

"love is not all"  
commentary and  
analysis



The speaker in Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet "Love Is Not All" describes reality and crushes the fairy tale belief that love brings infinite happiness and solves all problems. This narrator expresses her thoughts on falling in love throughout the poem; bluntly, she describes life's most basic necessities, which love cannot replace. Mocking those who strongly believe in the power that love holds, she aims to persuade the reader to accept love as an irrational notion. What appear to be her cynical thoughts developing throughout the beginning of the poem turn out to be a dramatic build-up to emphasize her real intentions.

The speaker uses repetition in the first six lines as an important tactic, thus guiding the reader's thoughts into circling around the negative aspects of love. Repetition of "not" and "nor" exaggerates all that love cannot do. It "is not meat nor drink, nor slumber nor roof," and it cannot "clean blood, nor set the fractured bone"; simply put, love does not even begin to fulfill a human's most basic needs for survival. Continuing the repetition of all that love cannot do, the speaker notes its inability to take the place of a "floating spar," comparing it to a life preserver or floating piece of wood for someone drowning to clutch onto. Lacking the capability to save one's life, even given numerous opportunities as the person "sink[s] and rise[s] and sink[s] and rise[s] and sink[s] again," accounts another one of love's faults. This situation suggests that love cannot be a form of aid in some of life's most crucial situations, no matter how many chances arise.

In the first six lines, each verse consists of ten syllables. These lines, in iambic pentameter, appear to present the speaker's thoughts: basic and cynical thoughts creating a negative view, in the reader's mind, on the

subject of falling in love. Adding an extra syllable to the seventh line, the speaker shifts her point of view. Throughout the remainder of the poem, lines seven through eleven, each verse now includes eleven syllables. While the rhythm changes, the expression of thoughts alters, the tone of the speaker shifts, and the thoughts conveyed to the reader suddenly transform.

The structure of the first eight lines, which constitute one complete sentence, serves to aide the reader in understanding the shift in the poem. The first line begins with the statement " Love is not all," and a colon follows; this colon sets the introduction for the following seven lines, the first six of which offer a summary of love's incapacibilities. If we remove the negative, repetitive verses of the sentence, the words left simply introduce the change in ideas: " Love is not all: / Yet many a man is making friends with death / Even as I speak, for lack of love alone." In the seventh and eighth verses, the speaker acknowledges that many choose to voluntarily approach death due to an absence of love. The poem is concerned with not only the death of the living, but also the death of a person's moral beliefs, the death that results in dependencies and dissatisfactions that create other substitutes for love. The shift in ideas and the speaker's comparison of love's absence to death provide the reader with the image that love brings life.

Following her comparison of love to life and death, Millay develops a situation in which the narrator faces the harsh reality, contemplating giving up her love for a glimpse of relief. " Pinned down by pain and moaning for release," the speaker faces a time in her life when only the hardships and struggles of her days cross her mind. As she wishes " to sell [her] love for peace," she comes to the realization that no matter how much she desires

to, she "[does] not think [she] would." The speaker leaves the reader's thoughts revolving around how and why she will not trade love to relieve such vivid pain.

Presenting an opposition to the words of Cécile de Jouy, " love life comes last in [our] life, [we] put real life first," the speaker in " Love Is Not All" proves that obsessing over love is one of the biggest mistakes man can make. Man's first thoughts on falling in love revolve around love as an all-powerful notion, but materialistically it proves useless. Realistically, preoccupied love is nothing greater than a weakness. However, the speaker truly admits some aspects of love's significance, disseminating the importance of love in one's life. As the speaker uncovers the falsity of the perception of love, she allows the reader to understand that although materialistically and fundamentally love serves no purpose, without it man never becomes intimate with the inevitable beauty in the world, life.