

Recuerdo



POEM TEXT

- 1 We were very tired, we were very merry—
- 2 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
- 3 It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—
- 4 But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
- 5 We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;
- 6 And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

- 7 We were very tired, we were very merry—
- 8 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;
- 9 And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,
- 10 From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;
- 11 And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
- 12 And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

- 13 We were very tired, we were very merry,
- 14 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
- 15 We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,
- 16 And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;
- 17 And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,
- 18 And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

fruit, along with the rest of our money—except for what we needed to get home on the train.



THEMES



THE BEAUTY AND POWER OF COMPANIONSHIP

"Recuerdo" testifies to the transformative power and beauty of companionship. According to poetry legend, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote the poem after a night spent riding New York's Staten Island Ferry with a friend. Whether this story is true or not, the poem's speaker clearly looks back on a fun and frivolous evening spent with a companion as something special and, as the title suggests, worthy of remembering ("recuerdo" is Spanish for "I remember" or "memory"). Being with the right person, the poem implies, can suffuse everyday life with a special kind of magic.

The poem describes two friends (or maybe lovers) going "back and forth all night on the ferry." The speaker recalls "look[ing] into a fire," leaning "across a table," and lying on a hill looking up at the moon. In short, it seems like a pretty low-key evening where not much happens. They have nowhere in particular to go, it seems, and perhaps don't have much money to spend. Indeed, this is no glamorous cruise ship: the ferry smells "like a stable" and the air is "cold."

Yet none of this matters to the speaker, who repeatedly declares that they are "very merry," or happy. The speaker and their friend are having such a delightful time, in fact, that they stay up till dawn, suggesting that time flies when you spend it with the right person. In describing the sunrise as a "bucketful of gold," the speaker also implies that this shared experience—watching the sun come up with a person you care for—is something precious. The poem thus stresses that it's not *what* you do but *who* you're with that matters. The simple fact of being together has made the speaker happy and made this adventure meaningful.

Upon returning to land, the speaker and their companion buy a "morning paper" that neither of them reads, suggesting that the drab events of real life are no match for the intoxicating joy of good company. Their shared happiness also seems to make them feel generous towards others: they give their leftover fruit, and most of their money, to a "shawl-covered" woman who blesses them in turn. In other words, they pay their happiness forward. Companionship, the poem implies, makes the world a better place.



SUMMARY

We were exhausted but very happy. We spent the whole night riding the ferry back and forth from the port; it was unfussy, brightly lit, and smelled of horses. You and I stared into a fire and sat close together at a table. Later, we lay on top of a hill and looked at the moon. The ferry blew its whistle over and over again, and soon enough it was early morning.

We were exhausted but very happy. We spent the whole night riding the ferry back and forth from the port, eating some of the fruit that we'd bought earlier in the evening. The sky turned gray, a cold wind blew, and then the sun rose from the water looking like a whole bucket filled with gold.

We were exhausted but very happy. We spent the whole night riding the ferry back and forth from the port. Then we said good morning to an old woman wearing a scarf around her head and bought a newspaper that we didn't read. The old woman tearfully thanked us when we gave her the rest of our

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

**LOVE VS. MATERIAL WEALTH**

"Recuerdo" suggests that you don't need riches to be happy. The speaker and their companion have a wonderful evening—and morning—and hardly spend a cent. In fact, they seem to revel in rejecting material comforts and giving away what little money they *do* have. Whether it's love, friendship, appreciating nature, or just being alive and venturing out into the world, the best things in life, the poem suggests, are free.

The speaker and their companion set out on a cheap date, and there's nothing fancy about their night out. They take public transportation that smells "like a stable" (there might even be some horses on board), and they're not taking it to *get anywhere*. The boat is just a place to hang out, it seems, and that's all they really need. When they eventually get off the ferry, they're perfectly content to lie on a hill looking at the moon until dawn. No one charges admission for sky-gazing!

