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The Narrow Room : A Critical Study of the Sonnet Sequences of Edna St. Vincent Millay

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THE NARROW ROOM:

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE SONNET SEQUENCES

OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

BY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable as meeting the thesis requirements for this degree, but without implying that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The second decade of the twentieth century brought to American Literature a renaissance in poetry which affected not only the course of American letters but also the course of American culture as well. The beginning of this renaissance is marked by the publication of the Lyric Year in 1912[1] which purported to be a collection of new, fresh, and arresting poems by contemporary poets, both known and obscure. In this volume and into this renaissance appeared the teen-aged Edna St. Vincent Millay with her youthful "Renascence." Although the poem did not win a prize, over which there was an eruption of critical protest, readers "almost unanimously rated it the freshest, the most original, and certainly the best in the volume."[2] From this auspicious beginning Miss Millay's presence was to be felt in American letters for the next forty years.

Because she attained an almost instant and overwhelming success at age nineteen, Miss Millay became an anomaly in the poetic world. Thirty years later Winfield Townley Scott assessed the effects of this early acceptance on her later popular reputation:

> The truth is that Edna Millay's poetry has been damned with too much praise. If her work had bloomed quietly for twenty-five years in the nourishing privacy of a handful of devoted followers, there might be flourishing

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[1]Carl Van Doren, Many Minds (New York, 1924), p. 106.

[2]Miriam Gurko, Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1962), p. 46.

> now a widespread cult of happy admiration for at least a dozen fine poems that bear a personality at its best expression. . .; nevertheless, the praise became so extravagant that it assured a reaction which has begun to look like an almost equally extravagant, or faddish reaction.[3]

Differing from general popular reaction, literary critics tended to be a little less extravagant in their praise and more judicious in their criticism, and injected into their comments a more balanced appraisal of her work. They certainly were able to respond with an assessment of Miss Millay's work as seen within the framework of the rest of American Literature:

> Miss Millay is the best of the poets who are "popular". . .perhaps as good a combination as we can ever expect of the "literary" poet and the poet who is loyal to the "human interest" of the common reader. She can nearly always be cited for the virtues of clarity, firmness of outline, consistency of tone within the unit poem, and melodiousness. Her career has been one of dignity and poetic sincerity. She is an artist.[4]

At the height of her critical popularity Allen Tate could mention Miss Millay in the same critical breath with T. S. Eliot:

> More than any other living American poet, with the possible exception of T. S. Eliot, Miss Millay has puzzled her critics. Contrary to the conventional opinion, her poetry is not better understood than Eliot's, in spite of its greater simplicity, its more conventional meters and its closer fulfillment of the popular notion of poetic language. Her particular kind of excellence is beyond much dispute, but it is difficult to appraise. She is the most written about of living poets, but her critics are partisans. They like her too well or not enough. These views are

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[3]Winfield Townley Scott, "Millay Collected," Poetry, LXII (March, 1944), 334.

[4]John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York, 1938), p. 76.

> unfair; what is worse, they are misleading. Less interested readers of Miss Millay are tired of violent opinion. The more sceptical, embarrassed by her popularity in an age of uncertain and eclectic taste, do not take the trouble to find in her what is good.[5]

With the publication of Make Bright the Arrows, a book of propaganda poetry, the war years brought Miss Millay into great disfavor. She was later to express regret for having published this volume. Critics were very harsh with their appraisals commenting that her "poetic gifts of a brilliant and lofty order were frequently prostituted to a cause."[6] Others felt that she had not, in her maturity, fulfilled the promises that "Renascence" had made at so early a stage in her career or that she had not been able to successfully cast off the individual and personal to express the universal in her work. But through the tempest of critical abuse and the calm of popular rejection Miss Millay continued to write poetry.

Her death in 1950 brought few final appraisals--strange for a poet who had occasioned so much comment during her active years as a poet. The past twenty years, however, have brought her work more into perspective and the consensus conforms to the earlier opinion that Miss Millay produced work which entitles her to a high ranking, even though it be just below the leaders.[7] It is work which is at times maudlin, overromantic and "precious"--at other times controlled, penetrating and

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[5]Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (New York, 1936), p. 22.

[6]Francis X. Curley, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," America, LXXXIV (November 11, 1950), 166.

[7]Clement Wood, Poets of America (New York, 1925), p. 200.

remarkable.

Into the former category usually fall Miss Millay's lyrics, especially those youthful lyrics where she gave not just a few "figs" for "thistles" and insisted on "burning her candle at both ends." These lyrics have been as thoroughly rejected today as they were enthusiastically embraced by the readers of the Twenties. The category where she has not lost favor and is still highly regarded is in her mastery of the sonnet form. Typical comments state that her "sonnets are remarkable, the best perhaps thus far made in the new century,"[8] and that they are a "characteristic combination of archaic elegance and earthy vigor and that mastery of form which few poets have equalled."[9]

It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the sonnet sequences of Edna St. Vincent Millay: "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," Fatal Interview, and "Epitaph for the Race of Man." While some Millay scholars consider the group of sonnets published in Reedy's Mirror to form a sonnet sequence, they were not consciously written nor ultimately published as such and, thus, will not be dealt with as a sonnet sequence in this paper.

