I, Being born a Woman and Distressed (Sonnet

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

Given that I'm a woman—and, as such, afflicted by all the various ideas and desires that women can't help but have—I'm attracted to you when you're physically close to me, and I long to feel the weight of your body on top of my own. Lust, that smoke of life, has been cunningly designed to quicken heartbeats, to make people's brains foggy, and to unravel my defenses and take me over. However, don't think that just because my passionate body has betrayed my weakening mind that I will ever have any love for you. My lust will never dampen the disdain I have for you. Let's be totally clear: this lustful excitement is not enough of a reason for me to even speak to you the next time we meet.

THEMES

LUST VS. REASON

In "'I, being born a woman and distressed,'" a female speaker addresses someone she lusts after. The speaker is filled with sexual attraction whenever this person is nearby, "possessed" by her bodily desires despite the fact that she doesn't seem to actually *like* this individual all that much. In fact, she calls her lust "treason" against her "staggering brain"—meaning that her sexual desires are a betrayal of her rational mind, which doesn't crave any sort of emotional intimacy with this person. Though the speaker makes clear that she won't act on this physical attraction, the poem thus implicitly argues that passion is often irrational and that sexual desire isn't always coupled with love.

The speaker begins by acknowledging her physical longing for this potential lover. She can't *help* but find this person attractive and imagine this person's body pressing down on her own. Whenever this person is around, her "pulse" quickens and her mind grows foggy, implying that her thoughts are clouded by her physical longing; she isn't doing this on purpose or choosing to have these feelings. Her body, it seems, has a mind of its own.

Indeed, the speaker insists that her passionate lust butts heads with her rationality. The speaker is "possessed" by her lust, which pits her "stout blood against [her] staggering brain." Blood here represents the speaker's sexual desires, while the brain represents her intellect. The speaker's blood is "stout," or strong and sturdy, while her brain is "staggering," or unsteady, in the face of her lust. Again, then, the speaker makes clear that her passion isn't based on any sort of careful thinking or consideration; it's something with no basis in reason—nor, indeed, in any form of love.

To that end, the speaker insists that she doesn't want emotional closeness, and that her lust has no effect on her "scorn," or disdain, for this person. She bluntly says that her desires won't make her remember this person with "love" or even "pity." The speaker's lustful "frenzy"—or madness—is "insufficient reason" for her to even *speak* to this person again! Physical desire for the speaker thus has nothing to do with reason nor emotional connection. This was a bold statement for a woman writing at the time, and a subversive assertion of the difference between lust and love—of the battle between the body and the mind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-14

WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND DESIRE

Even as the poem's speaker refuses to give into her desires, she frankly acknowledges her physical lust without hesitation or shame. Indeed, the poem presents lust as something powerful and natural (albeit frequently irrational). The poem thus challenges traditional depictions of women as chaste and pure vessels devoid of sexual feelings, and also rejects the sinful or shameful associations with lust.

The speaker acknowledges—rather cheekily—that she is a "woman" who is "distressed" by various "needs and notions of [her] kind." "Notions" are trivial, whimsical ideas, usually without a rational basis. The speaker is deliberately playing into the stereotype of women as being uniquely susceptible to silly desires—an idea the poem will ultimately reject.

The speaker also makes clear from the start that her desires are far from chaste or platonic, taking care to detail the physical nature of her lust. The speaker wants this person's "body's weight upon [her] breast." The speaker's desire is undeniably sexual, yet the speaker does not indicate any shame about this. Instead, she suggests that lust is natural and expected. She describes lust as "the fume of life." A "fume" is a strong odor or vapor given off by a particular object or being, and this comparison suggests that sexuality is an inherent and natural product of "life." Moreover, lust has been purposefully "designed," presumably by God, to affect one's "mind" or reason. If lust is "designed" by God, there should be nothing shameful or sinful about it.

The poem's assertion of lust as a natural experience for the female speaker overturns stereotypical beliefs about female sexuality, and the lack thereof. At the same time, the speaker never gives in to her desires. She remains in full possession of her reason and intellect despite such powerful lust. Women, the poem thus implies, are hardly the so-called weaker sex, nor are they more "distressed" than men when it comes to desire. The poem ultimately rejects any sort of binary idea of women as being either virginal or wanton—insisting at once that women are sexual beings, *and* that they are perfectly capable of controlling their sexual desires when they want to.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 4-5
- Lines 6-7

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,

The first two lines of the poem establish the speaker's cheeky tone. In the first line, the speaker clearly asserts that she is a woman. The alliteration of hard /b/ sounds in "being" and "born" emphasizes the speaker's declarative statement of her womanhood. The speaker then goes onto admit to being "distressed." To be "distressed" is to be suffering or under great strain—but readers don't yet know why the speaker is feeling this way. The enjambment at the end of line 1 creates a beat of suspense, encouraging the reader to continue on.

