

I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed

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|----|--|---|
| 1 | I, being born a woman and distressed | A |
| 2 | By all the needs and notions of my kind, | B |
| 3 | Am urged by your propinquity to find | B |
| 4 | Your person fair, and feel a certain zest | A |
| 5 | To bear your body's weight upon my breast: | A |
| 6 | So subtly is the fume of life designed, | B |
| 7 | To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind, | B |
| 8 | And leave me once again undone, possessed. | A |
| 9 | Think not for this, however, the poor treason | C |
| 10 | Of my stout blood against my staggering brain, | D |
| 11 | I shall remember you with love, or season | C |
| 12 | My scorn with pity, -- let me make it plain: | D |
| 13 | I find this frenzy insufficient reason | C |
| 14 | For conversation when we meet again. | D |

Seasons come to pass questions

1. This poem is a sonnet, because it has:

- 14 lines
- Carefully structured rhyme scheme (abba, abba, cdcd, cd)
- Metre – (iambic pentameter?) rhythmic shape of a line of poetry, identified by the number of emphasized syllables.
- Divided into two sections:
 - Octave –describes the argument
 - Sestet – comment on the subject of the octave
- Last two lines state the speaker’s final message

What basic point is the speaker trying to make, and to who? Why is the use of the sonnet form particularly humorous here?

In this poem the speaker is bringing a message across to her ex-lover that even though she finds him physically attractive (“and feel a certain zest” line 4) this is only a superficial love affair (“frenzy” line 13) and that she does not want to see him again (... insufficient reason / *For conversation when we meet again* – lines 13, 14).

This poem is humorous, because the traditional sonnets were written by a man in order to woo a woman whereas this poem is written by a feminist in the traditional sonnet form, but is not a romantic love poem. The title of the poem “*I, being born a woman and distressed*” plays with sort of title generally provided to sonnets. In the octave she tells her lover that she is attracted to him and needs him physically, but the turning point comes in the sestet, where she tells him that, even though she is attracted to him she will not remember him with love or even pity him. In the rhyming couplet she breaks of the relationship and tells him that she does not want to speak to him again. The poem is humorous, because the title and the octave gives the reader the idea that the poem is a traditional sonnet, but in the sestet she turns the sonnet on his head by stating the opposite of what is expected of her.

2. Identify contrast

There is a contrast in the way the poet talks and behaves. Like many other sonnets *I, being born a woman and distressed* was written in the first person, but from a feminist viewpoint instead of a man’s. She is not the stereotypical woman; rather she behaves more like a man ordinarily would. Up until recently society expected women to not have a strong need for intimacy and not have her own opinions (line 2). In line 7 the poet ‘loses control’ over her desires (“To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind”) which were

more accepted of men than woman. She is bold (Think not for this – line 9) and states her mind clearly (*let me make it plain* – line 12). Stereotypically the man would be the one ending the relationship, but in this poem it is the woman who is ending the relationship on her own terms (line 13, 14).

Stereotypical woman	The poet
Does not have a need for intimacy Does not have own opinions	By all the <i>needs</i> and <i>notions</i> of my kind (line 2) 'I find this frenzy' line 13 is her own opinion
Weak	Bold
Normally a man tells a woman he does not want to see her again, not the other way around	insufficient reason For conversation (lines 13/14)
Normally men are betrayed by their body's urges, not women	the poor treason (line 9)
Normally the woman would pine and cry after the man ended the relationship	She ends the relationship on her own terms and does not even pity him

What is the tone of the poem?

The tone changes throughout the poem. In lines 3 and 4 the poet declares "Am urged by your propinquity to find / Your person fair" and in line 7 "To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind". In the octave the tone is lascivious, but also formal with the use of the word "propinquity" in line 3. In the sestet the tone changes to cold. The poet declares that he should not think that she will remember him with love.

What kind of language is used?

Is the language of the poem appropriate, or deliberately inappropriate?

How does the use of language and syntax (the arrangement of words in a sentence) compare with the topic (or argument) of the poem?

The language used in the poem is a formal Renaissance English, typical of a sonnet in the Shakespearian time. The language of the poem is deliberately inappropriate, because it is written in formal English. Up until only recently woman were not allowed to speak their mind or even have an opinion at all. They were simply there to look pretty, wear nice dresses and smile. So the poet uses the Renaissance type language to make a very bold statement from a woman's perspective against a man. If the poem was written in modern English and in free verse the message of clear defiance and

rebellion would not have come through as strong as it does.

In this poem the use of enjambment, or run on of the lines changes the meaning of the poem entirely. Enjambment is a technique in poetry whereby a sentence is carried over to the next line without pause. This technique is used to reinforce rhyme.

