



Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

*My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It makes a lovely light!
~ First Fig*

One of the most popular writers of the first half of the twentieth century and the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry—for *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems* (1922), Edna St. Vincent Millay began life rather quietly and quite privately. She was



born in Rockland, ME, on February 22 1892, the oldest of three girls born to Henry and Cora Millay, and was named for the French priest St. Vincent de Paul. The title poem of her prize-winning collection was a tribute to her mother, who sent her shiftless husband packing in 1900 when the girls were still young, citing "financial irresponsibility." Cora then moved the family to one of the poorest neighborhoods in Camden and took a job as a district nurse, forcing her to be away from home a good deal, often over night. The girls had to learn to fend for themselves during this time, but their mother also found a way to encourage the creativity that was evident in them. A trained singer herself, who coached orchestras

and wrote out parts for musicians, Cora nurtured music in the girls and taught Edna to write poetry. At one point Edna considered a career as a concert pianist, but ultimately turned to poetry and playwriting.

Even though she was absent frequently, Cora saw to it that the girls went to school regularly. Edna was a good student, but was shy and reserved. One of her elementary teachers described her at 12 years old: "Her mane of red hair and enormous gray-green eyes added to the impression of frailty, and her stubborn mouth and chin made her seem austere, almost to the point of grimness." When she got to high school, she wrote for and edited the school magazine all four years. She also had her first poem, "Forest Trees," published in a children's magazine early on during that time (she was 14).



Edna's first major poem, "Renascence," was published in 1912 in *the Lyric Year*, an anthology of amateur poetry. Her mother had encouraged her to submit the poem to a



contest, and the judges like it, although they only awarded it fourth prize. Still, it brought Millay instant fame, expressing a vision of infinity as the speaker lies on her back and looks up at the sky.

At the time, Millay's sister Norma worked in the Whitehall Inn dining room in Camden. At the end of every season, the long-term guests held a party to honor the hotel staff. In 1912, it was a masquerade ball; and Norma brought along Edna, who entertained everyone by singing and playing the Steinway piano that is still in the inn lobby today. She also recited her newly published poem, "Renaissance" for the first time in public. Edna's recitation of the poem that was written at the top of Mt. Battie, just above the back side of the inn, thrilled the audience.

Vincent, as her friends called her, was 19 when her poem was published. She had been too poor to go to college on her own after graduating from high school, but an officer of the Young Women's Christian Association heard her read "Renaissance," and helped her get a scholarship for Vassar College. She did a year of prep work at Barnard College and then went to Vassar. There, she wrote poetry and plays (she starred in her own play, *the Princess Marries the Page*), was published in a number of magazines—*Smart Set*, *Poetry* and others, and studied literature and languages. She graduated in 1917. That same year her first collection of poetry, *Renaissance, and Other Poems*, was published.



After graduating, she moved to New York City, settling with her sisters in Greenwich Village where she lived what most considered an unconventional life. She became a key figure in the cultural life there during a time when the Village served as an "incubator of every important American literary, artistic, and political movement of the period." She hung out with artists, writers, political radicals such as Wallace Stevens, Eugene O'Neil, and John Reed; she had relationships with Floyd Dell (novelist and co-editor of a magazine), Edmund Wilson (critic), John Peale Bishop (editor of *Vanity Fair*), and Arthur Davison Ficke (poet). She was described as having the "Spirit of the New Woman" because of her sexual freedom, independence, and political activism. Both her work and life represented the "modern, liberated woman of the Jazz age, free of the restrictions of the past;" and the sentiments of much of her poetry expressed this, as evidenced in the lines quoted above.

While her personal life was unconventional, her public life as presented in her poetry was quite traditional, at least in format. Ballads and sonnets seem to have been her favorite forms, but she also liked free verse as well as drama; and she wrote prolifically. *Aria da Capo*, a peace-loving play, was published in 1919. *A Few Figs from Thistles* followed in 1920, *Second April* in 1921; and *The Harp Weaver and Other Poems*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922. Vincent joined the Provincetown Players, who

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performed two of her plays: *Two Slatterns and a King* and *The Princess Marries the Page*. She traveled on assignment for *Vanity Fair* in Europe from 1921-1923. She converted her articles into book form, publishing *Distressing Dialogues* in 1924.

Vincent married Eugen Jan Boissevain in 1923. He was a widower of the early feminist Inez Milholland and a coffee importer 12 years her senior who gave up the business and devoted his life to her. It was a good pairing as he provided her the security she needed to continue her work. After they got married, they traveled extensively all over the world until 1925 when they bought a farm in the Berkshires, near Austerlitz, New York, and settled down. The farm—"Steepletop" as they called it—was a peaceful place to write and entertain friends (writers and musicians and others).



The years following her marriage were productive for Vincent, if sometimes traumatic. In 1927 she protested the death sentence of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and was arrested in Boston. She wrote "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" in response to this. It was published in the *New York Times*, 22 August 1927. She wrote the highly acclaimed libretto for Deems Taylor's opera *The King's Henchman*. She was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1929. She read her poetry on radio in the early 1930s. (She had done popular reading tours prior to this.)

But those years after marriage were also sad ones for her. Her good friend Elinor Wylie died in 1928, her mother in 1931, and her father in 1935. Then she was in a car



accident in 1936 that caused her to withdraw from many of her public activities. Still, she continued to write material that caused people to think and write about her. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1940. In 1942 she wrote a poem, "The Murder of Lidice," that went by shortwave to Europe. It was a poem about the Nazi destruction of men, women, and children of Lidice, Czechoslovakia after the resistance had killed Reinhard Heydrich (Nazi officer). Vincent didn't think much of it (it had been commissioned by the Writers' War Board), but it was published anyway. She was awarded the gold medal of the Poetry Society of America in 1943.

Vincent's last years were difficult and filled with the effects of a drug addiction (pain killers) and a drinking problem. She had a nervous breakdown in 1944 and was unable to write for 2 years. Her husband took her to a number of rehab centers, but to no avail. And then he died from lung cancer in 1949. This left her feeling anchorless.



She died within a year of him on October 19, 1950 after falling down the stairs and breaking her neck. Both she and her husband are buried on the grounds of Steepletop. It was a tragic end to the candle that had burned so brightly in its prime.

Vincent's poetic voice has been described as "intense and bittersweet, passionate but controlled." Her favorite subjects were treated in meditations on nature, commentaries on feminist issues, ballads and sonnets on love, death, and political protest. She has been called a "witty observer of human relationships" and "the poetic voice of eternal youth, feminine revolt and liberation, and potent sensitivity and suggestiveness. Her best and most representative themes are bittersweet love, sorrow, the inevitability of change, resignation, death, and ever-abiding nature." Most of her work was either autobiographical or based on current events. Her lyrics had clear musicality—owing to her classical music training, no doubt. The classical poets she loved to read, although she often used colloquial language in expressing herself.



After her death in 1950, hundreds of people, including celebrities, crowded into the Whitehall Inn in Camden to dedicate a room in Millay's honor. Visitors can roam the lobby of the Inn as well as the room where Millay was "discovered." Pictures, mementos, first editions of her works and a grand piano on which Vincent sometimes performed all provide a snapshot of the life she led and the impact and legacy of her writings.

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