

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and



POEM TEXT

- 1 What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
- 2 I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
- 3 Under my head till morning; but the rain
- 4 Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
- 5 Upon the glass and listen for reply,
- 6 And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
- 7 For unremembered lads that not again
- 8 Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

- 9 Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
- 10 Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
- 11 Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
- 12 I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
- 13 I only know that summer sang in me
- 14 A little while, that in me sings no more.



THEMES



LOVE, MEMORY, AND LOSS

In “What my lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,” the speaker reflects on her previous lovers, all of whom she has forgotten. She mourns not the loss of these lovers themselves, but rather the loss of her *memories* of them. Other love poems might more commonly grieve an unrequited love or the death of a lover. However, this poem seems to radically suggest that it would be better if the speaker had never loved at all, rather than be forever haunted by the loss of her memories of that love.

The speaker admits she’s forgotten whom she’s kissed or slept with, as well as the details behind those encounters. She does not remember “[w]hat lips” she has kissed or “what arms” she has rested her head upon. The fact that these body parts are disassociated from names and faces makes for unsettling images that parallel the speaker’s unnerving lack of memory. Furthermore, the speaker does not remember “where” she has had past romantic encounters and, perhaps more importantly, she does not remember “why” she has had them either. She has not only lost the specifics of her memories—she has also lost the passionate *emotions* behind them. The thought of these emotions, which once may have comforted her, is now only a reminder of her loss and pain.

Consequently, the speaker is haunted by the fact that she’s forgotten these memories and emotions. The rain outside her window sounds as though it is full of “ghosts ... tap[ping] and sigh[ing]/ [u]pon the glass.” These may be the ghosts of her previous lovers themselves or the ghosts of the speaker’s *memories* of those lovers. Either way, these ghosts actively demand the speaker’s attention and wait for her “reply.” They *want* to be let inside or acknowledged; however, the speaker is unable to do either. The window that separates these ghosts and the speaker represents the division between the speaker’s memories and her present self. Though she cannot name or discern these ghosts individually, the speaker is taunted by their general presence. Similarly, just as she cannot recall her previous lovers individually, the speaker is tormented by her knowledge that they once existed.

As a result of forgetting these lovers, the speaker suffers from a “quiet pain” and loneliness. The adjective “unremembered” is key to the speaker’s pain. The speaker is not simply pained by the loss of her lovers, but rather by the fact that she has “unremembered” them. To emphasize this, the speaker compares herself to a “lonely tree.” Birds once filled this tree’s branches, but have since departed. In fact, the loss of these



SUMMARY

The speaker wonders about the people she has kissed, where she has kissed them, and for what reason she has kissed them. She has forgotten all of the specifics of her previous lovers, including whose arms she has rested her head upon at night until the morning. As the speaker reflects on her loss of memories at night, she hears the sound of the rain tapping on the window as if it were the tapping of ghosts. These ghosts, a metaphor for either her memories or previous lovers, want to get her attention and wait for her to answer them.

Unfortunately, the speaker can only respond by feeling heartache for all of the lovers she has forgotten and, as such, who will never again call out to her in the middle of the night.

The speaker goes on to compare herself to a solitary tree during the winter. This tree does not know the birds that have left its branches. Rather, the tree only knows that its branches are quieter and lonelier than they were before the birds’ arrival. Similarly, the speaker is unable to describe her previous loves and lovers. All she knows is that she experienced pleasurable and summery feelings of love in the past, though only for a brief time; now, the speaker is filled only with a sense of loss.

birds makes the tree “more silent than before.” Thus, the loss of what the tree and the speaker once possessed—the birds and the memories, respectively—causes greater silence and pain than if they had never possessed them in the first place.

Similarly, the speaker once experienced “summer,” a reference to her previous experiences and memories of love. Her summer state, however, only lasted “[a] little while” in comparison to her current, permanent state of “winter.” The winter season is typically associated with a loss of life and vibrancy, a state that reflects the speaker’s profound pain. The progression from summer to winter is also symbolic of the passage of time and the speaker growing older.

If the speaker were mourning the loss of a specific lover, she could console herself with memories of that person. But because she’s lost even her memories of love, and the corresponding feelings of warmth and pleasure associated with them, she has nothing to console herself with as she grows older. Therefore, the poem suggests, it is not worth loving, for love brings not comfort in memory, but a sense of loss in one’s old age.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten,*

“What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why” is an Italian [sonnet](#). The first [stanza](#) of these kinds of sonnets establishes the speaker’s “problem,” which is traditionally the problem of love, particularly unrequited love.

The first line of the poem fulfills the reader’s expectations for an Italian sonnet by bringing up the speaker’s past experiences of love. The speaker wonders about the lips she has kissed, where she has kissed them, and the emotional reasons for kissing them. Note that “lips” here is an example of [synecdoche](#), as these “lips” refer to the speaker’s past lovers.