The topic/argument of the poem contradicts the language and syntax directly as the structure and language of the poem is that of a traditional sonnet, whereas the topic at hand is completely opposite. The topic of the poem is opposite to the traditional sonnet, because it is not the average 'love' poem written by a man. It was written by a woman, but is not a romantic poem at all, even though she finds him attractive she is not singing his praises, but instead telling him that she does not want to see him again.

3. How does the poet use the formal structure of the sonnet to emphasize her argument?

She has written this using the original rhyme scheme of Italian sonnets, not any of the many modern deviations. The subversion of tradition is enhanced when your attack is built on the foundations of said traditions. Traditional Italian sonnets were always written by men, to woo and bed women (or to boast about their successful conquest of a virginal woman) - like they were playing a game at times.

4. Is this an anti-love poem (Sidney)? In what way does it undermine the tradition?

In the middle ages it was not generally accepted for women to write poetry, therefore women often wrote poetry anonymously. This poem undermines the sonnet tradition in that it was written by a woman instead of a man. Often sonnets were love poems where the poet would sing the praises of his mistress and complement her features. *I, being born a woman and distressed* is not a love poem, the poet does not praise her lover's physical appearance. Instead she tells him that even though she finds him physically attractive and enjoyed the sexual encounters ("to find / Your person fair, and feel a certain zest lines 3,4) she does not want to see him again (lines 13,14) and will not remember him with love nor will she pity him (lines 11,12).

I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed

- 1| I, being born a woman and distressed / 2| By all the nneeds and notions of my kind,
- I/my – first person – self involved
 - Born – born a woman, but does not think and behave like a typical stereotype

- Distressed/ by all the needs and notions – she refuses to accept responsibility and says she cannot help what she says, does or feels, that it is the result of her nature as a woman
- Needs - Of necessity; necessarily; unavoidably: generally used with *must* (she needs love, physical intimacy and sex)
- Notions – she has her own opinions; A mental image or representation; an idea or conception; A fanciful impulse; a whim
Alliteration (needs/notions)
- Kind (sarcastic) – almost like a woman is a different species – womankind; kind also means ‘Of a friendly, generous, or warm-hearted nature’. Stereotypically woman are more friendly, generous and warm-hearted than men, therefore this is expected of them.

3| Am urged by your propinquity to find / 4| Your person fair,

- Urged – strong force/ feels attracted to him, yearns for his closeness
- Propinquity – nearness/closeness (formal, cold, distancing word)
- Fair – attractive; Of pleasing appearance; also free of favouritism or bias; impartial
- Alliteration (fair/ feel)

4| and feel a certain zest 5| To bear your body's weight upon my breast:

- Zest – Spirited enjoyment; enthusiasm/lust
- Bear – barely tolerate
- Weight – heavy emotional burden / Oppressiveness; pressure / Influence, importance, or authority; stereotype of a man
- Metaphor – this line has two meanings, 1) him on top of her during/after love making and 2) him being a burden to or suppressing her.
- Alliteration
- With the words you and your she shifts the blame to him.

6| So subtly is the fume of life designed,

- Alliteration
- Subtle – slight, difficult to detect
- Fume – essence; A state of resentment or vexation;
- Life designed – life ‘plan’
- she is commenting on what society considers the behaviour of a woman should be
- She is blaming “the fume of life design” for her

7| To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,

- Metaphors
- Clarify the pulse – makes her heart race, excites her
- Cloud the mind – she cannot think clearly
- Again she shifts the blame from herself, this time she says it is because she is excited and cannot think clearly

8| And leave me once again undone, possessed.

- Metaphor
- Undone – double meaning 1) literally naked, 2) figuratively emotionally vulnerable
- Possessed – ‘owned’ by him

9| Think **not** for this, however, the poor treason 10| Of my stout blood against my staggering brain, 11| I shall remember you with love,

- The pivot of the poem
- Marks the point of change in the tone
- Poor treason – her physical yearning for his body betrays her better thinking

- Stout blood – strong need/lust
- Staggering brain – struggling to think clear but still knows better
- Stout blood, staggering brain - **Alliteration**

11| or season 12| My scorn with pity,

- She will not remember him with love, not think back later in fondness of him
- (season my scorn with pity) – she will not pity him.
- Scorn - Contempt or disdain felt toward a person or object considered despicable or unworthy.

12| -- let me make it plain:

- Plain – Obvious to the mind; evident / simple
- strong word to make you take note of what she is about to say; this word marks the beginning of her conclusion, final word

13| I find this frenzy insufficient reason / 14| For conversation when we meet again.

- Frenzy – crazy, haphazard love affair; A state of violent mental agitation or wild excitement
- Insufficient - not enough; inadequate
- Straight talk, she is saying that the frenzy of physical passion does not mean that once they part she has any reason to talk to him again if they should meet. In essence she is telling him to get lost and never to bother her again.

