

Millay sonnett analysis: not in a silver casket essay



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Analysis of Millay's "Not in a silver casket cool with pearls" Edna St. Vincent Millay's unconventional childhood, growing up without a father because her mom kicked him out and having to learn independence and responsibility by the age of twelve, influenced her poetry and shaped her as an motivated and self-sufficient individual.

By the time " Vincent", as she liked to be called, was nineteen years old, she already had already made a name for herself as a formidable poet. A couple discovered her and sponsored her education at Vassar College where Vincent experimented with her sexuality. She openly expressed her bisexuality, and continued to have both male and female sexual partners. When she married Eugen Boissevain, the couple agreed to have an open marriage, and she continued to write lustful poetry in which it is unclear if the beloved addressed in her sonnets refer to men or women. In " Not in silver casket cool with pearls", Edna expresses her love for a beloved who appears to be female; Vincent drops subtle hints in the sonnet alluding to the lover's gender, and she employs sensory details and sound devices to establish a tone of confidence, security, and joy as she articulates the fact that her non-traditional ways of expressing her love are just as legitimate as the traditional ways she dismisses.

In " Not in a silver casket cool with pearls", Millay addresses her lover as " you" three times, indicating that although this is a reflective poem conveying her true emotions, it is not an internal monologue by any means. The gender of the beloved is never clarified, although there are details Millay felt compelled to include in a deliberate fashion in her sonnet which point to a feminine companion. Vincent writes to her partner that " one should bring

[her partner] cowslips in a hat/ Swung from the hand” (line 11-12). Cowslips are yellow, fragrant, ornamental flowers.

A woman would never bring flowers to a man under normal circumstances, so more likely than not, Enda just made clear who her true audience was aside from the reader. Enda refutes traditional practices of devotion and commitment by saying that she will not wear a ring to prove she’s in a relationship—that it isn’t necessary to show someone you love them, but if she was speaking to a woman, she wouldn’t be able to marry them legally and have it be recognized as legitimate anyways. She explains how her love is something that can be proven with an “ ungemmed” and “ unhidden” hand, but if it was a lesbian couple, they wouldn’t be able to get married so their love would have to be expressed in nontraditional ways similar to those Millay is advocating in the last six lines of her Elizabethan-styled sonnet. A strong indicator that there is something slightly “ scandalous” happening is when Millay writes “ not in a ring/... [with] a legend plain—/ Semper fidelis, where a secret spring/ Kennels a drop of mischief for the brain” (lines 5-8). Here Millay is saying that she can not be bound by rings—she needs her freedom.

She knows what the rings stand for—you must be “ Semper Fildelis”, “ always faithful”, and instead she’s obviously doing something that a ring would not allow her to do; she’s being “ mischievous” and not acting according to how she would be required to had she practiced the traditional methods of showing someone you love them. She needs the spring to be “ secret”—she has reasons to not be tied down even though she loves the person she’s addressing in the poem. Also, Millay might have to be

mischievous and secretive for another reason—because her beloved is another woman, and homosexuality and bisexuality weren't widely accepted. A final indicator that Edna wrote this poem for a woman is the copious amounts of references to jewels, jewelry, and precious valuables.

Immediately the poem opens with the imagery of a “ silver casket cool with pearls”, while the next line only speaks of more jewels—rubies and sapphires. Millay then mentions the ring, the traditional symbol of marriage, but the idea of a ring after just having numerous valuables alluded to in the first two lines just further add to the bountiful nature of the images jewelry and precious stones cascading over a casket. She continues by mentioning the “ ungemmed” hand, because she believes that you don't need to wear jewelry to express the extent of your love for someone. Women love rubies, sapphires, and pearls, but Edna's point is that no objects, especially traditional objects used to show commitment and affection, are needed for two people to express their love and devotion for one other.

Jewelry is more appealing to women, so it may be referenced more when talking to a female lover than it would be if she was trying to share her feelings with a man. Edna refers to “ you” which really puts an emphasis on the fact that there is a specific person that this poem is written to, but it must not be a man because the whole sonnet seems to express a secret love affair that needs to be kept “ secret” or hidden, and the analogies and references made to an open relationship without any signs of true commitment aside from a weak oath “ not to hurt” the other and an excited exostulation, “ Look what I have! , to a promise that even though the traditional signs of love are not being utilized in this love affair, that Edna is

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committing everything she can to her beloved—she’s willing share all her “apples”. This sonnet has very smooth and fluid feel to it, most of which can be attributed to the iambic pentameter and Elizabethan sonnet rhyme scheme as well as the numerous sound devices and sensory details applied to the work to fully actualize the poem. Edna strays from the iambic pattern in the poem at moments for emphasis. For example, in line three, the first two feet are “ Locked, and the key”.