The three sonnet sequences under scrutiny in this paper will be presented and discussed in the order in which they were published: "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" in 1922; Fatal Interview in 1931; and "Epitaph for the Race of Man" in 1934. To say, however, that this is the

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[8] Fred L. Pattee, New American Literature: 1890-1930 (New York, 1930), p. 309.

[9] Sara Henderson Hay, "The Unpersuadable V," Saturday Review, XXXVII (June 5, 1954), 20.

order in which they were written is only a matter of estimate as certain intimations in Miss Millay's writings indicate that "Epitaph for the Race of Man" was in preparation during the whole decade of the Twenties.

First, a brief over-view of Edna St. Vincent Millay's life is necessary to position these sonnets in time and to place them in perspective in relation to the rest of her literary output while seeing in what way her life reflects their themes. Chapter II will deal with these general concerns. Second, each of the sonnet sequences will be examined individually in succeeding chapters to determine how and why Miss Millay has used the sonnet and the sonnet sequence and how these forms enhance her subject matter. Simultaneously, each of the sequences will be explored for the ideas she has consistently pursued in her work in the sonnet sequence form.

It is not the purpose of this paper to compare and contrast these sequences measuring them against one another. To use the word "best" when evaluating these sonnet sequences is to deal with a nebulous term. To name one of the sequences "best" would depend upon the terms of evaluation. Certainly, Fatal Interview is "best" if that superlative means adhering to and employing all the traditions and subjects of the sonnet form throughout literary history. On the other hand, "Epitaph for the Race of Man" might be considered the finest of the sequences if pursuance of a universal theme is the element in question. But, if by "best" one means working innovatively and creatively within a traditional form, then "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" must be acclaimed as Miss Millay's most formidable sequence. It certainly is within the treatment

of this latter sequence that Miss Millay gives to the sonnet sequence a new viability, a function that it has not had in the past, and a direction that it may take in the future. In "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" she both breaks from the confinement of the narrow room while at the same time remaining within its restrictions.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is not so much to make qualitative judgments about Edna St. Vincent Millay's work as to show the how and the why of Edna Millay's use of the sonnet and the sequence. Miss Millay's work shows, in effect, not so much that "sound must seem an echo to the sense" but that form is an echo to the sense, to the theme of her sequences.

CHAPTER II

IN PERSPECTIVE: EDNA MILLAY'S LIFE AND ART

Inevitably, any artist is influenced by and is a product of the sum total of his experiences, familial, cultural, and intellectual. The degree to which he is affected by these factors depends, of course, on the temperament of the writer and the nature of his art. Edna St. Vincent Millay is no exception in this regard, although critics have hotly disagreed on the extent to which her education and the milieu of her age have affected her work. Edna St. Vincent Millay's life, like her sonnets, illustrates a drive toward freedom and independence and a rebellion against the restriction of modern life while living in a confining groove of limitation.

Some critics have, no doubt, over-estimated the influence of Edna Millay's childhood spent by the sea, believing that her proximity to it helped her to achieve all manner of marvelous effects in her poetry. The propounding of such ideas is as specious as it is fruitless, just as is Mr. Sheean's effort to credit Miss Millay with some supernatural affinity with birds.[10] Nonetheless, there is little doubt that her childhood and youth spent in various provincial towns along the Maine seacoast gave her a life-long love of the sea, a habitat to which she periodically returned.

Although Edna Millay was a child of a broken home, she described

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[10]This note refers to The Indigo Bunting by Vincent Sheean (New York, 1951) in which he maintains that Miss Millay has a mystical communion with birds.

her childhood as "extraordinarily happy."[11] Henry Tolman Millay left his wife and three daughters when Edna was eight, and from that time on the unique Cora Millay was mother, father, mentor, and friend to her three daughters whom she supported by carrying out duties as a private nurse. At times the Millays lived in material poverty but their lives were especially full of books, music, and lively companionship. In addition to Mrs. Millay, the family consisted of Edna, who had red hair and green eyes; Norma, the second sister who was a blond but looked somewhat like Edna; and Kathleen, the youngest, who was different, a dark Irish type. All the Millay girls were extremely pretty.[12]

Edna's girlhood is especially to be noted for the education it gave her. Although she went to a traditional high school, Mrs. Millay spared no expense to see that the girls, all talented, got music lessons and the extra books that rounded out their educations. Edna was an especially independent and voracious reader, reading Shakespeare's plays at age nine and Tennyson and Milton at age twelve. In addition, she was widely read in Latin poetry.[13]

Two events occurring during these early years marked Edna St. Vincent Millay for a career in letters. The first was a chance meeting with Miss Caroline B. Dow, head of the National Training School of the YWCA in New York, who urged Edna to go to college and aided her in

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[11]Edna St. Vincent Millay, Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay, ed., Allan Ross Macdougal (New York, 1952), p. 350.

