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Bri Carmichael

Indiana University South Bend

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Bri Carmichael

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Dr. Magnan-Park

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Deconstructing The Societal Conventions Of Spring And Condemning Its
Misrepresentation In Traditional Springtime Poetry

Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, "Spring," criticizes the misrepresentation of spring in traditional poetry as well as challenges its conformity. This intention is evident in the formal elements of the poem, such as its condemning diction and negative tone, in its deviation from the celebratory tone of spring, and in its unpleasant imagery and cacophonous language. Rather than focusing entirely on the renewal of life, Millay acknowledges the existence and inevitability of death and even engages in an existential nihilistic perspective of life, contrasting harshly with the primary thematic elements found in traditional poetry concerning the subject of spring.

The poem's simplistic and seemingly plain title embodies the idea of accurate representation—meaning the title is not veiled with deception, it is not hidden behind more euphonic words. The title, "Spring," accurately depicts the content in the poem, presenting *all* aspects of spring and what it elicits, acknowledging that life cannot exist as one entity, but rather as a duality which is inherently intertwined with death. Millay renounces the emphasis of one, more 'pleasant' aspect whilst disregarding the other more 'distasteful' aspect, condemning the denial of their coexistence. Millay promotes the challenging of conventional writing associated with spring through the use of a negative and rather abrasive tone.

Rather than reveling in the renewal of life, the speaker is in a state of dissatisfaction toward the arrival of spring, developing a powerful tone of negativity and discontent:

To what purpose, April, do you return again?

Beauty is not enough.

You can no longer quite me with the redness of

Little leaves opening stickily.

I know what I know (1-5).

The speaker is unable to internalize this existential dread and possesses an unwillingness to accept this beauty as sufficient compensation for the existence of death. This period of resurrection is nothing more than a futile disguise for mortality (Kanes). This tone is further developed by the use of cacophonous language and rather unsettling imagery throughout the poem. The deliberate use of dysphemisms as well as words which are not particularly phonetically pleasing epitomizes the overarching concept of the poem: to undermine the overdramatized themes of renewal, hope, love, rebirth, etc. found within conventional writings of spring and challenge conventional thinking of spring as only associated with pleasant imagery. The deliberate juxtaposition of “spikes of the crocus” (7)—a symbol of revival alongside a symbol which suggests potential harm—explores the purity of rebirth, proposing that while the renewal of life may bring beauty, with it, comes undeniable suffering. The “brains of men eaten/ by maggots” (11,12) further serves to conjure a disturbing image which alludes to the inevitable loss of said life. Millay, once again, illustrates a genuine representation of spring, acknowledging *all* of its aspects, and condemning those who fail to do so.

By using diction delicately underlined with criticism, Millay condemns overall societal conventions of the insensitivity or lack of active awareness toward death whilst proclaiming the regeneration of life, and quite plainly condemns traditional poetry of misrepresenting the intrinsic facets of spring thoroughly. Although “it is apparent there is no death” (9), that is due to the realities of spring being deceptively veiled by an overwhelming abundance of new beginnings. In actuality, such a vast amount of new life is forming, little speculation is applied to the simultaneous occurrence of *degeneration*. This consequently transfers to the composition of conventional writers, influencing entire bodies of work to preserve a pure or censored adaptation of spring, resulting in neglecting to be inclusive of all its elements. Millay portrays this depiction of spring as distorted and inaccurate as it fails to present a genuine representation of spring.

Moreover, “Spring” may be read as an obloquy to writers of traditional poetry who embodied this inorganic, synthetic rendering of spring as “idiot[s]” (18) whose poems regarding spring in an exaggerated tone of appraisal are focusing solely on the renewal of life are nothing more than ignorant “babbling and [the] strewing [of] flowers” (18). This unnecessarily exaggerated and cliché presentation of spring offers very little toward the advancement and development of poetry, thus creating an extensive mimetic effect of poetry production, resulting in a lack of new material within a specific genre and/or theme. Just like the “spikes” (7) threaten the arrival of the blooming flower, likewise poetry should aim to threaten—whether that may be through the criticism of societal conventions, the advancement of new theories or ideas, or through the challenging of pre-existing ones. In the conscientious presentation of “Spring,” Edna St. Vincent Millay actively engages in the deconstruction of a classical poetic ideal in regards to the topic of spring through her experimentation of preconceived notions. Millay

elicits a powerful emotional response and generates powerful meaning by demonstrating a strategy which focuses on form and content—a strategy which strictly adheres to the concept of *reversion*. This strategic technique of reversion relies on the *subversion* of preconceived notions and/or the denouncement of conventionality to generate meaning. In this manner, Millay takes advantage of the exploitation and exaggeration of a traditional theme within conventional springtime poetry. Eg. the significance lies within the positive connotation which the term, “spring” has been ascribed, as well as in the pleasant images the word inherently implies. Therefore, by exploiting the overdramatized theme of love, rebirth, hope, renewal, etc. within springtime poetry, Millay then subverts the readers’ expectations altogether by abstaining from the adherence to those conventional poetic elements. *All* meaning and/or interpretation of this poem is strictly derived from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s utilization of this reversion technique.