In line 2, the speaker elaborates that she is suffering from "all the needs and notions of [her] kind." "[N]otions" are trivial and whimsical ideas, often without a rational basis. Society has often trivialized women as needy and irrational creatures. Rather than outright denying this, the speaker surprisingly admits to these faults; as the poem goes on, however, it will become clear that the speaker is being tongue-in-cheek. The consonance of soft /n/ sounds in "needs," "notions," and "kind" plays into associations of softness and weakness with femininity.

"I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is written in the form of a traditional 14-line Italian sonnet. As such, the first two lines are written in iambic pentameter, as is conventional of the sonnet form. Iambic pentameter is composed of five iambs, poetic feet consisting of an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern:

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,

Although the poem initially appears to follow traditional conventions in terms of form and meter, the poem ends up subverting these conventions—just as it ends up subverting conventional ideas of womanhood.

LINES 3-4

Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair,

Conventionally, 14-line sonnets are divided into an eight-line octet and a six-line sestet. Often, the octet establishes the poem's "proposition" or problem, while the sestet provides a resolution to the problem. For many sonnets, the traditional problem of the poem is unrequited love. In lines 3-4 of "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed," the speaker begins to introduce the problem of the poem.

The speaker is "urged by" the "propinquity," or closeness, of another individual. Namely, in line 4, the speaker is compelled by the other person's closeness to find this person "fair," or attractive. To be "urged" is to feel strongly compelled or driven by something. An "urge" itself is a primal or instinctive impulse. The speaker is basically saying that, when this other person is close by, she can't help but feel physical attraction and lust.

The caesura in the middle of line 4, created through the comma after "fair," slows the reading of the line and draws attention to the statement of the speaker's physical attraction. For the moment, the poem seems to suggest that its problem is one of unrequited love—that is, the reader might assume that the speaker is spilling out her feelings for someone who may or may not love her back.

At the same time, already something seems off. The first two lines of the poem have a tongue-in-cheek feel to them, as though the speaker is poking fun at stereotypical ideas about

her "kind" (i.e., women). As such, readers should take what she's saying throughout the poem with a grain of salt. She also says that she finds this other individual fair because of "propinquity"—raising the question of whether she'd simply find herself attracted to anyone who was nearby!

Line 3 continues to be written in the conventional unstressed-stressed iambic pentameter of an Italian sonnet:

Am urged by your propinquity to find

However, although the poem appears to follow sonnet conventions of form and theme, the poem is already beginning to subvert these conventions. First, the sonnet is written from the point of a view of a woman, which defies the tradition of male speaker of poems. Second, the poem describes frankly a women's sexual attraction and lust for another individual. This is another act of defiance against a literary traditional of depictions of women as "pure," chaste, and nonsexual beings.

LINES 4-5

and feel a certain zest
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:

The speaker elaborates on her lust, developing the poem's subversive depiction of women's sexuality. The speaker's attraction to this other individual is affected and heightened by their closeness. The speaker "feel[s] a certain zest"—a keen interest, desire, or excitement—when this other person is around. The enjambment at the end of line 4 provides emphasis on the word "zest," pushing the reader forward into the next line. The poem's pace remains quick, perhaps like the speaker's beating heart.

In line 5, the speaker gets even more explicit. She's not simply attracted to this person; she wants to "bear" the "body[] weight" of the other person "upon [her] breast." In other words, the speaker wants to be physically intimate with the other person. The alliteration of hard and forceful /b/ sounds in "bear," "body's," and "breast" reflects the physicality of the speaker's fantasy. The stresses of the meter in the line also provides additional emphasis on these specific words:

To bear your body's weight upon my breast:

The consonance of sharp /t/ sounds in "[t]o," "weight," and "breast" emphasizes the sharpness of the speaker's "zest" and desire. The assonance of moaning /aw/ sounds in "body's" and "upon" stresses the sexual nature of the speaker's lust. Her attraction, the speaker makes clear, is not a chaste or platonic in any way. The explicit, frank, and unashamed depiction of a woman's sexuality subverts conventional ideas about the "purity" and chasteness of women. Women, the speaker declares, can experience sexual attraction. Moreover, their lust can be powerful and full of passion.

LINES 6-8

So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.

Having declared her sexual attraction to this other person, the speaker now elaborates on the nature of lust in general and the effect that lust has on her mind. In line 6, the speaker uses a metaphor to compare lust to the "fume of life." A "fume" is smoke or vapor, often with a particularly strong odor. If lust is the "fume," or vapor, of "life," then lust is a natural product of life. Moreover, smoke and vapor and not easily contained. Consequently, lust, too, is not an emotion that can be easily contained, controlled, or discarded.

Additionally, the speaker notes that lust is "[s]o subtly" "designed." The implication, then, is that lust is purposefully "designed" by someone—namely, God. The consonance of sibilant /s/ sounds in "[s]o" and "subtly" emphasize this "subtl[e]" or cunning nature of lust. If lust is purposefully created by God, then, the speaker seems to suggest, lust is a natural part of life and nothing women should be ashamed of or tried to hide.

