I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed

Edna St. Vincent Millay

(1892-1950)

I, being born a woman and distressed

By all the needs and notions of my kind,

Am urged by your propinquity* to find

Your person fair, and feel a certain zest*

To bear your body's weight upon my breast:

So subtly is the fume* of life designed,

To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,

And leave me once again undone, possessed.

(Think not for this, however, the poor treason

Of my stout* blood against my staggering brain,

I shall remember you with love, or season

My scorn with pity, - let me make it plain,

I find this frenzy insufficient reason

For conversation when we meet again.

Propinquity* - closeness

Zest* - enthusiasm

Fume* - essence

Stout* - strong

Ironic because she shows that she is not.

Connotation: 1) part of the predominantly female activity of cooking 2) suggest time & former poetic boasts that love does not alter with the seasons.

Enjambment: The running on of the thought from one line, couplet, or stanza to the next without a syntactical break/punctuated pause.

Irony: The technique of implying exactly the opposite of what is being said.

Paradox/contrast: A contradiction in terms; word with an implication that is opposite to their meaning.

Pivot: Central point where poem turns.
**What is the poem about?**

**What is the subject of the poem?**

- It is an impacting sonnet that tries to get a political point across alongside a personal one.
- The poet is making a mockery of the Petrarchan ideal where a woman is rejecting her lover and also the traditional roles of a woman, by which she feels trapped. (She is “distressed/By all the needs and notions of my kind” – that is, trapped by femininity.)

**Who is speaking?**

- The narrator of the poem (first person) is obviously a woman and is more likely a character of Millay's who is talking.

**Who is the narrator speaking to?**

- She is speaking to her lover.

**What is the location/setting of the poem?**


**Themes and messages of the poem:**

- Millay intends to show domination of women over men. She describes a woman who resists a man’s expectation. She tells us a message that every woman should be herself without following the image of what a woman in her society should be like.
- A theme of morbid sexual desire runs through this poem and the poet uses the heavily emphasised central couplet of the octave (lines 4-5) for the particularly salacious, intimate remark:
  “…feel a certain zest*/To bear your body's weight upon my breast”

**Attitudes and feelings in the poem:**

**Emotions and feelings of the speaker:**

- The speaker expresses a variety of different emotions, thoughts and feelings. They range from lust (“I am urged by your propinquity”(closeness)), confusion and desire to stress, a patronizing attitude and the idea of carpe diem (seize the day). The speaker is objective and disinterested and uses cold, unromantic words. There is none of the anger that usually accompanies a lovers’ breakup; she is reserved, restraining her emotions.

**Tone of the poem:**

- Matter-of-fact tone, audacious/daring, scornful, facetious (treating serious issues with deliberately inappropriate humor), mocking, ironic, arrogant, disinterested & objective.
**Form and structure of the poem (rhyme, rhythm, line length, stanza length, etc.):**
- Old style Petrarchan (Italian) Sonnet of 14 lines – octave and sestet each with their own theme.
- **Octave:** the speaker explains how, because of the “notions of my kind” she is physically attracted to her lover.
- **Sestet:** turn of the poem & change that the speaker goes through; it shows that she is stronger than she was in the octave & refuses to continue their affair.

**Rhyme Scheme:** abba abba cdcdcd. The rhyme scheme is also reserved (slow to reveal emotions or opinions) just as the speaker.
- The rhyme “brain/plain/again” has a stronger feel than the rest of the rhymes & ends the sonnet definitely. These three words sound harsh & have ‘a’ as their vowel.

- The octave is in a steady iambic pentameter, but it varies – four times – in the sestet. The turn of the sonnet, line 10 of the sestet, is marked by an extra syllable (which forms an anapest) in the word “staggering”, and a brief shift in meter. The increase in syllables for the four ‘variation lines’ creates a stumbling feel.

**Type of poem:**
- Old style Petrarchan (Italian) Sonnet (These were traditionally used by male poets during the 17th Century to describe human nature and the emotions of love and lust). In this poem, Millay rebels and argues against the patriarchal, typical-male, view by using it in an ironic way.

