

The synergy of form
and theme in millays
sonnet love is not all



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The Synergy of Form and Theme in Millay's Sonnet "Love is Not All"

Introduction How important is love in a person's life Very Important or has no role to play or may be important yes, but not crucial to living. One may get different answers, depending on the person, perception, and the time in which the question is asked. It is precisely this - the analyses of what love means to Edna St. Vincent Millay (1931) that is the focus of this sonnet. A sonnet has a specific form, follows a specific rhyme-scheme, and brings about an effective connection between two seemingly contrasting ideas, within the short span of fourteen lines. This is well illustrated in "Love is Not All" by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1931). This short essay will discuss the synergy that exists between the particular form of sonnet and its theme, in presenting the poet's ideas on love, briefly analyzing the rhyme-scheme, alliterations and other techniques that enhance the lyrical quality of the sonnet. The analyses, it is hoped, will pave the way for a better understanding of the potentiality of the simple Shakespearean sonnet form.

Synergy in Structure and theme

Francis Petrarch (1304-74) popularized the sonnet form in Italian, comprising of ten or eleven syllables to a line, with a total of 14 lines divided into two parts, the octet and the sestet. The first contains one particular idea and the second presents the 'Volta' or the 'turnaround,' and follows the pattern - a b b a a b b a c d c d c d (or c d e c d e) (Spiller 1). Shakespeare modified the structure of his sonnets slightly, into three quatrains of four lines each, and a couplet of two lines in the end, which may contain the Volta. The form is simple and has more scope for exploring various ideas, and this has been utilized to the maximum by Millay, in her sonnet. The poem follows the

typical rhyme-scheme is a b a b c d c d e f e f g g; for example, the first
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quatrain, (1-4) drink, of the first line rhymes with sink of the third line, just as rain of the second line rhymes with again of the fourth line.

Each quatrain is used to present a different but related idea, linked by transitions within. For example, while Millay's sonnet opens with a negative evaluation of love " Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink" as a basic necessity of life (source, line 1), the second quatrain depicts the incapacities of love to mend physical wounds " nor set the fractured bone" (source, line 6), a different aspect of a related idea. More than the flexibility in structure, the sheer potential of the Shakespearean form of sonnets is revealed in their adaptability in the placement of the Volta. It may be placed in the last two lines or in the last quatrain. In this sonnet, Millay places the Volta in the end of the second quatrain itself " Yet many a man is making friends with death for lack of love alone" (source lines 7-8), wherein she muses that people were dying for lack of love, even as she was uttering those words. The third quatrain brings out her assessment of the value of love, and that her love may face difficult times " difficult hour/ Pinned down by pain" (source lines 9-10). And the ending couplet completes the picture of her resolve, wherein she states that even though she may be forced to barter the " memory of this night" for an essential need like " food" (source lines 13-14) she may not give in.

The sonnet is pleasing to the mind and the ears. Alliterations like aspects are well highlighted by use of alliterations - the repetition of consonant sounds in the word beginnings as " Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink" (Source line 1), and Consonance-the repetition of consonant sounds as in " And rise and sink, and rise and sink again;" (source line 4). In the above line, an imagery of a man drowning in a quagmire of life threatening situations like lack of

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food and water is painted, in continuation to the initial lines. The Volta serves to contradict the title " Love is Not All" by indirectly reiterating that though love does not constitute a part of the basic needs of man, it is the invisible power that motivates mankind to live.

Conclusion

The sonnet makes a beautiful study of the power hidden in the simplicity of the Shakespearean sonnet form, even as it explicates the poet's personal analysis of the importance of love in her life. The message is brought out loud and clear because of the Volta, and makes one ponder over the truth of the message in even in the today's context.

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List of Works Cited

Source of this work is Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet titled " Love is Not All," a part of a sonnet collection titled " Fatal Interview" (1931).

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