In line 7, the speaker builds on the metaphor of the previous line, thereby creating an extended metaphor. Lust, as "the fume of life," is inhaled by individuals, such as the speaker. When inhaled, this smoke "clarif[ies]" one's "pulse"; in other words, it makes one's blood pump more quickly, reflective of their physical desire. It also "cloud[s]" one's "mind," or reasoning. Lust, therefore, is like a vaporous drug that affects a person's rationality; it makes it hard to think straight.

In line 8, the speaker acknowledges the power of her lust. Her lust is so strong as to "leave" her "once again undone, possessed." The speaker's lust "und[os]," or breaks down, her rationality and seems to "possess[]" or take over her entire body. The speaker not only admits the strength of her lust, then, but also implies that she has experienced such lust before. The use of asyndeton in the phrase "undone, possessed" also speeds up the rhythm of the line and suggests the speaker's excited state of mind due to her lust.

By now, at the end of the sonnet's octave, the problem of the poem is finally clear. The issue isn't that the speaker worries about this other person not returning her feelings. On the contrary, the issue is that the speaker's overwhelming lust for this other person comes at the expense of her rationality; her desires aren't fueled by reason, but rather by passion. By presenting the problem of the sonnet as lust, rather than unrequited love, Millay subverts another convention. Lust, Millay seems to suggest, does not need to be attached to either love or reason.

LINES 9-10

Think not for this, however, the poor treason

Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,

Lines 9-10 begin what would typically be the sestet of the sonnet. Traditionally, the opening of the sestet indicates a turn in the poem toward a resolution of the poem's problem. Indeed, line 9 suggests a turn in the speaker's depiction of her lust. The speaker asserts the other person should "[t]hink not ... however" or assume anything despite the speaker's overwhelming lust.

In lines 9-10, the speaker does not fully reveal what the other person should not assume. Instead, first the speaker acknowledges that her lust creates a "poor treason. "[T]reason" is an act of betrayal, typically when a subordinate betrays someone they should owe loyalty to. For the speaker, her "stout blood" betrays her "staggering brain."

Blood, with its heat and intense red color, represents passion, while the brain represents reason. For the speaker, her passion should be subordinate and loyal to her reason. However, her lust makes her passion and desire rebel against her rationality.

The use of antithesis in line 10 to set up the contrast between "blood" and "brain," along with the personification of the speaker's "blood" and "brain," emphasizes the dramatic tension and conflict between the speaker's passion and reason. Indeed, under the influence of her lust, her passion grows "stout," or vigorous and strong, while her brain is "staggering" or weak.

Formally, the meter of lines 9-10 also indicate a shift from previous lines. While lines 1-8 of the poem are composed strictly in iambic pentameter, following the conventions of the form, lines 9-10 deviate from this meter:

Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,

Rather than containing 10 syllables in each line, lines 9-10 contain 11 syllables each. There are also some variations on the iamb here. For example, in line 10, "stout blood" is actually a spondee—two stresses in a row, reflecting the strength of the speaker's blood. More broadly, the break in what so far has been a relatively steady pattern resonates with the idea of the speaker's "staggering brain," indeed mirroring the unsteady nature of the speaker's mind when clouded by those lusty fumes.

LINES 11-12

I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity,—

The speaker makes clear that the other person should not assume she will "remember" or think of them "with love." Lust, the poem radically suggests, does not need to be associated with either affection or reason. The caesura near the end of line 11 slows down the reading of the line and provides additional emphasis to the speaker's declaration of her lack of love. The speaker's declaration also suggests her strength of mind against her lust. Although her lust heightens her passions and weakens her rationality, the speaker does not allow lust to influence her feelings for this other person.

The speaker additionally emphasizes that her lust will not "season / [her] scorn with pity." To "season" something is to temper or moderate it. The speaker is saying that her lust won't lessen her "scorn," or disdain, for the other individual by mixing it with "pity."

In line 11, the speaker states her lack of affection for the other person—insisting that her memories won't include "love." Line 12 is, therefore, an intensification of the speaker's feelings. In line 12, the speaker states that not only does she not feel any love, she actually feels outright *contempt* for the other person. No wonder she thinks her lust is a betrayal of her reason! The extended caesura in the middle of line 12 created by the comma and em-dash draws attention to the speaker's declaration of scorn.

The resolution of the sestet therefore subverts readers' expectations of the sonnet form. The speaker does not resolve her lust by asking the person she desires for affection or intimacy. Instead, the speaker declares her own strength of mind and continued independence from the other individual, despite her powerful and overwhelming lust.

LINES 12-14

let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

These lines are a final assertion of the speaker's rejection of her lust and her independence from the person she desires. The speaker doesn't want this person to misunderstand her or harbor any hope that she might act on her lustful feelings. In fact, she "find[s] this frenzy insufficient reason / [f]or conversation when [they] meet again."