**Poetic devices (e.g. metaphors, similes, enjambment, alliteration, personification, etc.):**
- Explained in the poem above.
- The strongest end-stops closes the octave and sestet. They create a small pause – in which the finality of the speaker’s words can sink in. In the sestet, end-stop alternates with enjambment: each line ending with an ‘ain’ rhyme (“brain/plain/again”) is end-stopped, while the others are enjambed. This brings even further attention to those rhymes, and subtly builds up to the final, authoritative end-stopped line.

**Personal response to the poem (how do I feel, what impact does the poem have on me):**
- As well as the speaker, I feel distressed by being born a woman. Our society still has particular expectations from women, still seeing them inferior to men.
- YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSE!
Language use:

- Her language is objective and disinterested.

Word use:

- Millay uses rather interesting words not normally come across in everyday language. Back then, they might have been everyday words such as “propinquity” or “frenzy”.
- She uses cold, unromantic words. She is distanced from the audience.

- “I” (title and line 1): It could be a direct address to us, meaning she is completely open and honest.
- “I, Being Born a Woman” (title and line 1): Makes it clear that this poem is from a female point of view.
- “distressed” (title and line 1): By saying she is “distressed”, she attracts sympathy from the reader and makes it seem as though she is a victim of her sex. This word is ironic because she shows throughout the poem that she is not a victim, nor helpless and passive. Then this ideals continued on in the next line “by all the needs and notions of my kind”.
- Contrast between “needs” which she is expected to do (& not to do) as a woman, and “notions” which are her desires, wants & urges (also her unspoken desires for equality & freedom).

- “My kind” (line 2): I said with some contempt/scorn (stating that women are worthless). It is a direct reference to all the females in the world, also exaggerating the fact that she is quite different to men by using the word “kind” instead of sex or gender.
- Also, some of the phrases and words she uses conjures up pictures and metaphors you wouldn’t really associate with some ideas such as “fume of life” - this is a metaphor/image for a relationship which, as gas/fumes, is inconstant, uncontrollable and can evaporate at any moment, like their relationship.

- “Am urged by your propinquity to find” (line 3): She talks to her lover rather than the readers.
- “propinquity” (line 3): If she used ‘nearness’ it wouldn’t have the same effect. “Propinquity” makes it sound that she is deadly serious about this, she’s genuinely enticed by this man.
• “cloud the mind” (line 7): She knows that falling in love with this man may result in her surrendering to him, therefore being under his control which is a slight form of Patriarchal society. Because she is a feminist it’s what she is against. She is in strife with herself between this and her beliefs. This confusion is portrayed through line 7. Their relationship/lust is making her heart beat faster whenever they are near each other (“clarify the pulse”) and she cannot think straight.

• “And leave me once again undone, possessed.” (line 8): She tells us the consequences of this lust. “Undone” could refer to her being sexually, and maybe even mentally unsatisfied. “Possessed” could mean that she is, or could be, being controlled by him i.e. Patriarchal society.

• “Think not for this, however, the poor treason/of my stout blood against my staggering brain” (lines 9-10): Her relationship and lust betrayed (“treason”) her; she was not herself. In reference with line 7 (“clarify the pulse and cloud the mind”), her heart beating fast and she cannot think straight.

• “my staggering brain” (lin 10) seems also to be a more obvious reference to this disturbance in the meter – particularly because the “staggering” is an anapest (a metrical foot consisting of two short or unstressed syllables followed by one long or stressed syllable), which throws it out of beat with the rest of the line. Thus both the meter and the reader’s voice stagger, in imitation of the speaker.

• “I shall remember you with love, or season” (line 11): This definitely confirms that she has taken back control of the relationship and that it actually means nothing anymore.

• “season” (line 11): Connotation: 1) part of the predominantly female activity of cooking 2) suggest time & former poetic boasts that love does not alter with the seasons. The poet will not indulge in such sentimental devotions; “season” has the implication of a lover being retained for a certain period and then discarded for a new one.