The [alliteration](#) of the /w/ sounds in line 1 force the reader to slow down and focus on these questions of “what,” “where,” and “why” that the speaker is asking. The repetition of the coordinating conjunction of “and”—an example of [polysyndeton](#)—further slows down the reading of the line, as does the [end-stop](#) at the end of line 1. The end-stop enhances the surprise of line 2, the beginning of which transforms line 1 from a series of *questions* to a *declaration*—there will never be an answer to these questions of “what,” “where,” and “why.”

In the beginning of the second line, the speaker declares she

has forgotten all her previous experiences of love. Thus, in a departure from traditional Italian sonnets, the speaker’s problem is not that she is experiencing unrequited love; rather, it is that she has forgotten all her loves of the past. The [caesura](#) after “forgotten” creates a brusque ending to the phrase “I have forgotten,” reflecting the harshness of the sentiment. The caesura also emphasizes the importance of the phrase by setting it apart from other words in the line.

The use of [synecdoche](#) in using “lips” to refer to the speaker’s lovers heightens the speaker’s sense of detachment from her memories. These lips are disembodied and unattached to individual faces, names, or bodies. They tease the speaker’s memory, but provide no real information or context. All they can accomplish is remind the speaker of the meaningful, pleasurable, and comforting memories she has lost. Furthermore, the use of [diacope](#) in the repetition of the word “lips” heightens focus on the imagery of the lips—a reminder for the speaker of what she once had and now has lost. The repetition of the coordinating conjunction of “and”—an example of [polysyndeton](#)—further slows down the reading of the line.

LINES 2-3

*and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning;*

The end of the second line and beginning of the third line elaborates on the speaker’s problem. In addition to forgetting the specific lips she has kissed, the speaker has also forgotten the arms she’s rested her head on at night.

This [imagery](#) and continued use of [synecdoche](#) creates a sense of intimacy and distance at once. The image of the arms builds upon the image of the lips in line 1. The lovers from the speaker’s past now are described with arms in addition to their lips. Additionally, the act of resting one’s head upon another’s arms is a very intimate act.

Furthermore, the speaker also uses the passage of time to show the emotional intimacy between herself and her lovers. The speaker rests her head on her lovers’ arms through the night “till morning.” The memory of two lovers who embrace one another for so long should evoke tender and pleasurable feelings.

However, the use of synecdoche in using “arms” to refer to the speaker’s lovers reflects the speaker’s emotional *detachment* from her memories. Although the speaker wants to remember her previous lovers and experiences of love in their entirety, she can only remember glimpses of lips and arms. These disembodied lips and arms reflect the speaker’s disconnection to her memories and past emotions.

LINES 3-5

*but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,*

As the speaker reflects on the memories of love that she has lost, she hears the rain outside her window. Rain is often associated with feelings of sadness or nostalgia, which is appropriate as the speaker is musing on loss. In addition, the poem builds on the image of the rain with a [metaphor](#). In lines 4-5, the speaker compares the sound of the raindrops to ghosts tapping on the window glass. The [assonance](#) of the long "o" sound in "full" and "ghosts" associates the two words closely together and emphasizes the rain's fullness of ghosts.

As [symbols](#), ghosts are often associated with sorrow and nostalgia for the past as well. These ghosts may be either the speaker's previous lovers or the memories of her past loves. Regardless, just as ghosts are mere remnants of the past, so too are the speaker's lovers and memories. None of them are whole or complete.

These ghosts "tap and sigh" on the window glass, thus demanding the speaker's attention. The [consonance](#) of the /t/ sound across the line evokes the tapping sounds of the ghosts:

Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh

There is also [alliteration](#) of the hard /g/ sound in "ghosts" and "glass," which adds to this sense of the ghosts trying to get the speaker's attention. Note, too, that lines 3 and 4 are [enjambéd](#):

Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,

The sentences here spill past the line breaks, creating a sense of anticipation and urgency. The ghosts want the speaker to acknowledge or recognize them; perhaps, they even want the speaker to let them inside. Either way, they are waiting for the speaker to give them a "reply." The [end-stop](#) after the word "reply" even seems to reflect the ghosts' pause as they wait and listen for the speaker's reply.

Unfortunately, the speaker can fulfill none of their desires. She cannot acknowledge or recognize the ghosts of her past because she has forgotten all her memories of love. Consequently, the glass of the window that divides the speaker from the ghosts becomes a metaphor for the division between the speaker and her past lovers or memories of past loves.

LINES 6-8

*And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.*

The last three lines of the octave (the first eight lines of a [sonnet](#)) continue to establish the "problem" of the poem. The speaker feels heartache and "pain" for her past lovers—"unremembered lads," or young men—who will never again call out to her in the middle of the night. The use of

[enjambement](#) at the end of line 6 emphasizes the "pain" in the speaker's heart by placing the word at the end of the line. The speaker's choice of "cry" at the end of line 8 is also intentional. While its primary meaning in the sentence is to call out to another, its secondary meaning of shedding tears or shouting to express grief is also present. Its secondary meaning thus brings to mind again the speaker's "pain" and grief in her heart. The adjective "unremembered" is key to this pain. It is not simply that the speaker can no longer encounter her past lovers or that her love is unrequited, it is the fact that she has forgotten—"unremembered"—them.