A "frenzy" is a state of intense excitement and agitation, a kind of madness. By describing her lust as a "frenzy," then, the speaker again separates her sexual desires from her logical mind. As the speaker described in previous lines, her lust "possess[es]" her and seems to take over her body. The speaker's lust also weakens her "brain" or rationality. And now, in line 13, the speaker's lust practically drives her to madness. The consonance of swift /f/ sounds in "find," "frenzy," and "insufficient" resonates with the speaker's agitation.

Yet, despite the intensity of her lust, the speaker finds her lust "insufficient reason" to even speak with the person she desires when they next meet. The speaker's reason and her presence of mind, thus, is far more powerful than her lust. The enjambment at the end of line 13 emphasizes the last word of the line and draws attention to the greatness of the speaker's "reason." There's also a subtle pun here, as the speaker is essentially

saying she doesn't think "madness"—the opposite of reason—is a good enough "reason" to talk to someone.

Thus, although "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is written in the traditional form of an Italian sonnet, the poem is by no means a conventional love sonnet. In fact, the speaker doesn't even like the object of her desire! The poem thus totally separates lust from love and reason. The speaker also implicitly rejects the assumptions of the opening lines here. While people may think her "kind" are "distressed" by silly needs and ideas, the speaker here asserts that she is in full control of her body and actions. Ultimately, the contrast between the poem's mostly traditional form and subversive content plays on the readers' expectations and creates suspense and surprise throughout.

SYMBOLS

BLOOD

The poem leans on common symbolic associations between blood and passion. Blood is, of course, a vital bodily fluid necessary for life. With its heat and rich color, it's often used to connote intensity and vibrancy. In "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed," blood more specifically represents the speaker's primal sexual passion and lust.

The speaker first alludes to blood in line 7, when she says that lust was "designed / To clarify the pulse." In other words, sexual excitement makes the speaker's heart beat faster and stronger, pumping more blood through her veins. In lines 9-10, lust possesses the speaker, so much so that her "blood," or sexual desires, are pitted against her "brain," or reason. The speaker's blood is described as "stout," suggesting a vigorous, robust, or substantial presence—and, in turn, conveying the strength and intensity of the speaker's passion. No wonder her brain, or rationality, is described as "staggering"—as unsteady and weak—in comparison.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "To clarify the pulse"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Think not for this, however, the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,"

POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

Caesura occurs in six places in "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." Millay uses caesura in order to play with the rhythm of the poem and provide additional emphasis on certain ideas or phrases. Millay also uses caesura in conjunction with asyndeton in order to create dramatic tension.

In the first line of the poem, the speaker declares that she is a woman. The caesura created by the comma in line 1 slows down the reading here in order to emphasize the speaker's declaration. It creates a stressed beat on the word "I," forcefully asserting the speaker's presence in the poem. Sonnets are usually written in iambic pentameter, meaning readers would expect the poem's opening beat to be unstressed (da-DUM); that it is *not* foreshadows the subversion to come. Sonnets are also traditionally written from the point of view of a male speaker. "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" has, of course, a female speaker, and the pause of the caesura also draws attention to this.

In line 4, the speaker goes on to describe her attraction to another individual. She is affected by their physical proximity to one another, which increases the beauty of this individual in her eyes. The caesura in the middle of line 4 again slows the reading of the poem, drawing attention to the speaker's attraction and emphasizing her lust for this individual.

Millay also uses caesura to resonate with the speaker's inner state of mind. In line 8, for example, the speaker describes the intensity of her lust, which leaves her "undone, possessed." Millay uses caesura with asyndeton to actually speed up the reading of the line by omitting any conjunctions. This speeding up of the line mirrors the speaker's agitated state of mind as her lust takes over her body.

In line 12, the speaker makes clear her contempt for the other individual, before reiterating her opinion. The clear caesura in the middle of the line draws attention to the speaker's intense feelings of "scorn." The extended pause in the middle of the line also creates a sense of suspense and hope. One might hope that the speaker will change her mind or moderate her feelings on the other individual. However, in the lines following the caesura, the speaker makes "plain" that her opinions will never, in fact, change.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I, being"
- **Line 4:** "fair, and"
- **Line 8:** "undone, possessed"
- **Line 9:** "this, however, the"
- **Line 11:** "love, or"
- **Line 12:** "pity,—let"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs in six places in "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." Millay uses enjambment in order to vary the rhythm of the lines, create a sense of momentum in the poem, and to emphasize certain words at the end of the lines.

In the first two lines of the poem, the speaker declares that she is a woman and, somewhat cheekily, that she is "distressed / By all the needs and notions of [her] kind." The enjambment at the

end of line 1 places emphasis on the speaker's "distress[]" and creates a sense of suspense as to what, exactly, distresses the speaker. This pushes the reader forward.