The poem repeatedly calls attention to the fact that the couple is on a simple, unpretentious adventure. And though the night doesn't sound like (or cost) much on paper, the speaker and their companion still clearly have a great time together. They enjoy *their* kind of luxury, one that doesn't depend on money or consumerism. They're happy simply to be together; their date is about the company, not the activity. That's why they go "back and forth all night," prolonging their happiness even though they're "very tired." That's also why the poem describes the dawn in such affectionate terms. The sun rises "dripping," looking like a "bucketful of gold"—a kind of wealth that has nothing to do with actual money. It signals the richness of the couple's experiences, the value of time spent with each other and in appreciation of the natural world.

Even though the couple probably doesn't have much money, this spiritual richness makes them generous toward others. As morning breaks, they give what they have left to a "shawl-covered" woman, whose gratitude suggests that she's poor and hungry. They also give her their remaining "apples and pears," their only expenditure besides the ferry rides, and keep just enough money to get home on the subway. The night becomes one to remember ("recuerdo"), but not because of any lavish indulgence. All the couple needed, really, was each other; the rest is immaterial.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

**LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS****LINES 1-3**

*We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—*

The poem's title, "Recuerdo," means "memory" or "I remember" in Spanish. Right away, then, readers might get the sense that this is going to be a poem about an important moment in the speaker's life, one that they want to hold onto.

The poem was supposedly based on a night Edna St. Vincent Millay spent with Salomón de la Selva, a Nicaraguan poet and friend, during which they rode back and forth on New York's Staten Island ferry in New York. Readers don't need to know this context to understand these opening lines, however, which describe the speaker and a companion happily riding a "ferry" to and from its port "all night."

This might not seem like the most enjoyable way to spend an evening, especially given that the ferry "smelled like a stable." Indeed, the speaker makes it clear that this is no fancy cruise liner; the ferry is "bare and bright," free from cozy decoration or soft lighting. The bold [alliteration](#) of "bare and bright" and the hissing [sibilance](#) of "smelled" and "stable" call readers' attention to just how physically unpleasant the onboard experience must be.

Most people taking the ferry would, quite reasonably, have just been trying to get to the other side. For the speaker and their friend, however, the night is about the journey more than the destination—and the journey is just a way for them to spend more time together. It sounds like the kind of thing broke students or artists might do to pass the time.

The speaker and their companion are thus perfectly content, "very tired" but also "very merry." The [anaphora](#) of "we were very" adds a kind of sing-song rhythm to the moment, establishing an atmosphere of carefree joy. The same is true of the musical [internal rhyme](#) between "very" and "merry." Line 2 then once again begins with "we," another example of anaphora.

The abundance of "we"s in the poem is no accident: this is a poem about the beauty and power of companionship, so it makes sense that the speaker repeatedly points out that they're part of a "we." That "we" foregrounds the reason *why* the speaker remembers that night fondly: who it was spent with. Even the poem's *form* echoes the importance of companionship: "Recuerdo" consists of rhyming [couplets](#)—rhymed *pairs*—from start to finish.

LINES 4-6

*But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.*

This ferry might have been smelly and austere-looking, but the speaker clearly didn't let that detract from their evening. The setting wasn't nearly as important as the company, it seems, and the speaker was able to find beauty and comfort within their mundane surroundings.

That "But" at the start of line 4 signals a little shift toward activities that sound more conventionally romantic than taking a ferry: looking into a fire, leaning in close across a table—it sounds like the two companions were getting on very well! That fire suggests *emotional* warmth and passion, while the leaning-in suggests two people literally and [metaphorically](#) trying to get closer.

It seems the speaker and their friend (or, maybe, lover) did get off the ferry at one point in order to loll about "on a hill-top" and gaze up at the sky. It doesn't get much more romantic than lying together on the ground staring up at the moon—an activity that, not incidentally, doesn't come with an admission charge. It's clear that the speaker and their companion don't need much to be happy, apart from each other. The speaker delights in both an earthly/mundane part of life (the ferry) and something more traditionally beautiful and magical (the moon). It's their affection for their companion, the poem implies, that makes the world such an enchanting place—and which transformed the night into a cherished memory.

The sounds of these lines help to convey the speaker's joy. The [anaphora](#) and [alliteration](#) of "we looked," "we leaned," "we lay" link these three experiences together, placing them in the same memorable category in the speaker's mind. Note that these phrases are also an example of both [asyndeton](#) and [parataxis](#). The quick statements and lack of any coordinating conjunctions portray the evening as a kind of continuous, breathless rush of experience.