Memories of past lovers can bring comfort and pleasure long after those lovers have departed. However, in previous lines, the speaker can catch only teasing glimpses of her past lovers—lips and arms—but not remember them in their entirety. Now in these three lines, the speaker lumps all her lovers together in one anonymous group of "lads," unable to discern them individually. In forgetting these "lads" as individuals, the speaker can not be comforted by specific memories. She can only feel pain for all that she has lost.

LINES 9-11

*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:*

Following the traditions of Italian [sonnets](#), the beginning of the [sestet](#) (the second, six-line stanza) marks the "turn," which indicates a shift from the poem's problem to resolution. The "turn" also often indicates a turn in the poem's tone or mood. In "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," the turn in lines 9-11 is both a shift in tone and a departure from the octave's first-person descriptions of the speaker. These three lines use an omniscient point of view to describe a "lonely tree" in "winter" and [personification](#) to describe the tree's inner life and emotions.

The tree's branches were once filled with birds; now, however, the birds have all "vanished," leaving the tree "more silent than before." The use of [diacope](#) with the repetition of "one by one" slows down the reading of the phrase, thus evoking a sense of the speaker lingering on each individual loss.

In a similar vein, the speaker too was once comforted by all of her lovers; now, however, her memories of them have "vanished," leaving her more lonely, and consequently more pained, than before. The [imagery](#) of the "lonely tree" is thus symbolic of the speaker herself. The speaker uses her description of the tree's emotional progression to emphasize and describe her own emotional state.

LINE 12

I cannot say what loves have come and gone,

After establishing that her inner emotional state is the same as

a "lonely tree," the speaker reiterates her admissions in the first stanza. She is unable to recall her previous lovers in her life. The [consonance](#) of the harsh /k/ and /t/ sounds across the line evokes the harshness of the speaker's declaration:

I cannot say what loves have come and gone,

Additionally, the phrase "come and gone" suggests that although she has been able to experience many loves in her life, all of those who arrived ("come") eventually left ("gone"). The coordinating conjunction of "and" implies that her lovers' departures are in fact an inevitable conclusion to their arrivals.

The [sestet](#) of this poem is therefore a departure from traditional Italian [sonnets](#) as it does not provide any sort of resolution to the problem of the poem. With the speaker's admission of her failure to remember, the sestet is a continuation of the problem that was previously established. The sestet, in fact, *deepens* the problem; the poem declares that the speaker not only feels pain at the loss of her memories of love, but rather feels more pain than if she had not loved at all. This message is a radical departure from traditional sonnets which, though acknowledging the pain of unrequited love, still view love as something desirable. Thus, in both form and content, the poem deviates from tradition.

LINES 13-14

*I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.*

In the previous line 12, the speaker declares that she cannot remember what love she experienced in the past. In these last two lines of the poem, the speaker asserts that she only knows she once experienced love ("summer sang") and now is bereft of it ("sings no more"). Summer, a representation of the speaker's past state of love, here is [personified](#) as a singing figure that the speaker once contained within herself. Thus, when summer "sings no more"—or, in other words, when the speaker no longer experiences the love of her past—the speaker feels a great loss and emptiness inside her. The [polyptoton](#) of "sang" and "sings" highlights the change in verb tense across the last two lines. In doing so, this change in verb tense highlights the change in the speaker's emotional state from the past to the present.

The [sibilance](#) across the two lines ("summer sang," "sings") is evocative of someone singing and highlight the sweetness of the speaker's past experiences of love. The [enjambment](#) at the end of line 13 delays the acknowledgement of summer singing for only "[a] little while," evoking the speaker's emotional desire to linger on the songs of love she once enjoyed.

The imagery of "summer" also evokes the passage of time. The speaker's past, enriched with experiences of love, is associated with "summer." This association is fitting as summer is typically associated with life and joy. However, the speaker compares

her current state to that of a "lonely tree" in "winter." The season of winter is fittingly associated with barrenness, isolation, and loneliness. Thus, as the speaker ages and forgets her memories of love, she moves from a symbolic state of "summer" to "winter." At the end of the poem, the speaker does not express any hope that she will return to a state of "summer." Indeed, as winter is the last season of the year, the speaker seems to imply that she will remain in this state of winter filled with pain and loss until her death.



SYMBOLS



GHOSTS

The appearance of ghosts can often evoke fear, sorrow, and pain in the viewer. They are [symbols](#) of death and of the past, as well as reminders of what one has lost. In "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," ghosts symbolize the speaker's memories of love and her past lovers.

The speaker hears ghosts in the rain outside her window. Moreover, these ghosts are "tap[ping]" upon her window glass and waiting for her "reply." The ghosts represent the speaker's relationship and attitude toward her past memories and lovers. They want the speaker to acknowledge them. However, the speaker, who has forgotten her memories of the past, is unable to recognize them. She can only listen to their incessant tapping and sighing. Thus, these ghosts do not evoke happy emotions, but rather painful and sorrowful ones. To the speaker, they represent the past that she has lost and the happiness she can never regain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "but the rain / Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh / Upon the glass and listen for reply,"



THE TREE

A tree full of leaves and branches is often a [symbol](#) of life and possibility. Therefore, a *barren* tree in the midst of winter can symbolize death and loss. In "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," the speaker compares herself to a "lonely tree" in "winter." The tree that appears in the poem symbolizes the speaker's current state that is devoid of love and full of loss.

