First Fig

POEM TEXT

1 My candle burns at both ends;
2 It will not last the night;
3 But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
4 It gives a lovely light!

SUMMARY

The speaker's life is like a candle that's burning up on both the top and bottom. Burning in such a way, this candle will go out before the night is through. The speaker calls out to both their enemies and their friends, declaring that, at least, while it's still burning, the candle emits a beautiful light!

THEMES

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

The speaker of Edna St. Vincent Millay's pithy four-line poem, "First Fig," celebrates going your own way and taking life by the horns. Describing their life as a candle that's burning from both ends at once, the speaker affirms that life should be full of intensity, vigor, and passion (rather than just, say, conformity and politeness). If that means making a few enemies along the way, then so be it! And should living this way hasten exhaustion or even death—well, the speaker thinks that's a sacrifice worth making too.

The symbolic image of a "candle" that "burns at both ends" might refer to anything from partying, to working hard, to sexual openness. Whatever it is, the speaker commits completely, with every fiber of their being. Doing so might cause the speaker's "flame" to flicker out sooner than it would if they lived their life in a more moderate and measured fashion. The speaker knows that their candle "will not last the night"—that they might be cutting their time on earth short by expending so much energy in their efforts to gobble up as much life as they can. (After all, a candle lit on two sides would burn through its wick, and melt its wax, quite quickly.) Yet despite their potential burnout, the speaker embraces the consequences of living in this bold, daring way.

Some people might take issue with how the speaker lives, but the speaker believes that their double-ended candle's light is all the more beautiful for its brevity and intensity. Addressing both their "friends" and "foes," the speaker defiantly declares that their candle "gives a lovely light," suggesting that they don't care what anyone thinks of them or their choices. Other people might prefer a slower, less intense or passionate existence, but not this speaker. Making friends and enemies is all part of living the life they want to, and they won't let other people's opinions stop them from burning bright.

In this speaker's eyes, living a rich, full, independent life is better than merely living a longer and more conventional one. Even the poem's title, "First Fig," suggests devouring life as if it were a ripe fruit—one that won't keep!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;

The speaker opens the poem with a bold declaration: "My candle burns at both ends." This candle represents the speaker's life—something the speaker apparently lives to the fullest!

The poem doesn't go into specifics, but readers might imagine the speaker partaking in any number of things: going out and partying all the time, totally throwing themselves into their work, embracing sexuality in a way that goes beyond society's norms—or all of the above! Burning life at both ends implies that the speaker doesn't stop to rest or hedge their bets. Perhaps the speaker works hard and plays hard, indulging both their ambition and their lust. In any case, the speaker probably doesn't sleep much and risks their well-being in order to gain more of life's rewards—and they're proud of doing so! It's *their* life-candle, after all.

Note how the bright, bold alliteration of "burn"/"both" adds some *oomph* to the poem's opening line, perhaps evoking the speaker's joy in living their life in this way.

The poem's bouncy meter adds energy and excitement as well. "First Fig" consists of a single quatrain that alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM) and iambic trimeter (three da-DUMs) and follows an ABAB rhyme scheme. This is called common meter.

Yet there's a striking variation in the poem's very first line, with ends with two strong beats in a row:

My candle burns at both ends;

Astute readers will also notice that line 1 contains just seven syllables rather than the expected eight of a line of iambic tetrameter. The line ends powerfully and abruptly—much like the speaker says their own life will!

Indeed, the speaker declares in the very next line that this metaphorical "candle" will burn up before the night is through. Just like a candle burning twice as fast as it normally would (because it's lit at both ends), the speaker's life might soon end—go dark—because of the extreme way they're living it. There's no sentimentality here, nor desire for pity, just a plain statement of what the speaker sees as the facts.

LINES 3-4

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

Line 3 uses apostrophe, as the speaker calls out to both their "foes" (or enemies) and "friends" alike. That "ah" and "oh" provide a kind of rhetorical flourish, as though the speaker has reached the climax of a great speech (even if it's only four lines long!). The line sounds all the more dramatic thanks to the alliteration of "foes" and "friends"; the speaker clearly has a showy personality! Caesurae ramp up the drama as well, inserting multiple pauses throughout the line to build up the tension:

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—

Note the clear parallelism here as well: the speaker essentially repeats the same phrase, swapping in "friends" for "foes." This creates a sense of balance; readers get the sense that those friends and foes are much the same in the speaker's mind, at least when it comes to dictating how the speaker should live their life. Most people prefer their friends to their foes, of course, but this phrasing is a way for the speaker to assert their independence. They're going to live life the way they want to, and they're not been afraid to make a few enemies or disappoint their friends in the process.

That "ah" and "oh" also sound a bit resigned, as though the speaker has nonchalantly accepted their lot (to burn bright and fast). Instead of fighting against their nature, they simply appreciate the "lovely light" this metaphorical candle gives off while it's still burning. The lilting alliteration and consonance of "lovely light" evoke the beauty the speaker sees in their chosen lifestyle.

