

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Kinsella, Anna (2007) ""The Spring and the Fall" by Edna St. Vincent Millay," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 28.

Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/28>

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"The Spring and the Fall" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

by Anna Kinsella

(English 1130)

In the spring of the year, in the spring of the year,
I walked the road beside my dear.
The trees were black where the bark was wet.
I see them yet, in the spring of the year.
He broke me a bough of the blossoming peach 5
That was out of the way and hard to reach.

In the fall of the year, in the fall of the year,
I walked the road beside my dear.
The rooks went up with a raucous trill.
I hear them still, in the fall of the year. 10
He laughed at all I dared to praise.
And broke my heart, in little ways.

Year be springing or year be falling,
The bark will drip and the birds be calling.
There's much that's fine to see and hear 15
In the spring of a year, in the fall of a year.
'Tis not love's going hurts my days,
But that it went in little ways.

In the lyric poem "The Spring and the Fall" by Edna St. Vincent Millay, the female speaker reflects on the emotions she had throughout her failing relationship with an anonymous man. The first line of the poem begins with an emphasis on the fact that it is spring and line two of the poem expresses the carefree feeling the author is experiencing when walking down the road with her love. The use of spring in the poem emphasizes a feeling of newness, not unlike the feeling people experience when they begin a relationship with someone new: a feeling of hope and wishful anticipation. After the initial feeling of contentment is expressed, the third line begins to foreshadow the sad fate of the relationship by stating, "The trees were black where the bark was wet". The color black symbolizes the sadness the speaker will experience when her relationship with her lover is over. However, in line four it is evident that the speaker had overlooked the black bark when she was walking with the man in the spring, saying that only as she looks back now does she see the bark vividly. Lines five and six describe how the speaker's love broke off a branch from a peach tree to give her a blossoming flower. These two lines seem to have a double meaning. At the time, the lover's actions seem to be expressing care for the speaker; by going out of his way to find a beautiful flower to give to her, he is telling her that she is loved and cared for. However, in retrospect, the reader can see that perhaps someone who would break off such a beautiful flower, denying its natural right to bloom and ultimately killing it, would not be capable of nurturing nature's most fragile blossom, the heart.

The second stanza begins as the first stanza did, with emphasis on the time of year in which

the action is taking place, except that this time it is taking place in the fall. The use of fall in this stanza is very appropriate, because in the fall the days become shorter and colder and life begins to die. In this stanza the speaker herself and the reader can see the beginning of the collapse of the relationship. In the second line of the second stanza, the speaker states that she “walked the road beside my dear.” which is the same as the second line in the first stanza, illustrating that the relationship is still the same as it was in the spring, though it may be dwindling, neither the speaker or her lover realize it, or both of them do realize it but do not want to give up on it yet. In the ninth line of the poem, the fate of the relationship is finally realized when the crows, or “rooks”, fly away with a loud racket as the two lovers walk down the road together. Since crows are black birds often associated with death, the author uses their presence to portray the symbolic death of the relationship. After the crows have flown away it opens the speakers eyes to all that is deteriorating in the relationship and in line eleven she is finally able to state that her lover laughed at everything that she liked and broke her heart “in little ways”, meaning that although the man was never directly or even intentionally cruel to her, he was insensitive to her feelings, which hurt her immensely.

In the final stanza, there is a feeling of refreshment partly because the reader knows that the relationship has finally ended, partly because the stanza starts out in a different way than the previous two stanzas did (instead of stating what time of year it is, this stanza states that the time of year is rather irrelevant) and partly because the rhyme scheme has changed from AABACC to AABBCC. Lines 13 through 16 are used to describe the passing of time and how it is extraneous to the affairs of the heart, which explains why the poem is titled “The Spring and the Fall,” because the speaker was able to convey the events that have led up to the failure of the relationship, and it does not matter what time of year it happened to be. The last two lines express the underlying point of the poem: the whole reason for the speaker’s heartache and her reason for writing the poem. The speaker states that the worst part of heartbreak is not the heartbreak in the end itself, but watching the relationship slowly deteriorate over time (in this case, the time from the Spring to the Fall) and feeling hurt in small ways while it was deteriorating due to her lover’s insensitive nature. In the first stanza it seems that the relationship was ill fated to begin with and the whole poem suggests a sense of helplessness because it seems like nothing can be done in order to make the relationship work.

The overall poem is very structured. Each of the three stanzas has six lines and each stanza has a set rhyme scheme, the first two stanzas have the same rhyme scheme (AABACC) and the last stanza has a slightly different rhyme scheme (AABBCC), which introduces the change in the speaker’s mind-set: she is no longer is trying to hold on to what remains of her relationship with her lover, and has finally accepted that she has been left with a broken heart. The fixed structure of the poem also suggests from the beginning that the relationship being portrayed is ill fated from the start because love is supposed to be spontaneous, joyous and unscripted, not carefully structured as the poem is.

Works Cited

Barnet, Sylvan, William Burto, and William E. Cain. *An Introduction to Literature*. 14th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. 711-12.