The tree once kept company with the birds who nested in its branches, just as the speaker once kept company with various lovers over the years. However, the birds "have vanished" just as the speaker's lovers have all vanished "one by one." Moreover, though the tree enjoyed the company of the birds, the departure of the birds leaves the tree "more silent than before." Therefore, the poem implies, the departure of the

speaker's lovers and the loss of her memories of their love leave the speaker more pained than if she had never loved in the first place. Because the speaker loved in the past, the poem radically suggests, the speaker is worse off now as she is left with only pain and loss.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "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."



SEASONS

Winter evokes images of barren and dark landscapes filled with ice and snow. Plants do not flourish and animals are rarely seen. Winter thus is often a season traditionally associated with death, loss, and emptiness. In contrast, summer is full of life in the midst of blossoming. Many plants and animals thrive in the summer, and the days are long and full of sunlight. Summer, therefore, is typically associated with life, joy, and rebirth.

In "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," the speaker progresses from a state of "summer" to "winter" as she ages and forgets her memories of love. This progression not only marks the progression of time but also reflects the speaker's inner emotional state from the joy of experiencing love in her youth to the pain of losing her memories of love in her older age. The speaker does not seem to have any hope that she will return to a state of summer. As winter is also the last season of the calendar year, the poem suggests the speaker will live out the rest of her days in this emotional state of "winter."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "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."
- **Lines 13-14:** "I only know that summer sang in me / A little while, that in me sings no more."



POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Millay uses [metaphor](#) once in "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" to intensify the speaker's state of mind by reflecting the speaker's mood upon the world around her.

In lines 3-5, the speaker listens to the rain outside her window. She compares the sound of the raindrops falling against on her window to the sound of ghosts "tap[ping]" and "sigh[ing]" on the glass. Ghosts are associated with feelings of loss, pain, nostalgia for the past, and sorrow. As the speaker is currently

mourning the loss of her memories of love, she is consequently feeling loss, pain, nostalgia for the past, and sorrow. It is no wonder, then, that the sound of the raindrops seems to the speaker more like the sound of ghosts instead.

Moreover, in this metaphor, the ghosts demand the speaker's attention ("tap and sigh") and wait for her "reply." The ghosts are symbolic of what the speaker has lost—namely her past lovers and memories of love. Yet though they demand her attention, the speaker is unable to remember her past lovers or her memories of love. Thus, these ghosts do not comfort the speaker with their presence. They serve only as reminders of what she has lost and can never regain.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "the rain / Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh / Upon the glass and listen for reply,"

IMAGERY

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is rife with [imagery](#). The imagery in the poem is dynamic and engaging, immersing readers in the sensations and emotional states the speaker considers and experiences. The imagery is also often symbolic of the speaker's current state of being.

Lines 1-3, for example, have vivid imagery describing the speaker's past encounters with her lovers. The intimate imagery of the speaker "kiss[ing]" her lovers' "lips" and lying her "head" on her lovers' "arms" until the "morning" bring these encounters to life. They are only glimpses of the speaker's encounters, suggesting the fragmentary nature of the speaker's memories; however, the vivid imagery within these lines suggest the intensity of the speaker's romantic encounters and feelings.

In the beginning of the [sestet](#), Millay uses imagery to describe the speaker's current emotional state of loneliness. Millay describes a "lonely tree" in "winter" with great specificity and detail. The tree once had "birds" in its branches. However, after the birds have left "one by one," the tree's branches are "more silent than before." The vivid imagery and [personification](#) immerses the reader in the tree's mindset. As an echo of the speaker's mindset as well, the tree transforms is a powerful symbol for the speaker's own loneliness and pain. The imagery of the tree even suggests the speaker is left more pained and lonely than before she ever experienced love. Perhaps, the poem seems to suggest, the speaker would have been better off without experiencing or ever knowing love.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-5
- Lines 7-8

- Lines 9-11
- Lines 13-14

REPETITION

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" contains several different forms of [repetition](#). In the poem, repetition highlights the importance of certain words or images and also creates links and associations across lines.

In the first line, the speaker wonders whose lips she has kissed, where she has kissed them, and the reasons behind her kissing them. The repetition of "lips" twice—an example of [diacope](#)—emphasizes the image of the "lips" and stresses the importance of them to the lover. "Lips" not only represents the speaker's past lovers, but they also represent her own ability to participate in romantic encounters and experience love. In establishing the *importance* of the "lips" through diacope, Millay is then able to show how devastating the *loss* of these lips is to the speaker. Diacope appears again with "one by one" in the second stanza, emphasizing the loss of each individual bird (which, of course, are symbolic of the speaker's lovers).

Repetition can also be used to slow down the reading of the line. Line 1, for example, uses [polysyndeton](#) in the repetition of the coordinating conjunction "and," as well as [caesuras](#), to encourage the reader to linger on the circumstances of the speaker's past romantic encounters. This effect emphasizes the importance of these details to the speaker herself.

