



## Edna Saint Vincent Millay

### 7 Poems—Discussion and Activities

#### Objectives:

- To appreciate several forms of poetry, including ballad and sonnet.
- To understand and perhaps identify with the sentiments of a teenager put into poetic form.
- To discover how a variety of poetic techniques can come together effectively in a poem.
- To experience the poetic writing process personally in the hopes of understanding and appreciating the art of poetry.

#### Process:

I. Read Edna St. Vincent Millay's biography

II. Look up and define the vocabulary

III. Read the following seven poems:

- [Renascence](#)
- [Dirge without Music](#)
- [First Fig](#)
- [I Shall Forget You Presently](#)
- [God's World](#)
- [The Philosopher](#)
- [Love is Not All](#)



IV. Watch the video on Millay's poem "Dirge Without Music"

V. Answer the questions for each poem.

VI. Complete the poetry project.



**Edna St. Vincent Millay**  
**7 Poems—Vocabulary**

Define the following literary vocabulary words:

1. **Renascence**
2. **Diction**
3. **Syntax**
4. **Dirge**
5. **Conventional symbol**
6. **Sonnet**
7. **Couplet**
8. **Abstract**
9. **Concrete**
10. **Euphemism**
11. **parallelism**



## Edna St. Vincent Millay 7 Poems—Discussion and Activities

### Discussion and Activities:

#### *I. Renaissance*

- a. Study the photo below. It is the vantage point from which Millay wrote this poem. What, if anything, do you see in the photo that could have evoked such a lengthy poem that essentially contemplated the meaning and value of life, death, and resurrection?



- b. Early critics of the poem were shocked to discover such a young girl had written it. What do you find in the poem that could have surprised them? Are these themes typical of the thinking of young people today? Why or why not?
- c. This is the poem that launched Millay's writing career. She was just 17 when she wrote it. Is there anything about the sentiments she expresses that



indicate her age to you? How do they compare with the things you think about in your quieter moments? Be as specific as you can.

- d. Examine Millay's **diction**. What do you notice about it? About the rhythms of the lines? How do her word choice and **syntax** affect the overall feel and effect of the poem?
- e. If you were to write a poem today about your philosophy of life, what would you say? What would trigger such in-depth soul-searching for you? What value is there in considering such things while in your teens?

## II. *Dirge Without Music*



- a. What is a **dirge**? How is the poem like a dirge?
- b. What does it mean to be resigned? How do we act when we are resigned?
- c. When we discriminate, we tell people or things apart according to how we value them. Why or how can dust be indiscriminate?
- d. Would it make any difference if the poet had written "soft ground" in the first line instead of "hard ground"? Why? How?



- e. Readers of poetry are familiar with the lily, laurel leaves, and the rose as symbols dear to poets. When familiar symbols appear with their usual meanings, we call them **conventional symbols**. Look at these three symbols as they are used in this poem. Which of them are used in a conventional way? Are any of them used unconventionally? How? Be specific.

### III. *First Fig*

- a. What is the tone of this poem? Is it a confession? Is the poet bragging? Is she being sentimental or "in the moment"?
- b. Who *is* the speaker in this poem? Given what you know about Millay, do you think this is an autobiographical poem? Who is the poet speaking to? Why?
- c. What does Millay mean by "burning the candle at both ends"? Why doesn't this make a good end?
- d. What do you notice about the rhythm of this poem? Why do you think she uses **parallelism** here? What about her use of "ah" and "oh"? Why the parallelism? Why does Millay use "ah" and "oh"; are those utterances different in meaning? Why do her foes care? Her friends?
- e. What is the significance of the title? If you had to title it, what would you call this poem?



### IV. *Pity Me Not Because the Light of Day*

- a. This poem is a traditional **sonnet** divided into two parts. The first eight lines, traditionally, form a tight-knit group that sketches a scene, sets up a situation, or raises a question in our minds. The next six lines often interpret what has gone before, draw a conclusion of some kind, or answer the question. The first block of eight lines in this sonnet is further held together by the repetition of the poet's request "Pity me not. . ." Each of



these requests leads to something from the natural world that for the poet is similar to the way love passes or fades among human beings. What are those similarities or analogies? What do they have in common?

- b. The concluding six lines again compare our human experience with love to things we see in nature. How are these similarities different from the earlier ones? What is the common element this time?
- c. A pair of rhymed lines that together state a complete thought is a **couplet**. In many sonnets, a final couplet sums up the main point. Sum up in your own words what the mind beholds and the heart learns. Why would the mind be swift about it but the heart slow?

#### V. *God's World*

- a. What are the poet's feelings on this autumn day? Does she experience only pleasure in the natural beauty of the world? Explain.
- b. Toward the end of the poem, the poet says the world is "too beautiful this year." How are both pleasure and pain suggested by the poem's language?
- c. Although the language of "God's World" is on the whole simple and straightforward, there are several words in the poem that some dictionaries label *archaic* meaning "out of general use." What effect do the words *thy*, *thou'st* and *prithee* create? How do they indicate the poet's attitude toward God and nature?
- d. Is there a season or outdoor place that makes you feel this way about it? Describe this season/place concretely, yet emotionally so your reader knows how and why you feel about this place.