Some of the interesting contrasting emotions in the poem:

- distressed
- urged
- zest
- fume
- undone, possessed
- scorn
- frenzy

Even though she is physically attracted to him (zest) she still feels contempt towards him (scorn).

Words that rhyme:

Distressed, zest, breast, possessed

Kind, find, designed, mind

Treason, season, reason

Brain, plain, again

AD KREUITER

Women are also not supposed to be sexual predators. They are supposed to be heart broken when a relationship ends and try everything they can to get it back, not be independent and say too bad. They are supposed to be passive receptacles with no will of their own. What Millay is doing is turning this entirely hypocritical masculine ideology on its head (no pun intended).

Men have a lost of self assessment to undertake as do women who seem to have forgotten the feminist attempt at a revolution, one Millay surely expresses.

(2013-04-15 09:40)

AD KREUITER

The use of the word 'fume' is wonderful. It could be seen to be both meanings that you provide. But think about what the poet is doing, surely with those meanings she is commenting on what society considers the behaviour of a woman should be - which is what you are doing as well.

If a man were to respond in a sonnet in the same manner, would you call it transgression?

Now think about it.

(2013-04-15 08:02)

C W MEIER

Hi Anzel

Propinquity is a very formal word, and perhaps given the time when the poem was written, it was considered appropriate. However, there is a coldness to it too - whenever you use formal language you are placing some distance between yourself and the person you are addressing; and obviously one would hardly associate language that was too formal with romance. This isn't to suggest that nobody ever romanced someone in formal language - this was only a few years after the Victorian era had come to an end.

The meaning of fume in the poem is linked to essence. You are correct to look at the various meanings or definitions of words, but you have to still consider those meanings within the context of how the word was used. She has said "the fume of life", so you can't stretch that into her being irritated by the life she was born into. Anger is an emotion, so you could possibly link it as "the emotion of life", and how this clouds the mind - because that is a theme that Dr Kreuiter has already mentioned.

she has felt physical passion which has at times overthrown her reason through the demands of the 'blood', basically animal desire

but you would need to elaborate on this. She is blaming the fume of life but I wouldn't call anything she has done a transgression.

The rhyme scheme is correct.

Christopher
(2013-04-14 18:05)

A ROUX


Hi Christopher
My response to your question, why I used cold unromantic.
'Propinquity' just sounds cold and harsh almost, if Millay was deeply in
love with this man, wouldn't she have used a warmer word like
nearness/closeness.?
"fume" ,in the poem it says 'essence', but fume also means
'irritable/angry' maybe she used it in reference to life itself, saying that
life is like a fume, (metaphor), that she is irritated with the life she is
born into, being a woman, that her life plan was so delicately planned
Or she is blaming the 'fume of life' for her transgressions.

Or am I talking nonsense?

Is the rhyme scheme- abba abba cdcddc?
Anzel (2013-04-14 17:41)

M M E LABUSCHAGNE

Hi Christopher
I agree with your interpretation, that's what I have as well.
I was trying to read line 6 in conjunction with line 5, but now that I read
with line 7&8 it makes a lot more sense.
A lot of the words have double meaning - weight = physically heavy /
emotional burden (line 5). Season – 1) she will remember him for a
short time/temporary, 2) to improve or enhance the flavour of
something (pity) / (season my scorn with pity) – enhance my contempt
for you with sympathy.
I also love the use of metaphors and alliteration.
I will email you my notes.

Elizabeth
(2013-04-12 08:09) 

C W MEIER

Hi Elizabeth

Is she not expressing two different feelings or opinions, about how she
is expected to behave and act in 'love' and how she really feels? I see
almost as in the opening lines she expresses how society expects her
to act in love - almost giving herself over to a man, because he is
attracted to her she must be attracted to him, and she must respond
with enthusiasm? Yet she feels this is a betrayal of herself - undone=
exposed, weak, vulnerable (defeated?); and possessed= not
herself, owned or controlled by someone or something?

Line 6 must be read in conjunction with line 7 & 8 to understand it fully

I am open to exploring this more, so please give your input too.
(2013-04-11 18:11)

M M E LABUSCHAGNE

I love the poem, I was supposed to work today, but decided on the sp

of the moment to study this poem instead. 😊

I only have one question. What does she mean with line 6: So subtly in the fume of life designed?

Something tells me to take note of the colon after breast (line 5), but I don't what to make of it. (2013-04-11 16:13) 🗑️

C W MEIER

A Roux

I'm not going to address all of your points, at least not today, but with regards punctuation:

Ask yourself the following

- What punctuation has been used?
- What is the usual function of this punctuation?
- Does the way it is used in the poem follow standard rules?