In the last stanza, repetition again deepens readers' understanding of the speaker's thoughts and emotions. "[K]nows"/"know" is repeated across line 10, 11, and 13. This repetition creates links between the *tree's* knowledge in lines 10 and 11 with the *speaker's* knowledge in line 13. This association makes clear the comparison between the tree's loneliness and pain and the speaker's corresponding loneliness and pain. The [polyptoton](#) across lines 13-14 with "sang"/"sings," meanwhile, highlights the difference between the speaker's past and present. "[S]ummer sang" in the past, but now it "sings no more." The speaker's loss is thus emphasized through the shift in verb tenses.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What," "lips," "lips," "and," "and"
- **Line 10:** "knows," "one," "one"
- **Line 11:** "knows"
- **Line 13:** "know," "sang"
- **Line 14:** "sings"

CAESURA

Millay uses [caesura](#) in "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" to slow down the reading of certain lines, emphasize particular phrases, or build on complex ideas and

images.

For example, in line 1, the two instances of caesura, in conjunction with [end-stop](#), slow down the overall reading speed of the line. When reading the line on its own, the speaker seems to be asking questions about the circumstances of her past romantic encounters. The pauses after "kissed," "where," and "why" mimic the natural jumps of the speaker's thought process as she considers the details of her past. Each aspect of her past encounters—the "what," "where," and "why" of them—hold equal weight for the speaker.

However, the beginning of line 2, which is set off by another caesura, subverts readers' initial conception of line 1. Initially, the speaker appears to pose a series of questions in line 1. Line 2 transforms those questions into a declaration of the speaker's memory loss. The caesura after "forgotten" emphasizes the brusqueness and harshness of the phrase "I have forgotten." The caesura also highlights the importance of the phrase, which sets up the sonnet's main problem.

The caesura in line 3 presents another turn. Forgetting one's past romances may not necessarily be particularly distressing. The semicolon after "morning" provides a pause that allows readers to entertain this conclusion. However, the next image of ghosts in the rain outside the speaker's window negates this possibility. Symbolically, ghosts are often a distressing sight for the viewer—in this case, the speaker. The delay in this negation creates an element of surprise and interest for the reader.

The caesura in line 4 helps build on the image of the ghosts by creating a more complex sentence structure. Using the pause after "tonight," Millay lets readers focus first on the image of ghosts in the rain at night. Then, Millay continues to build on the image of the ghosts by providing them with actions. Not only are the ghosts *present*, they demand *acknowledgement* from the speaker. Readers can more easily process the complexity of the image with the caesura.

The caesura in the last line functions similarly to the caesura in the first line of the poem. Both slow down the reading of the line and encourage the reader to linger on certain ideas and phrases. In line 14, the reader, like the speaker, lingers on the thought of "summer s[inging]" in the speaker for "[a] little while" in the past. The thought is bittersweet as it acknowledges both the existence of "summer" within the speaker, as well as its brevity. Nevertheless, the speaker still desires to linger and slow down on the sweetness of the thought. Therefore, the caesura evokes the speaker's own rhythms, thus providing a more immersive experience for readers.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "kissed, and where, and"
- **Line 2:** "forgotten, and"

- **Line 3:** “morning; but”
- **Line 4:** “tonight, that”
- **Line 14:** “while, that”

ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) appears often in “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why.” In the poem, enjambment is used to emphasize meaningful words and create ambiguity in the meaning of lines.

By ending lines on words that are not [end-stopped](#), enjambment emphasizes the importance of their meaning to the speaker. At the end of line 2, for example, enjambment stresses the intimacy of the speaker’s past romantic encounters. The final word “lain” not only positions the lover’s arms intimately beneath the speaker’s head, but also evokes the innuendo of “lie” as in to lie or sleep with. Similarly, the enjambment at the end of line 4 highlights the “sigh[ing]” of the ghosts. The act of sighing is an expression of the ghosts’ sadness and longing, feelings which are mirrored in the speaker as she listens to their sounds. Likewise, the end of line 6 places emphasis on the “pain” the speaker feels in her heart. The enjambment thus emphasizes the sorrow, longing, and, above all, pain that the speaker feels.

Enjambment is also used to create a sense of ambiguity in meaning. For example, the enjambment at the end of line 13 suggests that the speaker acknowledges experiencing the pleasures of love (“summer sang in me”) in the past. This acknowledgment on its own feels positive, as it may be an expression of gratitude. However, the following line makes clear that the speaker is truly acknowledging the *brevity* (“[a] little while”) of her experiences of love. The last two lines thus take on a negative tone, suggesting that the speaker is left without any positive emotions after having loved. Therefore, the poem insinuates, it was not worth having loved at all.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “lain / Under”
- **Lines 3-4:** “rain / Is”
- **Lines 4-5:** “sigh / Upon”
- **Lines 6-7:** “pain / For”
- **Lines 7-8:** “again / Will”
- **Lines 13-14:** “me / A”

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) in “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why” not only enhances the musicality of certain lines, but also emphasizes and evokes the meaning of particular words.