[12]Edmund Wilson, The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties (New York, 1952), p. 760.

[13]Gurko, pp. 12-13.

getting the financial assistance which ultimately enabled her to spend four years at Vassar. While many feel this to have been a great advantage in Edna's life, other critics feel that being sent to college may have stifled and kept her from fulfilling her youthful promise.[14]

The other major event in Edna's early years was the publication of "Renascence" in the Lyric Year in 1912. Although the poem didn't win the prize, its publication brought instant praise and fame from many who were reluctant to believe that a 19 year-old girl could have written so finished a poem. She writes to Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Bynner who had praised the poem:

> To Mr. Ficke and Mr. Bynner:
> Mr. Earle [editor of the Lyric Year] has acquainted me with your wild surmises. Gentlemen: I must convince you of your error; my reputation is at stake. I simply will not be a "brawney male.". . .But gentlemen: when a woman insists that she is twenty, you must not call her forty-five. . . .
> Seriously, I thank you also for the compliment you have unwittingly given me. For tho [sic] I do not yet aspire to be forty-five and brawney, if my verse so represents me, I am more gratified than I can say.[15]

Edna St. Vincent Millay's Vassar years were a mixture of frustration and production. Edna did not take well to the restriction and confinement of life on the campus of a girls' college. After four years of chafing under such rules, which included being told by President Henry MacCracken that he would not expel her, "I know all about poets at colleges and I don't want a banished Shelley on my doorstep!" She

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[14]Vernon Loggins, I Hear America: Literature in the United States Since 1900 (New York, 1937), p. 86.

[15]Millay, Letters, p. 20.

replied, "On those terms, I think I can continue to live in this hell hole,"[16] she finally earned her diploma after being barred from the campus. This was just one of the many times that Edna Millay was to chafe at the role of women in modern life.

Not only did Miss Millay begin her drama career at Vassar, writing and acting in a number of class plays (The Princess Marries the Page, The Wall of Dominoes, Two Slatterns and a King, and The Lamp and the Bell were produced during this period), but she also prepared her first book of poetry, Renascence and Other Poems, which was finally published after her graduation in 1917.

Edna St. Vincent Millay went from the restriction and order of life at Vassar to the freedom and self-expression of Greenwich Village which was just beginning to get the reputation which it held so long. She went to New York presumably to get a job in the theatre, but when no acting roles were forthcoming, Edna settled in the Village, because it was cheap, and prepared to support herself with her pen.

Her Village years were filled with the formation of a number of valuable friendships which were to remain throughout her life. A part of her ever widening circle of friends were Edmund Wilson, John Peale Bishop, F. P. Adams, Llewelyn Powys, Arthur Ficke and Floyd Dell, a number of whom had fallen in love with Edna Millay. In addition to her friendships, she continued her associations with the Provincetown Players, as well as continually producting new poems. It was during this period that Miss Millay turned out stories and sketches under the

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[16]Gurko, p. 58.

name of Nancy Boyd. In 1919 every issue of Ainslee's Magazine contained one of her poems and it was also in this year that she finished her best and most famous play, Aria da Capo, a symbolic parable attacking war. In 1920 the twenty Reedy's Mirror sonnets appeared and made Edna St. Vincent Millay one of the most promising young poets of the day. She had found the freedom and lack of restraint of Village life exactly suited to her youth and temperament.

However, the event of the Village period, certainly the one which had caught the spirit of the times and appealed to the imagination of the public at large, was the publication of A Few Figs from Thistles in 1920, containing that famous "First Fig," "My candle burns at both ends."

> A Few Figs from Thistles established her reputation once and for all as "the poet laureate of the nineteen twenties," as the "spokesman for the new woman," and as "the voice of rebellious youth." All over the country young people were soon quoting the poems. How could that defiant era resist such a book?[17]

The Village grew more "Villagy" and Edna Millay, who had been hailed as its spokesman, grew older and soon tired of life there feeling that her poetry was becoming too sterile. With the promise of publication in Vanity Fair of a series of Nancy Boyd pieces, she prepared for a journey and:

> . . .sailed for France January 4, 1921, on the Rochambeau leaving behind her brief theatrical career, her family, and a whole galaxy of suitors. Most of all, she was leaving the Village. Though she would be there again, briefly and intermittently, her Village days were over.[18]

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[17]Gurko, p. 123.

[18]Gurko, p. 135.