In line 9, the speaker describes the "poor treason" of her passions against her rationality. "[T]reason" is an act of betrayal, a breach of expected loyalty. The enjambment at the end of line 9 draws attention to this word, thereby underscoring with the speaker's shock at the rebellion of her passions against her reason.

Nevertheless, by the end of the poem, the speaker makes clear that her reason will always overcome her passion and lust. Indeed, as the speaker declares in the final three lines, even her overwhelming lust is "insufficient reason" for her to even speak to the person she desires. The enjambment at the end of line 13 emphasizes the importance and triumph of the speaker's "reason" over her lust and, ultimately, the speaker's strength of mind.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "distressed / By"
- **Lines 3-4:** "find / Your"
- **Lines 4-5:** "zest / To"
- **Lines 9-10:** "treason / Of"
- **Lines 11-12:** "season / My"
- **Lines 13-14:** "reason / For"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs in almost every line of "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." Millay uses alliteration in order to enhance the musicality of the language and draw readers' attention to certain words and phrases.

In lines 4-5, for example, the speaker expresses her physical attraction to the other individual and her desire to "feel" the person's body on her own. The alliteration of soft /f/ sounds in "find," "fair," and "feel" mirrors the sensuality of the imagery. By enhancing the sensuality of the speaker's desires and lust, Millay challenges the idea that women are chaste or nonsexual beings. The alliteration continues to emphasize the intensity of the speaker's lust in line 5. The alliteration of bold /b/ sounds in "bear," "body's," and "breast" stresses the physicality of the speaker's fantasy. The speaker, the poem makes clear, does not shy away or feel ashamed by her desires.

Millay also uses alliteration in conjunction with other poetic devices like antithesis to draw attention to certain ideas. In line 10, the speaker the power of her lust, so much so that her "stout blood," or passions, rebel against her "staggering brain," or reasoning. The alliteration of /st/ and /b/ sounds between the phrase "stout blood" and "staggering brain," coupled with the use of antithesis, emphasizes and enhances the *contrast* between the forces of the speaker's passions and her reasoning. In other words, using the same sounds in these phrases draws attention to the idea that they are butting up against each other, that the speaker's passion is battling her reason. Moreover, the alliteration of the hard /b/ sounds reflects the formidable power of both the speaker's passions and her rationality.

In line 12, the speaker states that her lust will not temper her contempt for the object of her desire. Indeed, she wants to make her feelings of disdain "plain" for this other person. The last lines of the poem are, therefore, a statement of the speaker's strength of will and triumph of her rationality over her lust. In line 12, the alliteration of firm /m/ and /p/ sounds in "[m]y," "pity," "me," "make," and "plain" reflect the firmness of the speaker's rationality and power over her lust.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "being," "born"
- **Line 2:** "needs," "notions"
- **Line 3:** "find"
- **Line 4:** "fair," "feel"
- **Line 5:** "bear," "body's," "breast"
- **Line 6:** "So," "subtly"
- **Line 7:** "clarify," "cloud"
- **Line 9:** "Think," "this," "the," "treason"
- **Line 10:** "stout," "blood," "staggering," "brain"
- **Line 11:** "season"
- **Line 12:** "My," "scorn," "pity," "me," "make," "plain"
- **Line 13:** "find," "frenzy"
- **Line 14:** "when," "we"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears in every line of "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." Millay uses consonance to add a sense of rich musicality to the poem, and also to evoke the events and emotions of certain lines.

In lines 6-7, for example, the speaker compares lust to the "fume" or smoke of "life" and goes on to describe its cunning nature. Lust, the speaker declares, has been "So subtly" and purposefully "designed" by God in order to confuse one's rationality. The hissing sibilance in "So subtly," resonates with the cunning and subtle nature of lust.

In lines 9-10, the speaker describes the rebellion of her "stout blood," or passions, against her "staggering brain," or reason. Her lust, the speaker makes clear, is a formidable force within her. Indeed, the conflict between her passion and her reason is overwhelming. Both forces are relentless, and neither, at this point in the poem, appears to give way. Therefore, the consonance of sharp, staccato, and unyielding /st/ sounds in "stout," against," and "staggering" heightens the dramatic tension of this conflict.

In the last three lines of the poem, the speaker makes clear that as great as her lust is for the other individual, her contempt is