The abrupt halt in the pattern makes the reader focus on the “ Locked” and “ key” fragment in a trochee-iamb sequence. It can catch the reader noticing slight shifts in the pattern, especially with hard consonance of the “ k” sound, but most the poem is so fluid, and “ locked” begins with an “ L”, so its not too harsh of a change from the soothing sounds of the repetition of the “ r” sound in “ rich with red corundum” or the “ l” sound in “ silver casket cool with pearls”. That first line is tricky though because of the consonance of the hard “ c” sound but its almost overpowered the softer sounds, and by what the speaker is saying because their tone isn’t harsh or anxious whatsoever until the very last line. The last line has so much emotion and excitement, though it keeps the iambic form. There’s a caesura in the middle of the line splitting up the two ideas of the line into a two foot segment, like a dimeter, and a three foot segment, like a trimester. The iambic pentameter rhyme scheme helps the reader know how to read the poem and put an emphasis or stress on the syllables or words that they know come next in the order of the meter.

Its helps to know how the author meant for it to be read, and by following a set rhyme scheme with a set meter, you will be able to easily read the poem

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you know it was intended to be read. The classic ABABCDCEFEFGG rhyme scheme of a very traditional poem helps the reader even further—being able to recognize a very famous structure and have the speaker adhere to the guidelines in an era where people no longer wrote strictly structured poems. The repetition of “not in a” to start line one and line five help easily show the split between the two halves of the poem. The first four lines match the second set of four lines with similar structure even down to the third line of both “stanzas” of four lines have a very meaningful opening to them that are then set apart from the rest of the line with a comma: “Locked,” and “Semper fidelis,”.

The first half of the poem composed of the first eight lines clearly state two cliché, traditional ideas of showing affection and devotion for one’s significant other which Edna is stating for the purpose of telling her beloved that the two of them will not use those material gifts to prove their love. Edna states how she loves her significant other and then she continues by acknowledging that they must keep their affair hidden and “secret”. The shift in the poem happens here, where Willay moves from refusing to practice certain traditional ideas to justifying and explaining what her nontraditional way of loving someone in an open relationship, and showing her love and devotion for the person with what she does promise to do which is to give all of herself to her lover: “—and these are all four you”. The different literary devices used help establish the tone, atmosphere, theme, setting, and characterization of the poem.

The tone is very matter of fact, confident, with no anxiety, speaking about how some people show their love and what love entails for those people,

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while Millay states those only to say that she views love in a different way and doesn't agree with the strict guidelines that come with wearing a ring on your finger. The tone is very reassuring and hopeful in the last 6 lines especially where Edna makes it clear, despite the fact that she wants the freedom of an open and laidback relationship, that she does love her significant other and will give all she is to her. If Edna is speaking to another woman, the type of relationship Edna is creating is basically all they were allowed to have anyways. Gay people can't marry everywhere.

Back when Edna was writing there was no respect for the gay community—bisexuals weren't understood either, but Edna was famous for her poetry, and became a big name for feminism. Her upbringing made her strong and self sufficient, and that confidence she built while fending for herself at a young age when her mom wasn't around is really apparent in her writing, and how she's able to just tell her lover how its going to be, with no reservations. She sounds very sure of every statement she makes in this sonnet and it has to be a result of everything she had endured in her life to that point. The atmosphere of the poem itself without taking the speaker into consideration is a good mixture between euphoric and cacophonous sounds.

They're in the right places too to give a sense of ease when something is said matter of fact and more harsh in the more exciting parts of the poem that really stand out. For example, "semper fidelis" is harsh and is used to make a huge statement against serious relationships and marriage, but then the sibilance of "secret spring" follows and the confidence and ease returned to the line of the sonnet. The theme of the poem expressed at the very beginning when the poem climaxes at the beginning of line 9—"Love".

Love is also referred to twice in line four when Edna states that she has given her love to “you”—the person for who this sonnet was written for. Other themes include a respect for her own self—her being confident enough in her idea of love and confident enough in herself to know exactly what she wants out of the relationship and how much she knows she wants to invest herself in it.

Edna doesn't indicate any clear setting besides the fact that she is with her significant other, having a really important conversation describing their relationship. Edna characterizes the “you” indirectly but showing that she obviously thinks her lover is such an amazing person that she is willing to give all of herself to her lover, as indicated by the last line, spoken so adamantly. The “you” has proved to be such an important person in Edna's life that she is taking the time to reassure her love in a sense that even though they won't perform any of the traditional and strict relationship practices, that Edna wants to make it clear that the love is just as sincere and the relationship means just as much as any traditional relationship ever could. Edna compares their relationship to a traditional, strictly, monogamous relationship in the fourth line when she explains that has “other girls/ Have given their loves, [that she] give[s her] love to [her beloved]”. Finally, through constant literary devices such as the anaphora with “not in a” for emphasis of the two things Edna will steer clear of doing in a relationship, to alliteration in such phrases as “Semper fidelis, where a secret spring” setting a more soothing and safe emotional state after surprising us with something as strong as “semper fidelis” in a strong cacophonous language, to assonance in “ungemmed, unhidden” really

driving home the feeling of freedom, Edna was able to portray her strong emotions and attachment for her partner in thier open relationship.