Before long, the sun started to rise. Perhaps the speaker and their companion were so enraptured with one another that they lost track of time! The "whistles" in line 6 probably signal the departure/arrival of the ferry. So the fact that the whistles "kept blowing" shows both how much time went by *and* how quickly it seemed to pass. In short, the poem shows how time flies when it's spent with the right person.

LINES 7-10

*We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;
And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,
From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;*

The second stanza opens with the same two lines as the first, creating a [refrain](#). It's as though [repeating](#) the basic facts of the evening helps the speaker hold onto the memory. The repetitiveness of the poem's structure also mirrors the repeated "back and forth" journeys on the ferry, as though the poem itself keeps setting sail and then returning to the same departure port.

Next, the speaker recalls eating some fruit. This sounds like a trivial detail, but that's part of the point: little moments can become charged with significance or forever lodged in one's memory. Notice the [parallelism](#) of these lines as well: both phrases start with "and," followed by a pronoun, the verb "ate," and the specific fruit:

And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,

Each half of the line mirrors the other. The two phrases, like the speaker and their companion, come as a pair.

The speaker doesn't remember precisely *where* they bought the apples and pears. This is the kind of detail that might escape someone whose memory is more focused on *who* they spent the night with, rather than *what* exactly happened. It's easy to imagine the couple buying their fruit, half-distracted by some joke they were sharing—and later totally forgetting where they purchased it.

LINES 11-12

*And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.*

The speaker abruptly shifts gears here, moving from a line about something relatively mundane (how much fruit they bought) to a lyrical description of the sunrise. The sky "went wan," the speaker says, meaning it grew pale and gray, and a cold wind blew.

These grim, gray conditions just before dawn make the sun's arrival doubly spectacular. The speaker then describes the sun itself using [metaphor](#): it seemed to "drip," presumably because it looked like it was emerging from the water. That "drip" also suggests that the sun, a metaphorical "bucketful of gold," was overflowing its container, spilling bright and brilliant light across the landscape. The [imagery](#) of "a bucketful of gold" further depicts the sunrise as a kind of precious treasure in its own right. The speaker and their companion don't need to spend a fortune to have an exciting and memorable time together. The best things in life—like watching the sun come up with a friend—are worth their weight in gold.

The sounds of these lines enhance their imagery. The soft /w/ [alliteration](#) "went want" and "wind" creates a kind of reverent hush, while the crisper alliteration of "came cold" might call to mind chattering teeth. These lines also feature [anaphora](#):

*And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.*

The poem's cadence here sounds almost biblical, elevating this sunrise to epic status.

LINES 13-18

We were very tired, we were very merry,

*We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,
And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;
And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,
And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.*

In the poem's third and final [sestet](#), the speaker relays what happened at the end of the night. The speaker and their friend stayed out so long, in fact, that the night was over; they return home the next morning!

On the way, the speaker remembers coming across a "shawl-covered head." This is an example of [synecdoche](#): there's a woman attached to that head, though perhaps the speaker and their companion couldn't see the woman's full body because she was working behind a newspaper stand. The couple cheerfully greeted the woman, who readers might guess was quite old and poor (based on that shawl and the fact that she was out near a ferry port so early in the morning).

The speaker and their friend were in a great mood because of the evening they'd spent together, and this joy spilled over into their interactions with others. The speaker bought a newspaper (presumably from this woman), but they didn't actually read it. This might indicate that they bought it simply to support the woman rather than to catch up on the news. That newspaper represents everyday reality—the real world to which the speaker presumably had to return. That it went unread might [symbolize](#) the speaker's rejection of the normal world, with all its rules and responsibilities.

The speaker and their companion then gave the woman the rest of their fruit and money, saving just enough for the subway ride home. The speaker's joy had apparently made them generous. Despite not seeming to have much in the way of material wealth themselves, they freely shared what they had with a stranger. In short, they spread the love, bringing a smile to the face of the newspaper seller. The woman wept and blessed them for their gesture, demonstrating the transformative effects of a simple act of charity.