Most of her writing during her European period consisted of the Nancy Boyd stories and articles. Second April, a book of serious verse, which had been prepared for publication in Greenwich Village and was to have come out in April, 1920, was finally brought out in late summer of 1921. In Europe she also wrote "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," dedicated to Cora Millay, for which she was soon to receive the Pulitzer Prize.

Although her European holiday was a continual struggle to obtain enough money, she traveled extensively. She had received a $500 advance on a projected novel Hardigut which never materialized. During this period Edna suffered continual ill-health, and finally, after being joined by Mrs. Millay, she took a cottage in Dorset to rest, isolate herself and write.

Edna St. Vincent Millay returned to the United States early in 1923 and by May 30 had settled upon Eugen Jan Boissevain as the man to whom she would be married. As she wrote to her mother, "And it is important, that you should like him, --because I love him very much, and am going to marry him. There!!!"[19] Eugen Boissevain was, perhaps, the ideal husband for the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay. His first wife had been the suffragette Inez Milholland for whom Edna Millay had written a sonnet, and thus his position on the equality and independence of women was sufficiently clear, a point very vital to the intellectual position of Miss Millay. Edmund Wilson, one of her rejected suitors from the earlier days, describes him thus:

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[19]Millay, Letters, p. 174.

> . . .handsome and muscular and bold, boisterous in conversation, noisy in laughter, yet redeemed by a strain of something feminine that most men except the creative geniuses lack. . . .the genius, the audacity, and the uncompromising determination to enjoy the adventure of life.[20]

Thus, on the morning of July 18, 1923, they were married. After the ceremony they drove to New York where Edna entered the hospital for intestinal surgery. Through this and numerous other illnesses which followed, Eugen Boissevain was a faithful and dedicated husband and companion. And he was not at all a satisfactory candidate for the "Only Their Husbands Club."[21] All who report having known the Boissevains indicate that Edna could not have made a sounder choice. Eugen did not impose upon Edna Millay the traditional role of wife and helpmeet. Rather they both found in their marriage a freedom with which they could successfully live.

In November 1923 The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems was published. For the title poem plus eight previously published sonnets Edna St. Vincent Millay won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1922. Included in this early volume was the sonnet sequence "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree."

The final phase of Edna Millay's life might be called the Steeple-top Years. The Boissevains purchased 700 acres on the slopes of the Berkshires near Austerlitz, New York, and here on this operational farm made their permanent home for the rest of their lives. Eugen gave up his

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[20]Wilson, p. 771.

[21]Jerome Beatty, "Best Sellers in Verse," American, January 1931, p. 103.

exporting business and devoted himself to the farm and the care of the poet, his wife Edna St. Vincent Millay.

It was at Steepletop that most of Edna St. Vincent Millay's mature work was written. In 1927 The King's Henchmen, a first for American opera, had its premiere. Deems Taylor was its composer and Edna St. Vincent Millay its librettist. In the libretto Miss Millay used an unusual principle of language. Since the project was dealing with an early period of English history, she used only Anglo-Saxon derived words as the basis of her text.[22] According to the contract it had been agreed that neither the author nor the composer would divulge, under the threat of penalties, any information about its theme before the initial performance. It was a marvelously well-kept secret.[23] This, the only work of its kind Miss Millay ever attempted, was generally well received.

These middle years also saw the appearance of a number of other volumes of verse, but Edna Millay's popularity had begun to wane. Nineteen twenty-eight brought Buck in the Snow; in 1931 the sonnet sequence Fatal Interview was presented to the public; and in 1934 another book of verse was published, Wine from These Grapes, containing her final sonnet sequence "Epitaph for the Race of Man." The last book of verse in the thirties was Huntsman, What Quarry?

The second half of the decade of the thirties saw two unusual projects in addition to these verse volumes. In 1936, in collaboration with George Dillon, they published a volume of translations of Baudelaire's

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[22]Ransom, p. 107.

[23]Griffin Barry, "Vincent," New Yorker, February 12, 1927, p. 27.

Flowers of Evil. And in 1935 Miss Millay was working on the manuscript for a long philosophical poem Conversation at Midnight, when a sudden Florida hotel fire destroyed the entire manuscript. Miss Millay set about rewriting the poem but the end result, published in 1937, was unsatisfactory to her and to the critics, one of whom described it as a "crashing bore" whose "primary effect was static" in which the "series of set pieces did not constitute an organized poem."[24]

During this period Miss Millay was also augmenting her income from her book royalities with a series of reading tours which took her thousands of miles and through thousands of poems, to which her audiences responded with hush and attention:

> She was one of those women whose features are not perfect and who in their moments of dimness may not seem even pretty, but who, excited by the blood or the spirit, become almost supernaturally beautiful. . . . She had a lovely and very long throat that gave her the look of a muse, and her reading of poetry was thrilling. She pronounced every syllable distinctly; she gave every sound its value. She seemed sometimes rather British than American. . . .[25]

It was the period 1932-33 that she gave a series of Sunday evening poetry broadcasts on the radio. While sponsors had feared there would not be an audience, it was the first time that a literary figure had been given equal rating with stage and concert personalities.[26]

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[24]Harold Orel, "Tarnished Arrows: The Last Phase of Edna St. Vincent Millay," Kansas Magazine, 1960, p. 74.