In the first two lines, for instance, the alliteration of the soft /w/ sounds emphasizes the speaker’s questions of “[w]hat,” “where,” and “why.” These questions, if answered, would

provide context and information to the speaker’s past romantic encounters. However, because the speaker has forgotten all her memories of past love, these questions remain unanswered and are a reminder of the pain and loss the speaker feels.

In line 10, the alliteration of the /n/ sound in “[n]or” and “knows” places emphasis on the tree’s lack of knowledge. As the tree is a symbol for the speaker, the speaker’s lack of knowledge regarding her past memories is emphasized by association. Both the words “[n]or” and “knows” contain an echo of the word “no” within them, a word of refusal. This is fitting as the poem is a poem in many ways of refusal—the refusal of the birds to return, the refusal of memories of past love to return, and the refusal of summer to sing again.

Alliteration, in its musicality, can also evoke and mimic the meaning of particular words. In line 12, the alliteration of the harsh /c/ sounds in “cannot” and “come” reflect the harsh emotional undertones of the speaker’s declaration of her memory’s failure. Likewise, in line 13, the alliteration of the soft, [sibilant](#) /s/ sounds in “summer” and “sang” mimic the sweet sounds of a song and bring readers closer to the speaker’s experience through its musicality.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “What,” “where,” “why”
- **Line 2:** “what”
- **Line 4:** “ghosts,” “tonight,” “tap”
- **Line 5:** “glass”
- **Line 10:** “Nor,” “knows,” “birds”
- **Line 11:** “boughs,” “before”
- **Line 12:** “cannot,” “come”
- **Line 13:** “summer,” “sang”

CONSONANCE

[Consonance](#) appears frequently throughout “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why.” Millay uses consonance to better allow readers to access and understand the speaker’s state of mind.

In line 4, for example, the consonance of the /t/ sound in “tonight” and “tap” mimics the tapping sound of ghosts upon the speaker’s window. This sonic effect highlights the speaker’s *experience* of hearing the ghosts outside her window and allows readers to hear the sound as well. In doing so, the consonance lets readers more deeply empathize with the speaker’s experience and state of mind.

The consonance in line 6 has a similar effect. The consonance of the /t/ sound in “heart,” “stirs,” and “quiet” produces a sharp, staccato rhythm across the line, reflecting the tumultuous stirring of the speaker’s heart. In the same vein, the harsh consonance of the /c/ and /t/ sounds in line 12 (“cannot say what loves have come”) are evocative of the harshness of the speaker’s declaration that she no longer remembers her loves

of the past.

Consonance can also be used to slow down the reading of a line. In line 8, for example, the consonance of the /t/ ("turn to me at midnight") sound slows down each word and emphasizes the speaker's loss. The speaker will no longer encounter any lovers who will turn and call out to her in the middle of the night. Instead, the speaker will remain alone, unable to be comforted by even her memories.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "What," "where," "why"
- **Line 4:** "ghosts," "tonight," "tap," "sigh"
- **Line 5:** "Upon," "glass," "listen," "reply"
- **Line 6:** "heart," "there," "stirs," "quiet"
- **Line 7:** "unremembered"
- **Line 8:** "turn," "to," "at," "midnight"
- **Line 10:** "birds"
- **Line 11:** "boughs," "before"
- **Line 12:** "cannot," "what," "loves have," "come"
- **Line 13:** "summer sang"
- **Line 14:** "little while," "in me," "no more"

PERSONIFICATION

[Personification](#) appears twice in "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why." Millay uses personification to deepen the reader's understanding of the speaker's emotional state and add depth to the speaker's inner life.

At the beginning of the [sestet](#), the speaker personifies a "lonely tree" in "winter." The tree, the speaker declares, "knows" its branches are "more silent than before" after the departure of the birds. The personification intensifies the loneliness and pain the tree feels after being abandoned by the birds. The speaker too, the poem implies, is like this tree after the departure of her memories of love and past lovers. Thus, the speaker's loneliness and pain is as valid and intense as that of this tree. Additionally, the poem also suggests that the speaker is left more pained than if she had not loved at all, a message that is a radical deviation from those of traditional [sonnets](#).

In the last two lines, Millay also personifies "summer" as a figure that once sang inside the speaker. This figure, symbolic of the speaker's past experiences of love, produces pleasing music and is a comforting companion. When the singing stops, as in the last line, the poem suggests that summer, and thus the speaker's past experiences of love, can no longer comfort her. Now, the speaker is bereft of both summer and her memories of love. Rather, she feels pain and loneliness in their place.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "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:"

- **Lines 13-14:** "summer sang in me / A little while, that in me sings no more."

SYNECDOCHE

[Synecdoche](#) occurs twice in "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why." In both cases, Millay uses synecdoche to highlight the incomplete nature of the speaker's memories of her lovers and the detachment she feels toward them.