The speaker knows they risk exhaustion and even death, but they've accepted these trade-offs. Again, the reader can fill in the blanks about what kind of life the speaker is actually living. (A life of pleasure? Working themselves to the bone? Sacrificing everything in the pursuit of a particular goal?) The point is that the speaker has made their decision and isn't going to complain about it; instead, they'll enjoy the ride.

And just like that, the poem is over! Four short lines and the "light" of the text goes out, the brevity of the verse mirroring the swiftness with which the speaker's candle will burn up.

SYMBOLS

THE CANDLE

The speaker uses the image of a candle burning at both ends to symbolize their passionate approach to life.

Think about what would happen if you could literally burn a candle at both ends: it would give off twice the amount of light, but it would also burn away in about half the time. It's much the same for the speaker: they're living every moment of their life to the fullest despite the fact that doing so isn't sustainable in the long run. The speaker knows that they'll burn through the symbolic candle of their life more quickly than would someone experiencing a more moderate, measured, and, in the speaker's estimation, boring existence. Yet the speaker believes their life burns all the brighter—is all the more exciting and beautiful—precisely because of its fleeting intensity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 4

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration brightens up this brief poem, providing a bit of drama and flair. The poem might be short, but it's filled with punchy music that mirrors the speaker's desire to squeeze every last drop out of life. When the speaker declares that the "candle" of their life "burns at both ends," for example, the plosive /b/ alliteration feels forceful and confident.

The alliterative sounds are like little flickers of excitement, bright flashes of flame. Line 3's fricative alliteration even sounds a bit like something catching fire:

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—

The alliteration here also works to link those "foes" and "friends." These terms might be opposites, but their shared sounds reflect their similarity in the speaker's mind. Neither friend nor foe can sway the speaker from their lifestyle, and the speaker will one day leave both friend and foe alike behind.

In the poem's final line, the speaker explains how their full-

throated approach to life "gives a lovely light." In other words, burning bright might mean the candle of their life goes out quickly, but at least it looks good while it's burning! The gentle, lilting alliteration and consonance of "lovely light" add loveliness to the poem's final moment.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "burns," "both"
- **Line 3:** "foes," "friends"
- **Line 4:** "lovely light"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker calls out to their friends and enemies directly in the poem's third line, an example of apostrophe: "But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends."

That "ah" and "oh" are particularly dramatic; it sounds as though the speaker is suddenly getting up on a table to make an impassioned, impromptu speech defending their life choices to any and everyone who might care. The caesura after each exhalation also slows the poem down, reflecting the way that the speaker savors each and every little moment in life.

The use of apostrophe might sound gently combative here, as though the speaker is *challenging* both friends and foes alike to justify the way that *they* live—to consider whether the "light" of their "candle" is as "lovely" as the speaker's, in other words. Readers might also think that the speaker sounds a little resigned; that "ah" and "oh" are like little sighs of acceptance and perhaps contentment. The speaker isn't going to fight against their own nature, nor are they going to waste much time justifying their choices to those who don't agree with them. *"This is just the way I am,"* the speaker seems to say—*"take it or leave it."*

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—"

REPETITION

The repetition in "First Fig" helps to make the speaker's words more powerful and memorable. Given that the poem is so short, these moments of repetition stand out loud and clear to readers' ears.

Lines 2 and 4 feature anaphora, both beginning with the word "It" (referring to the "candle" of the speaker's life):

> It will not last the night;
> [...]
> It gives a lovely light!

These lines also rhyme and use the same meter (iambic trimeter, or three da-DUMs in a row). This repetition makes the speaker's "candle"—their life—stand out more brightly in the brief poem.

There's more general parallelism in line 3, where the speaker repeats grammatically identical phrases on either side of a caesura:

> But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—

This parallelism creates a sense of balance, as though the speaker views their friends and enemies as equals. And in one sense, they are; the speaker refuses to be beholden to *either* group when it comes to how they live their own life. The repetition also simply sounds *dramatic* and performative. The speaker seems to be reveling in the moment as they declare, without guilt, their philosophy on life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "It"
- **Line 3:** "ah, my foes," "oh, my friends"
- **Line 4:** "It"

VOCABULARY

Candle (Line 1) - This is not a literal candle; it represents the speaker's life.

Foes (Line 3) - Enemies.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"First Fig" is a short, sharp poem consisting of a single quatrain. The poem itself mirrors the speaker's candle: it's bold, bright, and over quickly!

This is also a riff on something called a ballad stanza: a common form that it alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter. The poem's brevity together with its predictable rhymes and snappy rhythm make it especially memorable.

Note, too, that the poem appears at the start of a collection called *A Few Figs From Thistles*. Figs are also small fruits, sweet yet devoured quickly—a bit like how the speaker thinks life should be lived!

METER

"First Fig" uses common measure: it alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter. Iambs are poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed pattern; tetrameter means there are four iambs in a line, and trimeter means that there are three. These rhythms, combined with a tight ABAB rhyme scheme, make the poem very snappy and memorable.