[25]Wilson, p. 749.

[26]Gurko, p. 194.

The war years brought the greatest poetical disaster of Miss Millay's career. Appalled, as always, by injustice and senseless violence, Miss Millay rebelled against the world as it was developing and threw her talents and herself totally into the war effort. The result was Make Bright the Arrows, subtitled "1940 Notebook." She had intended the volume to be propaganda, her contribution to the war struggle, but both publishers and critics treated it as a serious book of verse. The result was critically disastrous and caused most reviewers to agree with the writer who described it as "perhaps the most disastrous book every published by a major American poet."[27]

The forties found Edna St. Vincent Millay in seclusion at Steepletop and her favorite summer spot, her island off the coast of Maine, Ragged Island. The first half of the decade was unproductive poetically and Miss Millay spent most of her time in seclusion combatting illness and pain. Max Eastman accounts for this lack of production during these years by indicating that the Boissevains became very dependent on alcohol.[28] But by 1947 she had projected a new volume of poetry at which she was eagerly at work. Before it could be published, death intervened. In the late summer of 1949 Edna Millay's husband, Eugen, died after what appeared to be successful surgery. Miss Millay lived for the next year alone at Steepletop and on October 18, 1950, died in seclusion at her isolated farm. Her final volume of poetry, edited by Norma Millay Ellis, her sister, was Mine the Harvest and appeared in 1954.

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[27]Orel, p. 73.

[28]Max Eastman, Great Companions (New York, 1959), p. 103.

Thus, as this brief history of Edna St. Vincent Millay's life has shown, she reached her peak of popularity in the twenties and early thirties and it is most often for her work during this period that she is hailed as "Poet of Her Age" or as "the spokesman of a generation. . . expressing the emotions of a generation from 1917 to 1925."[29] Or as another critic said, "If these boys and girls hail Edna St. Vincent Millay as their poet, it is because she seems to be writing about them."[30]

However, this assessment becomes too easy and too pat, especially when viewing the sonnets and sonnet sequences as an important segment of her work produced during this period. Her mastery of the sonnet form and her attention to traditional diction and meter precludes her being exclusively considered the representative of this age of emancipation, of rebellion against authority and propriety, of the need for striking originality.

Rather the truth lies somewhere between. Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses a "twentieth century romantic temperament in a nineteenth century romantic vehicle."[31] Her statements are distinctly modern, calling for intellectual and biological equality, but her methods and some of her poses are born of the long tradition of poetry, especially the sonnet which, for 600 years before Miss Millay was born, was accruing to itself a distinction for form and expression. Then truth is rather as Allen Tate would have it when he says that she "successfully stood

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[29]Tate, p. 222.

[30]John Farrar, ed. The Literary Spotlight (New York, 1924), p. 78.

[31]Elizabeth Drew and John L. Sweeney, Directions in Modern Poetry (New York, 1940), p. 202.

athwart two ages" and has put the "personality of her age into the style of the preceding age, without altering either."[32] As will be shown in the following chapters, Edna St. Vincent Millay would measure ideas and ideals of her own age within a form and against a backdrop of convention and tradition.

During her years as a poet Miss Millay was always the conscious artist but her comments upon art, especially upon poetic art, are very few. The only formal statement that exists in the Millay canon wherein she speaks to the subject of poetic philosophy and technique is in the preface to Flowers of Evil and even here her concern is more with the poetic rendering in the translations than it is with the creation of original poetry. And one cannot leave out, to be ranked along with Archibald Macleish's "Ars Poetica" and Marianne Moore's "Poetry," her attempt at a definition of the sonnet written in the sonnet form.

> I will put Chaos into fourteen lines
> And keep him there; and let him thence escape
> If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape
> Flood, fire, and demon--his adroit designs
> Will strain to nothing in the strict confines
> Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,
> I hold his essence and amorphous shape,
> Till he with Order mingles and combines.
> Past are the hours, the years, of our duress,
> His arrogance, our awful servitude:
> I have him. He is nothing more nor less
> Than something simple not yet understood;
> I shall not even force him to confess;
> Or answer. I will only make him good.[33]

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[32]Tate, p. 227.

[33]Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems (New York, 1956), p. 728. All further references will be to this edition of the poems and will be indicated in the text with CP followed by the appropriate page number.

Thus, any determination of Miss Millay's philosophy of her art must be made by a study of her poems themselves.