even greater. Indeed, although her lust is so great as to be a "frenzy," it is not even enough to make her speak to the other person the next time they meet. This concluding sentiment of the poem subverts conventions of sonnets, which are often dedicated to unrequited love. Rather than declaring her everlasting love, however, the speaker rather declares her everlasting hatred. The consonance of swift /f/ sounds in "find," "frenzy," and "insufficient" evokes the speaker's agitated "frenzy" of lust and, simultaneously, makes clear the speaker's great strength of will that overcomes such momentary madness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "being," "born"
- **Line 2:** "needs," "notions," "kind"
- **Line 3:** "propinquity," "find"
- **Line 4:** "person," "fair," "feel," "certain," "zest"
- **Line 5:** "To," "bear," "body's," "weight," "breast"
- **Line 6:** "So," "subtly," "fume," "life"
- **Line 7:** "clarify," "pulse," "cloud," "mind"
- **Line 8:** "once," "again," "undone"
- **Line 9:** "Think," "this," "treason"
- **Line 10:** "stout," "blood," "against," "staggering," "brain"
- **Line 11:** "season"
- **Line 12:** "My," "scorn," "pity," "let," "me," "make," "plain"
- **Line 13:** "find," "this," "frenzy," "insufficient," "reason"
- **Line 14:** "conversation," "when," "we," "again"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears frequently throughout "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed," enhancing the beauty and lyricism of the poem's language while also evoking the experiences and emotions being described. The poem is quite musical thanks to its use of sonic devices like assonance and consonance in addition to a steady rhyme scheme. This keeps the one feeling light and cheeky, rather than overly intense.

In line 5, the speaker describes her desire to feel this other person's "body's weight upon [her] breast." The assonance of drawn out and moaning /aw/ sounds in "body's" and "upon" mirrors the speaker's lustful fantasy. The assonance thus subtly draws attention to the speaker's sexuality.

In line 12, the speaker declares her "scorn" or contempt for the other person, despite her lust. The alliteration of short, staccato /ih/ sounds in "with," "pity," and "it" reflects the speaker's shortness and disdain with the other person. The alliteration of short /i/ sounds continues on in line 13 with "this" and "insufficient," extending the effect.

Indeed, as the speaker goes on to describe in line 13 and 14, her overwhelming lust is not enough to even warrant talking to this other individual, let alone feel affection. The use of long /ee/ sounds in "we" and "meet" in the last line of the poem draws attention to the musicality of the words and also the importance of the speaker's declaration. After all, the sonnet concludes on a surprising declaration of hatred, rather than the more conventional declaration of the speaker's love or devotion.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my," "kind"
- **Line 3:** "urged," "by," "your," "find"
- **Line 4:** "person," "fair," "certain"
- **Line 5:** "bear," "body's," "upon"
- **Line 6:** "life," "designed"
- **Line 7:** "clarify," "mind"
- **Line 8:** "leave," "me," "once," "undone"
- **Line 12:** "with," "pity," "me," "make," "it," "plain"
- **Line 13:** "I," "find," "this," "frenzy," "insufficient," "reason"
- **Line 14:** "we," "meet"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification appears in lines 9-10. Millay uses personification to enhance the imagery of the poem and increase the dramatic tension of the line.

In line 8, the speaker admits that she is "possessed" by lust. The speaker therefore feels as though she is taken over by her desire for this other individual. The speaker then goes on to describe the effects of that lust within her. Lust, she explains in line 9-10, creates a "poor treason" of her "stout blood against [her] staggering brain."

Treason is an act of betrayal and disloyalty. The speaker therefore personifies her "blood" as rebelling against her "brain," or reasoning. In doing so, the speaker implies that her passions should normally be subordinate to and obey her reasoning. The influence of her overwhelming lust, however, incites her blood to commit treason. Personification gives the speaker's blood a will of its own, emphasizing that the speaker *does not want* to feel these lustful desires that are a betrayal of her rational mind. Lust, the personification illustrates, often has nothing to do with rational thinking.

Moreover, in the conflict between the speaker's passions and reasoning, her passions appear to be winning. After all, her blood is personified as "stout," or strong and vigorous, while her brain is "staggering," or unsteady and weak. The personification, therefore, also heightens the dramatic tension and suspense in the conflict between passion and reason.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,"

METAPHOR

Apart from the personification in lines 9-10, there is one metaphor in "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." In line 6, the speaker describes the effects of lust upon the body. Using a metaphor, the speaker compares lust to "the fume of life." A "fume" is smoke or vapor, usually one with a strong odor. Therefore, the presence of fumes are difficult to ignore. Moreover, vapors are difficult to contain, as they spread quickly through the air. The implication is that lust is also difficult to contain as the feeling seems to spread throughout the speaker's body.

The metaphor in line 6 also suggests that lust is a natural experience. Lust, after all, is a product "of life." Moreover, lust has been "[s]o subtly" "designed," presumably by God, to purposefully "clarify the pulse and cloud the mind." The speaker thus continues the metaphor of comparing lust to smoke in line 7, creating an extended metaphor in which lust is a smoke inhaled like a drug by individuals. Once inhaled, this smoke intensifies one's heartbeat and passions, while weakening one's "mind" and reasoning. This effect is an intended one, however, built into God's "design[]" of lust. Therefore, lust is not a shameful feeling, but rather a natural experience.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "So subtly is the fume of life designed, / To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton occurs once in "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." At the end of line 8, Millay uses asyndeton to reflect the speaker's state of mind and intensify her emotions.