SYMBOLS



THE NEWSPAPER

After staying up all night, the speaker and their companion buy a newspaper that they never bother to read. This [symbolizes](#) their rejection of the humdrum reality of everyday life, something that the speaker doesn't want to intrude on their enchanted night (and morning) out. With its articles on politics and the economy, its advertisements, and so on, the newspaper is a symbol of the world that exists beyond the bubble of happiness that surrounds the speaker and their companion. The paper also gets published each morning like

clockwork, a signal that another ordinary day has begun. The fact that the speaker and their companion don't read the newspaper implies that they don't yet want to let go of the previous evening's magic.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head, / And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;"



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) fills the poem with bright, happy music that evokes the speaker's joy. It also brings scenes from the speaker's evening to vivid life on the page.

For example, the bold /b/ sounds of "bare and bright" call readers' attention to the ferry's austereness; this isn't a lush, cozy boat but rather something utilitarian and starkly lit. The ship "smelled like a stable," the speaker continues, the hissing [sibilance](#) perhaps conveying the speaker's disgust.

The alliteration in lines 4 and 5 is gentler. Listen to the delicate /l/ sounds here:

But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;

These soft sounds suggest the sweet beauty of the evening, something that persists despite the speaker's stark surroundings. Alliteration also makes the lines more memorable, helping the poem linger in the reader's ear just as the scene lingers in the speaker's mind. The [parallelism](#) and [anaphora](#) of the lines add to the effect: the speaker says "we did this, we did that," creating a soothing, predictable rhythm.

The alliteration of lines 11-12 again enhances the poem's [imagery](#):

And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,

Those quiet /w/ sounds might suggest a quiet reverence on the speaker's part as the inky blackness of night gives way to the gray of the dawn, while the crisp sounds of "came cold" evokes the sharp chill of the wind.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We were," "we were"
- **Line 3:** "bare," "bright," "smelled," "stable"
- **Line 4:** "looked," "leaned"
- **Line 5:** "lay"

- **Line 7:** "We were," "we were"
- **Line 11:** "went wan," "wind," "came cold"
- **Line 13:** "We were," "we were"
- **Line 15:** "morrow, mother"

METAPHOR

There are a few moments of figurative language in "Recuerdo," which add intensity to the poem's images. The first figurative piece of language in the poem is a [simile](#) (by some definitions, a specific type of [metaphor](#)). The speaker recalls how the ferry "smelled like a stable," by which they mean it stank! There may even have been real-life horses on board, given that the poem was written in 1920. Of course, the speaker and their companion didn't mind. They could have been in an actual stable for all they cared; all they *really* needed was each other.

The speaker later turns to a metaphor when describing the sunrise:

And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

Of course, the sun doesn't typically *drip* when it rises. The metaphor here implies that the sun, rising over the sea, looked like it was emerging from the water. The word "dripping" might also evoke the way the sunlight fell across and brightened the landscape, overflowing its "bucket."

In calling the sun a "bucketful of gold," the speaker further conveys both the beauty of the sun's light and the preciousness of this experience. That is, the sunrise becomes a kind of treasure, something worth more than any literal "bucketful of good." Watching the sunrise with a friend, the metaphor implies, is priceless.

On their way home, the speaker and their companion encounter a "shawl-covered head." This head belongs to a newspaper seller who, of course, has a body too. This [synecdoche](#)—using a part to refer to a whole—captures the way in which the couple themselves encountered the woman. This brief, impressionistic detail evokes the fleeting but impactful nature of the encounter.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "smelled like a stable"
- **Line 12:** "And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold"
- **Line 15:** "a shawl-covered head"

REFRAIN

All three stanzas in "Recuerdo" start with the same two lines:

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

This creates a [refrain](#), which works like a kind of framing device in the poem. Each stanza begins by restating the basic facts of this memorable night: the speaker and their companion were exhausted but ecstatic, and they spent most of their night riding on a ferry. While there's nothing particularly intriguing about riding a ferry back and forth all night, the fact that the poem repeats this fact over and over again imbues it with importance. This mundane evening became something special to the speaker. Repeating this refrain makes it more memorable, more likely to stick in readers' minds. It turns the event into a "recuerdo."

