of clear, concrete images in "The Buck in the Snow" is a prime example of imagist poetry. For another example, look to "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, or Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro."

Despite being a woman publishing in a field long dominated by men, Millay was unafraid to tackle a wide range of subjects and forms. As such, Millay's life and work have influenced countless other female writers who followed her, including as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Mary Oliver.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Widespread technological advancements occurred during the early 20th century, including the mass production of automobiles, radio, and other electrical appliances. The development of modern industrial cities and other advancements brought about great social changes as well. Modernism was an artistic and cultural movement that responded to these widespread social and technological changes, rejecting the traditions of the past and embodying the novelty and newness of the present.

More specifically, imagism, a movement considered to be the beginning of modernism, pushed for clear language and concrete images in artistic work. Just as modern society prized efficiency in the many technological advancements, so too did the imagists prize efficiency in their writing. The goal of any writing, the imagists believed, was clarity and concision in their language and imagery.

As such "The Buck in the Snow" embodies many of the values of imagism. Its efficiency in language and clarity in image is a stark departure from previous literary traditions, marking it clearly as a product of the new modernity of the 1920s.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Musical Adaptation — Listen to a musical adaptation of the entire poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKTiUW8WTHk)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the entire poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnHmRczzgMc)
- Millay's Biography — Read more about Millay's life, courtesy of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society. (http://www.millay.org/aboutmillay.php)
- Millay's Legacy — Read about the ways in which Millay and her work are perceived today. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/feb/22/edna-st-vincent-millay-poetry)
- A Poet's Lecture on Millay — Listen to renowned poet Eavan Boland read aloud and lecture on the poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9oySDzhr2Y)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY POEMS

- What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet 43)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Chen, Wendy. "*The Buck in the Snow.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Mar 2020. Web. 1 May 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Chen, Wendy. "*The Buck in the Snow.*" LitCharts LLC, March 6, 2020. Retrieved May 1, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/edna-st-vincent-millay/the-buck-in-the-snow.