## VI. The Philosopher

- a. Why can't the speaker in this poem sleep? What is keeping her awake?
- b. This poem seems to be a debate of sorts within the poet. What is she debating?
- c. Millay says she knows men who are as kind and some who are braver than the one she loves. By saying what he is not, what kind of man is Millay describing here? What is she saying about herself?
- d. Have you ever had feelings for someone that your head tells you that you shouldn't? Or maybe others have counseled you about? Millay says that women's ways are witless ways. Do you think she means this literally? Comment on the **paradox**, the seeming contradiction, of describing herself as witless and yet wise.

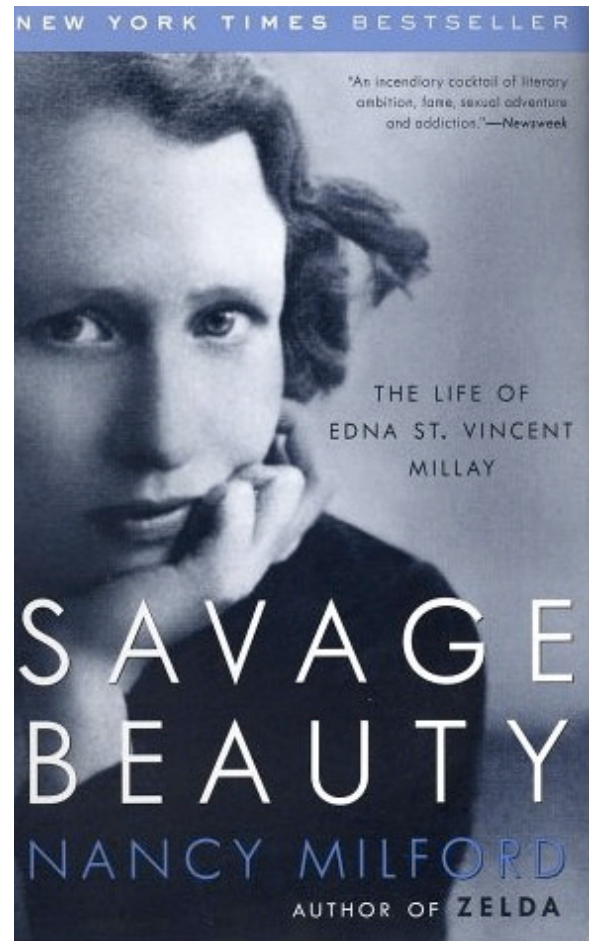


## VII. Love is Not All

- a. Unlike many other modern poets, Millay is not reluctant to use **abstract** words like *love*, *peace*, *happiness*, and *pity*. Abstract words are the large umbrella terms that stand for general ideas and that often seem far removed from the specific sights and sounds of down-to-earth experience. But like other modern poets, Millay knows how to make abstract ideas **concrete** for us. She gives us a vivid picture, like the picture of people clinging to a floating spar, rising and sinking with the waves. Concrete words take us to the level of actual sense experience, giving us things to see, hear, smell, touch. What more general idea does this very concrete picture act out for us? List other concrete details in this poem that stand for more general ideas.



- b. **Sonnets** first became a favorite form of poetry with English writers and their readers four hundred years ago. The early writers of sonnets often expressed similar feelings about love again and again. Are the feelings and ideas about love in this sonnet similar to those in Millay's other poems? Are they different? How?
- c. This poem takes a roundabout way to defend love. First the poet belittles it and places it in perspective. Then she builds it up again. Her strategy seems to be to say: let's not exaggerate what love can do. She follows this, though, with a powerful little word, "yet." List the things she says love cannot do. Then list the things it can and does do.
- d. Millay uses a kind of **euphemism** for suicide in this poem. What is it? Why do you think she uses this softer phrase instead of the harsh single word? Do you think it is more or less effective than that one word here? Why or why not?
- e. What side is the poet on here—is she for or against Love? How can you tell?
- f. This poem is a **Shakespearean Sonnet** (14 lines, iambic pentameter, 3 quatrains and a rhyming couplet, *ababcdcdefefgg* rhyme scheme). Why do you think Millay chose this form to express herself on the subject of Love?







## Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Projects

Choose any two of the following options to do. At least one must be a written project.

1. **Write** your own poem expressing your philosophy of life and eternity.
2. **Write** a sonnet about beauty, death, God, life, loss, love or eternity.
3. **Write** an essay explaining the context and meaning of one of Millay's poems. Be sure to include your own reaction and response to the poem.
4. **Write** a critique about Millay's poems, researching with others say as well as what you yourself think about them.
5. **Create** a collage inspired by one of Millay's poems.
6. Look up and **read** more Millay poetry. Choose one or two poems to **illustrate** in a way that you feel best expresses the poem(s).
7. Take your camera on a walk and find pictures that could **illustrate** "God's World" from the perspective of your world. Create a **power point presentation** that illustrates the poem and its meaning. Share it with your class.
8. Set one of Millay's poems to music. **Share** the song with your classmates, being sure to share with them why you chose the poem and what it means to you.
9. Make a **video** illustrating one of Millay's poems. Be sure to include an analysis of the poem and a rationale for your work.
10. Create a **podcast** of a poetry reading of the 7 Millay poems in this unit. For each poem, give an opening and closing remark about the poem and what it means to you.