In line 7, the speaker explains lust's ability to "clarify," or intensify, her "pulse," or physical excitement, while also "cloud[ing]," or weakening, her "mind." In line 8, the speaker definitely states that lust "leave[s] [her] once again undone, possessed." The speaker has thus experienced such lust before, and every time she has been left "undone" physically and mentally. Someone who is "undone" is someone who has lost their sense of composure or sense of self. Indeed, even more than feeling "undone," the speaker feels entirely "possessed" by her lust—completely taken over by it.

By omitting any conjunctions, the use of asyndeton in the phrase "undone, possessed" speeds up the reading of the line and reflects the speaker's physical and mental agitation. She has been through this before, and is again frustrated by her desires.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "undone, possessed"

ANTITHESIS

Antithesis occurs twice in "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed." Millay uses antithesis in order to enhance the dramatic tension and conflict between two opposing forces.

In lines 6-7, the speaker describes the effects of lust upon the body and mind. Using a metaphor, the speaker compares lust to a "fume" or smoke that is inhaled by individuals, almost like a drug. The speaker then uses antithesis to show how this "fume" has two vastly different effects upon the individual.

On one hand, lust "clarifi[es] the pulse." Here, to "clarify" means to intensify something—in this case, the speaker's "pulse" or physical excitement. Lust, therefore, intensifies the speaker's physical excitement.

On the other hand, lust "cloud[s] the mind." To "cloud" is to make something dull or weak—in this case, the speaker's "mind." Lust thus has the *opposite* effect on the speaker's rationality and, in fact, *dulls* her reasoning. The antithesis here heightens the dramatic tension between these opposing effects of lust—on the speaker's body versus her mind—and reflects the depths of the speaker's inner turmoil as she grapples with her unwanted desires.

In line 9-10, the speaker declares that lust has created a "poor treason" of her "stout blood against [her] staggering brain." "[T]reason" is an act of betrayal committed by a subordinate against a superior. Lust, the speaker explains, is an act of betrayal of her "blood," or passions, against her "brain," or reasoning. The use of antitheses in line 10 again sets up a contrast between these two opposing forces—passion versus reason—within the speaker.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "clarify the pulse and cloud the mind"
- **Line 10:** "my stout blood against my staggering brain"

VOCABULARY

Distressed (Line 1) - Upset or worried; feeling anxious or strained. The speaker (sarcastically) admits that she is upset by the various anxieties that all women supposedly experience.

Notions (Line 2) - Trivial ideas, usually ones without any rational basis.

Urged (Line 3) - Forcefully influenced or impelled. The speaker is influenced by the physical closeness between her and the object of her desire.

Propinquity (Line 3) - Nearness; intimacy. The speaker is physically close to the object of her desire.

Zest (Line 4) - Keen enjoyment or interest. The speaker feels very interested in enjoying the weight of the other person's body upon hers.

Fume (Line 6) - Smoke or vapor, particularly those which have a heavy odor. The speaker describes lust as the smoke of life which purposely clouds or fogs rational thinking.

Clarify (Line 7) - Make clear; enhance the purity of. Lust enhances and intensifies the speaker's bodily reactions and speeds up her heartbeat.

Treason (Line 9) - Betrayal; treachery; attempt to overthrow what one owes loyalty to. The speaker's lust betrays and tries to overthrow the speaker's reason.

Stout (Line 10) - Forceful; sturdy. The speaker's "blood," or lust, is vigorous and forceful.

Staggering (Line 10) - Unsteady; faltering. The speaker's reason falters against her passionate lust.

Season (Line 11) - Temper. The speaker's lust will not temper her hatred for the other person.

Scorn (Line 12) - Contempt; disdain. The speaker feels contempt for the person she desires.

Frenzy (Line 13) - Extreme agitation or excitement. The speaker's lust puts her in a state of extreme agitation and passion.

Insufficient (Line 13) - Not sufficient; inadequate. The speaker feels great contempt for the person she desires. Indeed, even the speaker's passionate lust will not provide enough of a reason for her to speak with the person.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is written in the form of an Italian sonnet. Italian sonnets are composed of 14 lines and are typically broken down into an 8-line octave, followed by a 6-line sestet:

- Octave
  - Quatrain
  - Quatrain
- Sestet
  - Tercet
  - Tercet

Traditionally, the octave presents the problem of the sonnet, while the sestet provides a resolution to that problem. Although "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is not broken up into separate octave and sestet stanzas, the poem's progression follows the traditional logic of these stanzas.

In the octave, the speaker's problem is not the traditional problem of unrequited love, but rather her overwhelming lust for another individual. This lust is so great as to affect the speaker's reason. In the sestet, however, the speaker resolves this problem by reaffirming her rationality and reason over her lust.

Sonnets were traditionally love poems, so Millay's use of the form here is important. She's following the conventions of the form while also subverting it by having her speaker be a sexually confident woman—a woman who insists she could never love her potential suitor, no less.