The refrain also subtly mimics the events of the evening themselves: the poem seems to go "back and forth" just like the ferry itself.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "We were very tired, we were very merry— / We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry."
- **Lines 7-8:** "We were very tired, we were very merry— / We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "We were very tired, we were very merry, / We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry."

REPETITION

"Recuerdo" uses lots of [repetition](#), which makes sense: the poem is like a keepsake of a delightful night that the speaker doesn't want to forget, and repeating things makes them easier to remember.

Apart from the poem's [refrain](#), this repetition generally falls under the category of [parallelism](#). More specifically, it's mostly [anaphora](#) and [polysyndeton](#) (which can overlap with anaphora). Take the refrain itself. Each of its three phrases begins with "we" and two with "we were very":

We were very tired, we were very merry
We had gone [...]

The anaphora of the word "we" calls readers' attention to a very important part of the poem: the fact that the speaker is not alone. They are going on this journey with a friend or lover, and this companionship is what imbues the mundane evening with magic. More broadly, the repetition lends the poem a soothing, predictable rhythm, contributing to its cheerful tone. There's more anaphora of the word "we" in lines 4-5:

But **we** looked into a fire, **we** leaned across a table,
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;

The /l/ [alliteration](#) of the words following those "we"s ("looked," "leaned," "lay") links the phrases together, making them all seem like parts of a seamless whole.

The poem also begins many lines and phrases with the word "and." Take lines 11-12:

And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

These lines are an example of both anaphora and polysyndeton. Here and elsewhere, the repetition of "and" creates a piling-up effect. The poem's language conveys the speaker's overflowing excitement. Think of an excited child telling a story: "*This happened, and then this happened, and then this happened!*"

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We were very," "we were very"
- **Line 2:** "We"
- **Line 4:** "we," "we"
- **Line 5:** "We"
- **Line 6:** "And," "and"
- **Line 7:** "We were very," "we were very"
- **Line 8:** "We"
- **Line 9:** "And," "and"
- **Line 11:** "And," "and"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "We were very," "we were very"
- **Line 14:** "We"
- **Line 15:** "We"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "And"

PARATAXIS

The poem is filled with [parataxis](#). The speaker relays the details of the evening in crisp, clear statements, for the most part, which might be rearranged without altering their meaning. Some of this parataxis is [asyndetic](#): it doesn't contain any conjunctions, as in the poem's [refrain](#):

We were very tired, we were very merry—

The speaker sounds quite straightforward and to-the-point here; they're simply stating the facts. The parataxis of lines 4-5 works similarly: "we leaned across a table, / We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon."

The parataxis of lines 11-12 is also an example of [polysyndeton](#), thanks to the repeated word "and":

And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, [...]

Altogether, the poem's use of parataxis lends the poem a clear, no-nonsense tone. It gives the poem a list-like effect at times, reflecting that each detail is one element of an evening that,

taken as a whole, holds great significance for the speaker. Parataxis makes the speaker sound like an objective observer; this is just how the evening went, they seem to say, and that's enough for them. They want to remember the evening exactly as it was.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We were very tired, we were very merry—"
- **Lines 4-6:** "we leaned across a table, / We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon; / And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon."
- **Line 7:** "We were very tired, we were very merry—"
- **Line 9:** "And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold, / And the sun rose dripping"
- **Line 13:** "We were very tired, we were very merry,"



VOCABULARY

Merry (Line 1, Line 7, Line 13) - Happy.

Stable (Line 3) - A building where horses are kept.

Wan (Line 11) - Pale and gray.

Morrow (Line 15) - Morning.

Shawl (Line 15) - A scarf.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Recuerdo" contains three six-line stanzas, a.k.a. [sestets](#). Each stanza can be broken down further into three rhyming [couplets](#). A couplet, of course, is a kind of tight-knit twosome—just like the speaker and their companion.

Note that each stanza also begins with the same two lines:

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

This [refrain](#) establishes the basic facts of the evening in question, and it also subtly mirrors the speaker's "back and forth" ferry journeys; the poem, like the speaker, keeps returning to its starting point.