Dr Kreuiter used the term enjambment - we often make the mistake of reading lines in a poem as if they were each single units (a single clause or a single sentence), but sometimes a clause or sentence will be split over two lines, and not always a neat split. Millay does that just once in this poem, and her use of punctuation is key to picking these up sometimes.

Finally - for today - you use the term "cold, unromantic words"; why do you say these words are cold and unromantic?

This last question doesn't imply that your statement is right or wrong, just want to see you expand on your idea. It is something we have to become accustomed to doing in English Lit. - expanding on ideas and statements. If you say you find them cold and unromantic, you need to explain why you believe that.

I look forward to your response, and will address some of your other points tomorrow (unless Dr Kreuiter does so first).

Christopher

(2013-04-11 15:27)

A ROUX

Thank you for the information, it does help a lot, thank you for being so helpful, now once I know it is funny I understand it, but when I given a new poem I can't detect the tone and everything else without reading extra notes. This is tough, but hopefully once I've been through all the poems, I will understand better.

Just a quick question- In "I being a woman and distressed"

-what allusions are made?

-What kind of punctuation is employed?

-The language used? As Dr Kruiter said is Renaissance, I have also got that its objective and disinterested, the language reflects the changing situation and self-image of woman, She uses cold, unromantic words such as "propinquity" and "fume".

-Why is a particular mood being evoked? Is it because she is making point that women are not inferior to men, and that women can also wr

Metre

The rhythm or measure in verse and musical composition

iambic pentameter

A poetic meter consisting of a line with five feet in each of which the iamb is dominant.

about feelings of this kind, even in that time 1923? when female sexuality in poetry was extremely controversial?

- The metre- iambic pentameter? the "I" disrupts the sonnets iambic pentameter as it demands emphasis, this adds to the assertion of the woman's identity: that she will no longer be a stressed syllable?? -what is rhyme scheme in octave- ? the central couplet has me confused?

last one- is the theme Lascivious? (2013-04-11 12:37)

A GOBRIE

Dr Kreuiter, thank you for your advice...I am actually understanding it much more clearer now. It was all too overwhelming in the beginning but as you said, read and re-read. I have realised, that once we understand the figure of speech, and work out alliteration, assonance paradox, anaphora, etc...it's actually not that bad . Also, reading it out aloud, does help a lot, even with figuring out the tone. I am certainly not an expert, but after following Dr Kreuiter's advice, i have a much better understanding on how to analyse poetry. (2013-04-11 11:36)

AD KREUITER

You need to read and re-read the poem. Then you need to annotate looking for odd words, for punctuation for structuring devices such as rhythm and whether it is a sonnet and elegy, an epic etc. Once you have done this go through the poem line by line and ask yourself what the poetic voice trying to say and why.... this will help you determine the theme or more than one theme because no work has merely one.

The I, being a woman and distressed is a marvellously funny poem. It takes the sonnet tradition and turns it on its head. It is written from a woman's point of view but it is not romantic and she is not saying that she thinks her ex-lover is a wonderful person who has all those fantastical attributes presented by males who have written in the sonnet tradition to their mistresses.

The title is hilariously funny playing with sort of title generally provided in sonnets. Then the lines which acts as the whole pivot (the central or crucial factor) of the poem:

Pivot

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,

Enjambment

The continuation of a syntactic unit from one line or couplet of a poem to the next with no pause.

A technique in poetry whereby a sentence is carried over to the next line

Note the enjambment, or run on of the lines. This changes its sense entirely. What she is brilliantly saying in lovely renaissance language that she is telling her lover that though she has felt physical passion which has at times overthrown her reason through the demands of the 'blood', basically animal desire, on parting she will neither remember him with love, or in anyway feel pity for him, rather she will hold him in contempt/ scorn. This is really funny because it is always thought that

without pause.

the continuation of a syntactic unit from one line of verse into the next line without a pause

after an affair a woman will pine and cry and love forever. This poetic voice is saying something very different

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

Straight talk, she is saying that the frenzy of physical passion does not mean that once they part she has any reason to talk to him again if they should meet. In essence she is telling him to get lost and never to bother her again.

Surely in the ending of an affair this is normally the male line?

Now tell me this is not funny and also that the title hardly reflects the content of the poem.

(2013-04-11 06:08)

A ROUX

How do we know the theme of a poem if we dont know? (giggle)
What I mean is, in some of the poems the internet does not help with notes, and i am very bad at analysing a poem by myself, i tried to analyse "i, being a woman and distressed" and after i read the questions which asked why is it funny? i didnt find it humorous at all. The rain that is male, my grandmothers love letters, and in the shadow of signal hill, i cant find any relevant notes. any help? (2013-04-10 21:49)