In examining critical assessments of Miss Millay's technique there is one clear fact which emerges. No unanimity of critical opinion is to be found. There are critics who feel that her lyrics are the most valuable part of her work:

> In the other division [lyrics], where she is entirely or nearly original and contemporary and less pretentious, ...she is decidedly the more considerable as a poet. . . .She is not a good conventional or formalist poet. . . .because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities.[34]

While other critics have held the opposite point of view that she has in her sonnets ". . .a characteristic combination of archaic elegance and earthy vigor and that mastery of form which few poets have equalled."[35]

That Miss Millay consciously chose the sonnet form indicates her awareness of the poetic tradition. Doubtless she would ascribe to the traditional definition of the sonnet, a fourteen-line poem of iambic pentameter in either the Petrarchan or the Shakespearian mode. There are a number of smooth, perfectly flowing examples of such a form within the body of her work. However, Miss Millay would not insist on absolutely strict conformation to these rules, for to do so would be to rule out some of her best sonnets as well as some of the best in English language poetry. She is willing to allow experimentation and variation within the form.

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[34] Ransom, pp. 87 and 103.

[35] Hay, p. 20.

For example, as will be shown, the sequence, "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," uses to advantage a seven-foot rather than a five-foot 14th line. A number of other sonnets use a combination of the two Shakespearian rhyme schemes or use a combination of the Shakespearian with its four-part structure, three quatrains and a couplet, and the Petrarchan structure with its two-part division of the octave and the sestet. In addition, other of Miss Millay's sonnets eschew the pentameter line in favor of tetrameter, especially when they are isolated sonnets not conceived as part of a group or sequence.

Miss Millay's definition of the sonnet sequence is more easily assessed. As can be seen by noting those groups which she has designated as sonnet sequences, she has not defined, as other poets have historically done, the sonnet sequence as any group of sonnets unified loosely by subject matter. Rather, Miss Millay calls for greater unity, asking not only that they have in common subject matter, but also that they are a group of poems conceived and executed as a totality advancing as a group a related recognizable theme and given coherence by a dominant emotion or series of related emotions resulting in an explicable climax.

Third, as was indicated by citing Miss Millay as a spokesman of her age, she ascribes to the traditional conventions and subject matter of the sonnet form. But her object in the use of the sonnet is to juxtapose modern stances against those of traditional poses and to emerge with a statement about the validity of traditional versus modern values. She is well versed in tradition.

John Crowe Ransom advances the thesis that Miss Millay approaches

poetry from the point of view of a woman and that women live for love. He concludes that "Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual and I think everybody knows it."[36] Mr. Ransom cannot have examined closely either the subject content or the form of Miss Millay's sonnets. It is inescapably obvious upon doing so that she brings to the form not only a wealth of interest and knowledge of both traditional and modern learning, but that the control and discipline she exercises over her form is remarkable. One or two good sonnets might be an accident of the "feminine mind," but the percentage of fine sonnets out of the 173 total is not accidental. On the contrary, her sonnets represent "the highest intellectual plane of her poetry,"[37] for to be intellectual is "to be disciplined in technique and stacked with learning. . . ."[38]

The depth and degree of Miss Millay's "stacking with learning" is quickly seen not only by her education, her reading, and the amount of poetry which she committed to memory as her biographers record, but also by the numbers and names of the poets whose poems are linked with hers. Each critic has a different idea: Edmund Wilson says her teachers were Hardy and Housman; Sheean says she owes nothing to any one but Shakespeare; Atkins describes her relationship to Donne. Other names that occur in such discussions are Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Burns and Emily Dickinson. Such a list of poets displaying such a diversity of qualities can only speak for Miss Millay's versatility and

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[36]Ransom, p. 78.

[37]Ransom, pp. 80-81.

[38]Ransom, p. 101.

achievement as a poet and an intellectual.

Finally, Miss Millay's sonnets are roughly similar in theme to the rest of her work although at different times there is a different emphasis especially during the growth of her poetry. Miss Millay's work as a whole shows "a journey in search of integrity of the individual spirit and a search for wholeness for the individual."[39] While she is not particularly interested in this from the point of view of a woman, her persona often happens to be feminine. However, the individuality and unity which she seeks are not necessarily feminine but could be masculine as well. In this search she encounters three forces with which the individual must grapple in coming to terms with life. In remaining whole and in retaining some vestige of integrity, the human spirit must come to terms with love and the relationship to the loved one; the human spirit must come to terms with death; and the human spirit must come to terms with the nature of man himself, both man, the human being, and man, the artist in quest of beauty. In the discussions of the three sonnet sequences which follow: "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," Fatal Interview, and "Epitaph for the Race of Man," we see Miss Millay coming to terms with these themes using a form that is one of the most confining of all poetic forms and using as her focus the "narrow room" in which man, confined, must make his search, governed by his own limitations, knowledge, and passions.