METER

"I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is a 14-line Italian sonnet. Traditionally, Italian sonnets are written in iambic pentameter—meaning there are five iambs, five feet with a da-DUM rhythm, per line. The poem follows this meter, but with some variations. Take, for example, the very first line of the poem:

I, be- | ing born | a wo- | man and | distressed

That first foot is actually a spondee (stressed-stressed) thanks to the initial "I." The speaker is subtly asserting herself right from the get go. For the most part, though, the first eight lines—the sonnet's octave—are a pretty steady iambic pentameter.

The beginning of the sestet, however, is also marked by a deviation in meter that reflects the sudden change in content and tone. Indeed, lines 9, 10, 11, and 13 all contain 11 syllables, rather than the 10 syllables of iambic pentameter. Here are lines 9-11:

Think not | for this, | howe- | ver, the | poor treason
Of my | stout blood | against | my stag- | gering brain,
I shall | remem- | ber you | with love, | or season

Some variations here are especially striking. The loud spondee of "stout blood," for example, reflects the strength of the speaker's passion. Overall, the break in the iambic rhythm here reflects the poem's content, the unsteady meter mirroring the "staggering" nature of the speaker's "brain," or reason.

RHYME SCHEME

"I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" follows the rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet:

ABBAABBACDCDCD

Millay never strays from this rigid rhyme scheme, keeping the poem squarely within the confines of its traditional form. The poem is, in part, about the speaker's self-possession and ability to control herself, and Millay here flexes her own muscles as a poet by perfectly following the form she's chosen—even as she subverts conventional depictions of women's sexuality in

traditional sonnets.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is an anonymous woman. The speaker could be the poet herself, but that is by no means definite.

Nevertheless, the speaker is well aware of society's ideas regarding the supposed irrationality of her "kind" (that is, women). In the opening of the poem, the speaker seems to, albeit cheekily, admit to suffering from silly ideas and desires like every other woman.

She is totally overwhelmed by her lust for another individual, to the point that her desires threaten to overtake her reason. However, the speaker's passionate lust still cannot quell her contempt for this other person. Indeed, the speaker's reason and strength of will still prevail over her lust; she refuses to even speak to the other person when they meet next.

Therefore, by the end of the poem, the speaker makes clear that she, and—by implication—other women, are not the weak, irrational creatures that society believes they are. On the contrary, women can maintain their composure even when "possessed" by lust.

SETTING

The setting of "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" is open-ended. Millay gives no indication whether the poem is set inside or outside a dwelling, or even the whereabouts of the speaker's particular geographical location. There are also no indications on whether the poem is set during a particular time period. What is clear, however, is that the speaker is physically present in the setting, along with the person she desires. Moreover, the speaker is close enough to directly address this other person. Indeed, the physical closeness of the other person increases the speaker's feelings of attraction and lust.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Millay published "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" in her poetry collection *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems* in 1923. The 1920s were a time of exciting cultural and artistic upheaval in the U.S., with writers often mixing modern themes and subjects with more conventional forms (such as the sonnet, which Millay turns to here).

While the aforementioned collection was published relatively early in Millay's long and decorated career, "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" exhibits much of the style and thematic interests that would go on to define Millay's writing. Like much of her work, "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" challenges and subverts societal stereotypes surrounding women, particularly regarding their sexuality. Millay frankly explored women's inner lives and desires in her work without hesitation or shame.

Despite its subversive topics and themes, "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed," as noted above, is written in the very classic style of an Italian (sometimes called Petrarchan) sonnet—a form developed during the Renaissance. Sonnets, traditionally, were love poems; they also classically were written from the perspective of a male lover—two expectations Millay expertly undermines here. Indeed, Millay gained a reputation for writing formidable sonnets, and many of her most well-known poems, such as "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" and "Love is Not All," are also sonnets.

Millay's turn to classic poetic forms contrasted with much of the more experimental modernist poetry of her time, from the likes of people like T.S. Eliot. Millay was renowned for her work, however, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1923, America was in the midst of the "Roaring Twenties," a decade defined by economic prosperity and vast cultural changes. The 19th amendment, which granted women the right to vote, had been ratified just a few years earlier in 1920. Additionally, the wider use 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.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Italian Sonnets — Learn more about the form Millay uses in this poem: the Italian, a.k.a. Petrarchan, sonnet. (https://www.masterclass.com/articles/poetry-101-what-is-a-petrarchan-sonnet-learn-about-petrarchan-sonnets-with-examples)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDFdz7JV8Jk)
- The Poem to Music — Listen to the poem sung aloud in this musical adaptation. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2MQOhIq7h0)

- Millay at Steepletop — Watch the trailer for the documentary "Millay at Steepletop." (https://youtu.be/ZCDTvXKujUk)
- Photographing the Poet — Watch a lecture on photographic representations of Millay and the poet's relationship with her public image. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEYAzKyeTII)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY POEMS

- The Buck in the Snow
- What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why (Sonnet 43)

HOW TO CITE

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