To further discuss tone, and understand Millay’s decision of opting for a rather negative one, a brief analysis regarding the formal elements of traditional poetry—particularly poems which employ the subject of spring as the theme—must be understood. These poems typically employ a gentle voice in conjunction with a melodic tone and a euphonious rhythm which include an increased amount of unstressed syllables to evoke a soft and phonetically pleasing poem that then, respectively, reflects the voice, or, mood, of the content that is being presented. In Edna St. Vincent Millay’s, “Spring,” however, the speaker assumes a resentful and discontented tone, emphasized by the deliberately unpoetic composition of the poem. Although our speaker admits that “the smell of the earth is good” (8), the appreciation of that beauty is immediately tainted by his or her own awareness of the realities of life—refusing to intentionally neglect the principle of mortality. The poem’s rigid physical composition reflects the disjointedness felt by the speaker as a result of his or her incessant existential dread. Further

elaborating on the physical aspects of poetic form, the employing of free verse automatically makes this poem one which defies conformity through its avoidance of adopting a rhythmically confining structure, further exhibiting Millay's disapproval of strictly adhering to conventional standards of poetry. "Spring" also exhibits a lack of enjambment; forming the majority of lines within the poem as complete sentences and providing closure through the use of punctuation. However, despite the implementing of these poetic devices, which appear to evoke a sense of freedom and nonconformity (especially with the use of free verse), they subsequently conjure a sense of disunity and lack of fluidity. Nearly each line within the poem stands alone and does not flow seamlessly into the next line. This results in a visual lack of cohesiveness and unification which ultimately serves to reflect one of the central themes of the poem—the speaker's inner lack of unity and inability to internalize the false sense of beauty that acts as a veil for mortality.

Within the closing lines of the poem, a resolution for the speaker appears to be entirely unforthcoming. There is, however, an sudden shift in voice—transitioning from discontent and dissatisfaction toward the idea of the misrepresentation of spring into an utterly existential nihilistic philosophy—completely stripping life of an intrinsic meaning. This evident shift in the perspective of our speaker may suggest the submitting to existential despair as the speaker of the poem now portrays life as nothing more than trivial efforts encased in futility: "Life in itself/ is nothing,/ an empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs" (13-15). Within these lines, however, lies ambiguity. This may be read as the speaker's inability to internalize the dualistic nature between the renewal of life and its inevitable degeneration—the delicate relationship between creation and destruction—or, this grouping of lines may also invoke an interpretation that is not quite so devoid of hope of a resolution. In this reading, life does not possess an intrinsic meaning—life in itself is empty, and inherently lacks any sort of inclination of a significant purpose. However,

although life may lack meaning, the presence of the “empty cup” and the “uncarpeted stairs” suggests that life is something in which meaning must be applied. Just as the empty cup and the uncarpeted stairs acquire meaning through the application of water or the application of carpet, so it is with life. Edna St. Vincent Millay argues that life *in and of itself* is nothing. Life without the acknowledgment of pain is nothing. Life without introspection and contemplation is nothing.

Millay’s poem, “Spring,” subverts nearly every formal aspect within traditional springtime poetry including—but not limited to—tone, language, imagery, voice, and diction. And thereby dismantles the preconception of spring as being inherently and only associated with perceptions that evoke feelings of positivity—love, hope, and amiability—as well as inclusions regarding regeneration, revival, and/or rebirth that exhibit a celebratory tone toward spring, yet knowingly neglecting the concept of degeneration. Through Millay’s reversion—the act of her taking conventional thematic elements and formal aspects of traditional springtime poetry and creating a poem that stands in direct opposition to its conformity through the inclusion of a bitter tone, harsh and unpleasant language, disjointed form and structure which lacked any sort of restrictive tenets to abide by, and the expression of voice—she has transgressed beyond traditional societal conventions of springtime poetry in an attempt to deconstruct and undermine the concept of what constitutes as poetry.

Works Cited

Sanes, Ken. “Horror At Existence.” *Kensanes*, www.kensanes.com/spring-millay.html.