METER

"Recuerdo" uses [meter](#), but it's quite irregular. Line 1 is trochaic hexameter: a line of six [trochees](#), poetic feet following a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern:

We were | very | tired, | we were | very | merry—

Line 2 is a bit more irregular. The stresses are still front-loaded, and there are still 12 syllables, but there are some [dactyls](#) (stressed-unstressed-unstressed) tossed in:

We had | gone back and | forth all | night on the |
ferry.

The rhythm feels propulsive and exciting, and the relatively steady meter makes the poem's [refrain](#) easier to remember. Things get much less regular after these lines, however. Line 3 keeps up the use of trochees with a rogue dactyl tossed in (one might scan this as a line of trochaic pentameter, meaning there are five trochees,):

It was | bare and | bright, and | smelled like a |
stable—

But things get more ambiguous as readers get deeper into the poem. Compare line 3 to line 9, which swaps the falling rhythm of trochees for the rising rhythms of [iambes](#) (da-DUM) and [anapests](#) (da-da-DUM):

And you | ate an ap- | ple, and I | ate a pear,

The fact that the meter never fully settles keeps the poem feeling loose and unpredictable. The poem is rhythmic but not rigid or strict, reflecting the carefree attitude of the speaker and their companion.

RHYME SCHEME

"Recuerdo" uses rhyming [couplets](#) all the way through, meaning that its [rhyme scheme](#) follows the pattern AABCC AADDEE and so on. The quick, perfect rhymes fill the poem with constant music, adding to its joyful, lighthearted tone. The poem simply sounds playful, as if the speaker is having fun remembering what happened. Couplets are also rhyming *pairs*, making them a perfect form for a poem about the joys of companionship.



SPEAKER

Edna St. Millay reportedly based "Recuerdo" on a night spent riding New York's Staten Island Ferry with her friend and fellow poet Salomón de la Selva. As such, it's reasonable to treat the speaker as a version of Millay.

Readers don't have to interpret the speaker as Millay to understand the poem, however, given that "Recuerdo" never offers up any specific details about this speaker's age, gender, etc. All readers really know is that this person had a wonderful time riding a ferry back and forth all night with a friend or lover.

The speaker doesn't seem to be well off, or at least not particularly concerned with material wealth; if they were rich,

they probably wouldn't spend their evening on a smelly ferry or ride the subway home the next morning. Despite not having much, the speaker comes across as generous and carefree, delighting in time spent with their companion, the beauty of nature, and the simple pleasures of fresh fruit. To this speaker, good company is a treasure in itself.



SETTING

Though the poem itself takes place in the speaker's present, the evening it describes takes place in the past—hence the poem's title: "recuerdo" is Spanish for "I remember" or "memory." There's no indication how long ago this evening happened; it could have been last night, or it could have been decades ago. Either way, the memory of the evening has stuck with the speaker.

On its face, this doesn't sound like a particularly eventual night: the speaker and their companion simply rode the ferry back and forth. The speaker makes it clear that this was no glamorous cruise ship: it "smelled like a stable" and wasn't particularly nice to look at (it was "bare and bright"). By calling attention to just how ordinary the ferry was, the poem underscores the power of companionship: the speaker and their friend still had a great time because they had each other for company.



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.

"Recuerdo" appears as the third 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 "[First Fig](#)," "[Midnight Oil](#)" and "[Grown-up](#)," which, like "Recuerdo," reject the idea of being overly sensible (and, in particular, of going to bed early). Indeed, the speaker of "First Fig" states that they burn life's metaphorical candle at both ends—which "Recuerdo"

then demonstrates! The poem was probably written about a night spent riding New York's Staten Island Ferry with a poet friend, Salomón de la Selva. (He was Nicaraguan, which might explain the use of Spanish in the title.)

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 "Reuerdo" 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 Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of the poem brought via the Millay society. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQ-dV2JZvwE>)
- ["The Staten Island Ferry: NYC's Famous Best-Kept Secret"](#) — Learn more about the ferry that allegedly inspired Millay's poem. (<https://www.exp1.com/blog/new-yorks-most-famous-ferry/>)
- [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

- [First Fig](#)
- [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

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MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Millay's Biography](#) — Read more about Millay's life, courtesy of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society. (<https://millay.org/millays-life/>)