The controlling thesis of this paper can be seen in terms of this

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[39]James Gray, Edna St. Vincent Millay (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1967), pp. 6 and 10.

quotation from Sonnet XVIII:

> Then is my daily life a narrow room
> In which a little while, uncertainly,
> Surrounded by impenetrable gloom,
> Among familiar things grown strange to me
> Making my way, I pause, and feel, and hark,
> Till I become accustomed to the dark. (CP, 578)

The quotation's unifying metaphor is that of daily life being a "narrow room." Miss Millay applies this concept of a narrow room to daily life as she sees it in this poem and she also uses it as an approach to poetry, especially the poetry of the sonnet. First, the sonnet form itself is a "narrow room" of restriction of versification. Miss Millay displays a mastery of technique in her use of the sonnet form with its force of limitation. Second, the sonnet sequence implies the restrictions of a tradition which must be known and understood before the sonnets can be put to use as a group. Finally, the work of Miss Millay also expresses this idea of the "narrow room" in the themes of the sequences. She is concerned with the confinement of man, by the limitations of his own nature, and the restrictions of the social institutions which he has created. Her sonnet sequences reflect her knowledge of and her discontent with this confinement. Ironically enough, working within a tightly controlled form she pleads for freedom and independence. Her use of restricted form was consciously chosen to make this plea more eloquent, more impressive.

As Geneieve Taggard has indicated, "her whole temperament--and philosophy runs best through a sharp groove of limitation"[40] and Sister

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[40] Geneieve Taggard, "Her Massive Sandal," The Measure, April, 1924, p. 16.

Madeleva has also observed, "It is precisely her ability to restrain rather than to free, to balance rather than to heap up emotion that fashions her poems into the mold of strength and great beauty."[41]

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[41]Sister M. Madeleva, Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays (New York, 1925), p. 146.

CHAPTER III

THE NARROW ROOM OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

To work within a closely-knit structure while adhering to the rules and at the same time to expand the form with innovative freshness describe the work of the sonneteer in keeping the sonnet and the sonnet sequence a vital poetic form for eight hundred years. A unique modern sonnet sequence is Edna St. Vincent Millay's tightly-controlled "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." Rarely has a poet been so faithful to the idea of the sonnet form and tradition while subtly rendering changes in the subject matter, the theme, the form and the diction of the sonnet sequence. This sequence, like Miss Millay's others, well illustrates how she pursues her theme of the "narrow room" using her form, the sonnet, and the tradition of the structured group, the sonnet sequence, to support and complement her idea.

Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" is more tightly structured than almost any other English language sonnet sequence. The totality reads like an embroidered essay or short story, very consciously constructed to articulate its theme. The opening sentence states its situation and all ensuing sentences relentlessly, even at times, ruthlessly, pursue and inscribe this central problem posed by:

> So she came back into his house again
> And watched beside his bed until he died,
> Loving him not at all. (CP, 606)

The myriad questions raised by this single sentence provide the poet with the material of her sequence. Basic to these questions is the problem posed by the past, present and future of the relationship between the

man and the woman.

In writing "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" Miss Millay is working with the age old subject of the sonnet--love, but her subject has a difference. It is not new-found love, lost love, nor even unrequited love. Rather, her subject is the absence of love--a dilemma, not just of woman but of the human condition although its application is particularly well adapted to the exploration of the problem of modern woman as she is drawn into, confined, and then freed of the concept of love and marriage as it is a part of the fabric of modern society.

The sequence focuses upon the nature and character of the woman who keeps a vigil beside the bed of a man she has known intimately but does not love. One of the ways that this creation is approached by the poet is that she has formed the character of the woman by departing from the accepted tradition in sonnet sequences of writing them in the first person. This first person persona has also been a characteristic of her own verse; it is a departure from her other poetry and her other self:

> Until now she has been our leading lady; here she has stepped off the stage completely to record the drama in which another woman has the lead.[42]

This is why this sonnet sequence lacks the "passionate drive of the individual sonnets or of the group of sonnets in Second April,"[43] and rightly so. It is unquestionably true that this lack of drive contributes to the success of the tone and the imprinting of the theme of the

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[42]Madeleva, p. 154.

[43]Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength (New York, 1929), p. 244.

sequence. To have the unloved and unloving woman of the sequence effuse:

> I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
> I only know that summer sang in me
> A little while, that in me sings no more. (CP, 602)

would be out of character and out of context in the prison-like world which Miss Millay is intent upon exploring.

The exploration upon which Miss Millay has embarked can be generally categorized under the analysis of the subject of death, but it is not just the physical death of the husband. It is rather the death of the life spirit and a struggle against that death. A brief retelling of the situation or plot of the sequence reveals the material giving rise to this analysis of emotion and theme.