Here's the poem's meter scanned fully:

My can- | dle burns | at both | ends;
It will | not last | the night;
But ah, | my foes, | and oh, | my friends—
It gives | a love- | ly light!

Eagle-eyed readers will detect that the first line isn't actually written in perfect iambic tetrameter! It ends with two stressed beats in a row ("both ends") and is missing a syllable (it has seven instead of the eight expected in a line of tetrameter). The double-stress of "both ends" makes the poem's opening sound extra forceful and punchy, a bit like the speaker themselves. Yet the missing syllable also means the line gets cut short abruptly—just like the speaker expects their life to be.

RHYME SCHEME

"First Fig" uses an alternating rhyme scheme. Lines 1 and 2 rhyme with each other, as do lines 3 and 4. This creates the pattern ABAB.

This simple, common rhyme scheme fills the poem with music, making it sound punchy, witty, and memorable. The neat click of the perfect rhymes—"ends"/"friends" and "night"/"light"—adds to the poem's confident tone as well, echoing the speaker's determination to live a certain way.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "First Fig" is, in one sense, totally anonymous; readers learn nothing about this person's age, gender, occupation, and so on. Nevertheless, it's clear what *kind* of person the speaker is: this is someone who squeezes every last drop out of life, even if it means burning out more quickly (and rubbing some people the wrong way—note the mention of "foes"). The figurative "candle" of their life might "not last the night," but this is an acceptable trade-off to the speaker: their life gives off a "lovely light" in the meantime.

There's something bittersweet about the speaker's existence as explained in the poem. Perhaps they don't *want* to change, or perhaps they *can't* because it's simply their nature to go nonstop, full-steam ahead at all times. Either way, they've chosen to look on the bright side and appreciate the "flame" of life while they still can.

The poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay wasn't, afraid to challenge the conventions of her time, so the poem might be describing her own take on life. At the same time, keeping the speaker unnamed within the poem itself makes its message feel more universal. Anyone might identify with the speaker.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a clear setting beyon taking place during the speaker's brief, bright life. The mention of a candle not lasting the night is symbolic rather than literal: it represents the fact that the speaker's boldly-lived life will be over quickly.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was a major poet in her own lifetime, winning a Pulitzer Prize for her thoughtful and often radical depictions of love and suffering. Her poetry was at once sincere and playful, and today she's remembered for her work's wit as well as its beauty. Her writing was also noted for its modern take on the battle of the sexes: the women in her poems are often just as cavalier and calculating about love as men were traditionally expected to be.

"First Fig" appears as the opening poem in Millay's collection *A Few Figs From Thistles*. The collection caused a stir when it was published in 1920, largely thanks to its unabashed exploration of female sexuality, and it set the tone for much of Millay's later work. Although she had not yet achieved the level of fame her Pulitzer Prize would bring in 1923, Millay at this point had already received a healthy amount of recognition for her writing. Having moved to the bohemian enclave of Greenwich Village in New York City in 1917, she was also famously social. Her zest for life is on clear display in poems like "Midnight Oil" and "Grown-up," which, like "First Fig," reject the idea of being overly sensible (and, in particular, of going to bed early).

Some of Millay's contemporaries compared her to Sappho for her frankness about love. But her formal, lyrical verse was seen as a bit out of step with the stylish, experimental modernism of her contemporaries Eliot and Pound. Her poetic reputation thus declined after her death, until later writers like Mary Oliver rediscovered her. Today, she's seen as an influential and important poet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Millay wrote "First Fig" at the start of the "Roaring Twenties," a decade defined by economic prosperity and vast cultural changes. The 19th amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920, and the spread of inventions like automobiles and electricity provided many new personal freedoms to individuals.

During this period of change, many people began to defy the stodgy moral standards of the past. From fashion to sexuality, women across the country were particularly interested in exploring and challenging convention. At the same time, their rights and societal expectations were still quite limiting compared to those of men. Millay herself was known for her

feminist views and activism, and much of her work reflects her rebellious spirit.

The idiom "burning the candle at both ends" now tends to mean going to bed late and getting up early. It's an old phrase/idea, though, and originally meant to be wasteful with money (as opposed to sleep). It's thought to date from the early 17th century.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Few Figs from Thistles — Dive into the full book in which "First Fig" appears. (https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/millay/figs/figs.html#oil)
- Millay's Biography — Read more about Millay's life, courtesy of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society. (https://millay.org/millays-life/)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "First Fig," recorded for National Poetry Month. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT0GSuXrgrc)
- Millay's Legacy — Read about the ways in which Millay and her work are perceived today. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/feb/22/edna-st-vincent-millay-poetry)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY POEMS

- I, Being born a Woman and Distressed (Sonnet 41)
- Pity me not because the light of day (Sonnet 29)
- The Buck in the Snow
- What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet 43)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*First Fig.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 18 Oct 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*First Fig.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved October 18, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/edna-st-vincent-millay/first-fig.