In the first line, the speaker wonders whose "lips" her "lips have kissed, where she has kissed them, and why she has kissed them. The "lips" are a stand in for the speaker's previous lovers. Therefore, the speaker is wondering about the details of her previous romantic encounters. Unfortunately, the speaker does not remember the answer to any of her questions, only that she once had those encounters. The image of the "lips" is a fitting image to represent a lover, as it is a romanticized and sexualized part of the body. However, at the same time, the image of the "lips" disembodied from a whole body represents the fragmented quality of the speaker's memories. The speaker cannot remember her lovers in their wholeness. Rather, she can only catch teasing, anonymous *glimpses* of them.

The second instance of synecdoche in the second line further develops these effects. The image of "arms" beneath the speaker's head is similarly a reference to the speaker's lovers who have held her at night. While "arms" is an intimate part of the body used to embrace another, the disembodied quality of the image highlights again the incomplete and fragmented nature of the speaker's memories of love.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lips"
- **Line 2:** "arms"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) appears with frequency throughout "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why." The assonance in the poem intensifies the language of the poem by resonating with the meaning of the line.

In the first line, for example, the short /i/ sound in "lips," "lips," and "kissed" create a close association between all three words. The lover's "lips" come together with the speaker's "lips" in a "kiss." The intimate imagery of the words thus are reflected in the words' shared assonance.

The assonance in lines 9 and 12 is also evocative of the content of the words. The short /i/ sound in "in" and "winter" in line 9 emphasizes the state of the tree in the winter season. As winter is symbolic of the speaker's empty and lonely state, highlighting the submersion of the tree "in the winter" is fitting. Likewise,

line 12 has assonance in the repetition of the short /uh/ sound in "loves" and "come." Millay intentionally associates the two words, as both "loves" and their arrivals ("come") have positive connotations for the speaker. The *lack* of assonance in "gone," on the other hand, further highlights its negative connotations by setting it apart from "loves" and "come."

Assonance, like consonance, can also slow down the reading of a poem. The assonance in line 8 of both long and short /i/ sounds—"Will turn to me at midnight with a cry"—causes the reader to linger over each word in the line, evoking the speaker's desire to linger in the past where lovers turned and called out to her in the middle of the night. Thus, on the whole, assonance allows readers to better empathize with the speaker's mood and mindset.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lips," "lips," "kissed," "why"
- **Line 2:** "I," "lain"
- **Line 3:** "rain"
- **Line 4:** "tonight," "that tap," "sigh"
- **Line 5:** "glass," "reply"
- **Line 6:** "pain"
- **Line 7:** "again"
- **Line 8:** "Will," "midnight," "with," "cry"
- **Line 9:** "in," "winter," "lonely tree"
- **Line 12:** "loves," "come"
- **Line 13:** "only know"
- **Line 14:** "little," "in," "sings"

made of two [tercets](#).

- Octave
 - Quatrain
 - Quatrain
- Sestet
 - Tercet
 - Tercet

In Italian sonnets, the octave presents the "proposition" or problem of the poem. Traditionally, the problem for the speaker is unrequited love. The sestet, on the other hand, provides the resolution to the problem.

Because "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" follows the form of Italian sonnets so strictly, its departure from the traditional content of Italian sonnets is all the more surprising. The problem of the poem is not unrequited love; the speaker has experienced love and lovers in the past. The problem, rather, is the speaker's loss of her *memories* of love. As she is tormented by this loss, the speaker experiences pain and heartache. In the sestet, the poem suggests that the only solution to this pain is if the speaker had not loved at all in the first place. This message is a radical departure from traditional Italian sonnets for its repudiation and questioning of the worth of love.

METER

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is an Italian [sonnet](#). As such, it uses the meter [iambic pentameter](#) strictly throughout all its lines. Each line thus contains five unstressed-stressed pairs of syllables. Take the first line, for example:

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

The speaker in "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" lies in her bed at night, listening to the rain outside her window. As the poem is written in the form of the speaker's informal musings, iambic meter, which closely evokes the natural rhythms of speech is a fitting choice.

The only meaningful deviation from the regular iambic meter is in the beginning of line 9:

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,

The deviation marks the turn of the sonnet, which is traditionally placed at the beginning of the [sestet](#). The turn typically marks a turn in mood or tone and a shift from the poem's problem to resolution. In "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," there is a shift in tone and point-of-view, as lines 9-11 are described from the point-of-view from an imagined omniscient narrator who observes the "lonely tree." Therefore, Millay further highlights the turn of her sonnet with



VOCABULARY

Lain (Line 2) - Past participle of lie, meaning to rest on a surface. Here, the speaker wonders what arms have rested beneath her head. In other words, whose arms she has rested her head upon.

Unremembered (Line 7) - Forgotten. The speaker's mind has *undone*—*unremembered*—her memories of these "lads."

Lads (Line 7) - Young men. Here, the speaker is referring to her previous lovers.

Boughs (Line 11) - The branches of a tree.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is an Italian [sonnet](#) (also known as a Petrarchan sonnet). The poem strictly follows the structure of an Italian sonnet with its fourteen lines and two [stanzas](#). As with all Italian sonnets, the first stanza is an octave made of two [quatrains](#). The second stanza is a [sestet](#)

the deviation in meter.

Additionally, the regular meter provides contrast with [caesuras](#) used within lines. The pauses set apart and highlight the importance of particular phrases. For example, in line 2, the commas after "forgotten" sets apart the phrase "I have forgotten." This declaration is a surprising conclusion to the first line, turning the *questions* in line 1 into a *declaration* of the speaker's failure to remember. The declaration "I have forgotten" is critical to the poem, as it sets up the sonnet's overarching problem. The rhythm and meter thus emphasize its importance as one of the poem's main ideas.

RHYME SCHEME

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is written in the form of an Italian [sonnet](#). The poem follows the standard rhyme scheme of such a sonnet accordingly, which is as follows:

ABBAABBA CDEDCE

Although Millay never deviates from the traditional rhyme scheme of Italian sonnets, she creates musical variation within and across lines through [assonance](#) and [repetition](#). Take, for example, the assonance across line 4 and 8, which are both the last lines of each [quatrain](#):

Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh

and

Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

The shared sounds here closely associate the imagery and meanings of these two lines. The speaker currently is lying in bed at night ("tonight") while thinking of her past romantic encounters which also occurred at night ("midnight"). However, their temporal similarities only serve to highlight the *contrast* between the speaker's current and past situations. Now, the speaker is alone, without even her memories to comfort her. In the past, the speaker had companions and lovers beside her. The loneliness and pain the speaker feels is highlighted through this contrast.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is an older woman who once had many lovers in her youth. While it's possible that Millay herself is the speaker, this is by no means certain. Regardless, the speaker does not remember any of her previous lovers, their individual characteristics, or her feelings toward them. As she grows older, the speaker loses these cherished memories and feels a "quiet pain" at their loss. She is tormented by the thought of these "unremembered" lovers, but can do nothing about it.

The speaker's tormented state continues in the second stanza where the speaker compares herself to a "lonely tree" in "winter." Just as the tree is "more silent" after the loss of the birds in its branches, so too is the speaker more pained after the loss of her memories of her lovers. Thus, the speaker, after reflecting on her torment, comes to the conclusion that all her former experiences of love in the past during a [metaphorical](#) state of "summer" have only brought her more pain in the present. By the end of the poem, the speaker seems filled with regret that she had ever loved at all.



SETTING

The setting of "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is inside the speaker's house. The poem seems to suggest the speaker is in her bedroom, perhaps lying in bed, as it is nighttime. However, it is not clear where the speaker is, only that she is inside.

Nevertheless, the speaker is listening to the rain outside her window as she reflects on the pain of losing her memories. The raindrops are coming down hard, hard enough to tap on the glass. The sound of the rainstorm is relentless, and heightens the speaker's sense of pain and loss in losing her memories of love.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" was first published in 1920 in the popular magazine *Vanity Fair*. Earlier that year, Millay had published her second collection of poems titled *A Few Figs From Thistles: Poems and Four Sonnets*. The collection caused a stir with its unabashed exploration of female sexuality and set the tone for much of Millay's later work to come. Although she had not yet achieved the level of fame her Pulitzer Prize would bring in 1923, Millay at this point had already received a healthy amount of recognition for her writing.

Millay wrote "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" during a critical period of the women's rights movement in the United States, and at the time when many women writers were rising into prominence. The concept of the "new woman"—a reference to a feminist ideal of an independent and empowered woman—greatly influenced the art and literature of this period. A prominent example of a work exploring this concept of a "new woman" and female sexuality is [The Awakening](#), published by fellow American author Kate Chopin 21 years earlier.

Like her contemporary feminist writers, Millay was interested in exploring female interiority and perspectives in defiance of a

long tradition and history of work written by and for men. Her work and attitude influenced many women writers following her, including, notably, Pulitzer-Prize winning author and poet Mary Oliver who even lived for a short while in Millay's home.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 19th amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, granting American women the right to vote. It was a historic victory for women's rights in America and the result of great effort during the women's rights movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries. While Millay was writing "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," there was great debate all around her regarding women's empowerment and the shape and form that would take in the present and future.

Women artists and writers during this time responded the debates around them, and many female writers rose to prominence during this time. For Millay, who eventually became the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923, sexual liberation and reclamation of female sexuality were ideas she explored in her writings. "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" is a prime example of this exploration and a subversion of Italian [sonnets](#) that historically were written by and for men. In her work, Millay's fearless exploration of female interiority paved the way for many feminist writers after her.

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edna-st-vincent-millay>)

- [The Italian Sonnet](#) — A breakdown of the Italian—a.k.a. Petrarchan—sonnet, the form followed by Millay in this poem. (<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/poetry-101-what-is-a-petrarchan-sonnet-learn-about-petrarchan-sonnets-with-examples>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/qFeztv4JXPI>)
- [A Musical Adaptation](#) — Listen to the entire poem set to music. (https://youtu.be/QSpSIUU-_Ps)
- [Love Letters](#) — A look at Edna St. Vincent Millay's polyamorous love letters from the 1920s. (<https://www.brainpickings.org/2016/02/22/edna-st-vincent-millay-polyamory-love-letters/>)



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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Edna St. Vincent Millay's Life Story](#) — A biography from the Poetry Foundation.