The unnamed woman of the sequence returns to the household of her former husband, a high school sweetheart, to nurse him in a terminal illness. Her vigil leaves her alone in her former memory-filled home. As a result, she examines her empty past and an emptier present within the limitations of her emotion and intelligence; these examinations are juxtaposed against the homely and the commonplace of her former everyday life. No reasons are given for her departure and no conflict in their relationship is described, only implied.

The sequence opens with the woman's return to her home to view the former homestead in its run-down condition as opposed to her memories of it. Sonnets III-VIII describe the woman attending to the routine daily chores that had comprised her life as wife. She avoids any social intercourse, however, as the reader observes her hiding in the cellar-way to avoid the delivery man and waiting in silence as callers leave their jellies at the door and go ungreeted.

The character of the husband does not really enter the considerations of the sequence until it is half completed, and even then, he does not emerge as a person but as a memory which the woman dredges up as she wanders back to her school days and to the desire-filled days of their courtship. With Sonnet XI as a transitional sonnet of despair for the "whole year to be lived through once more" (CP, 616), the remaining sonnets of the sequence are the slow, seemingly interminable (although there are only six more) coming of his death, and her realization of her loss. That moment is underscored by Miss Millay with these lines:

> She was as one who enters, sly and proud,
> To where her husband speaks before a crowd
> And sees a man she never saw before--
> The man who eats his victuals at her side,
> Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not
> hers, unclassified. (CP, 622)

As is clearly obvious the focus of the sequence is the woman, her dilemma, her responses, and her conclusions. The situation, or the story of the sequence as just described, including the husband who takes on no personality, is a means by which the poet can explore the complex lack-of-love relationship which imprisons this woman. Indeed, the circumstances are very personal but they become universal as they are juxtaposed against the symbolic, yet actual, death of the man and the kind of marriage he represents.

Thus, this is the first of the dilemmas confronted by the woman and the sequence. The two sonnets, IX and X, which explore the germination of their relationship almost tonelessly describe the two components that result in the marriage:

> Not over-kind nor over-quick in study

Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful was he,
Who had come into her life when anybody
Would have been welcome, so in need was she.

* * *

It's pretty nice to know
You've got a friend to keep you company everywhere
you go. (CP, 614)

And he

Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went,
Which seemed to her an honest enough test
Whether she loved him and was content.

* * *

And if the man were not her spirit's mate,
Why was her body sluggish with desire? (CP, 615)

These two components are need and desire, a need for an emotional and spiritual companion and the urgings of physical desire. Yet even then the woman realizes that this is not all--not enough when she indicates "and if the man were not her spirit's mate." She ignores the dictates of her mind that she needs an intellectual mate--a spiritual mate with whom she can communicate. Thus, marriage to him, neither kind, beautiful nor skilled, which satisfied need and desire, is not enough, and it is fated to disaster from the beginning.

The girl has confined herself within a narrow room walled by the dictates of the human condition and roofed by the dictates of the conventional mores of love and marriage. Miss Millay is making in the sequence an attack on these accepted ideas as seen through the eyes of the woman who is unsophisticated, but she is not unintelligent nor is she insensitive. She sees with clarity and perception--but she sees too late.

A second and ancillary dilemma posed by the situation of the sequence is a result of the first. From the time of their initial school days courtship, although the poem does not say so, the woman has obviously married the man who is not her "spirit's mate" and for a time they make a home together--he a farmer, she a farmer's wife. The reasons for the break-up of their marriage and the subsequent departure of the woman are only implied by the sequence. We are told only the fact that she has left and has now returned in the spring, a traditional time of life, to confront death, not only his physical death, but the death of her dreams, her ignorance, but the birth of despair.

As one might suppose, she does not confuse what she might have once thought of as love with pity or sorrow as she nursed his final hours, and "watched beside his bed until he died,/ Loving him not at all." Chillingly, she displays no emotion for him. It is not that she is emotionless about his death, but that her emotions are tied to the examination of self forced into the open by his impending death. Indeed, once he has died, she "mused how if he had not died at all/ "Twould have been easier" (CP, 621). It certainly would have been easier for she would not have had to face the formalities of a funeral, nor would she have had to face her own failure. She could have continued to punish herself with the guilt of responsibility for him, and she would not have been set free--freedom for her a most frightening, a most haunting human experience born out of need, freedom from a "narrow room" of ignorance of self and confinement by a concept of the love and marriage relationship.

She returns to his house in response to his need of her and in response to her guilt and remains to discover herself. Thus, it is <u>not</u>

the dead husband's wife who looks, passionless, down at his lifeless body with neither emptiness, nor remorse. She has emerged as someone new. She has changed from the girl to the woman. Her trial by loneliness has detached her from her former experiences. She is seeing with different eyes:

> Gazing upon him now, severe and dead
> It seemed a curious thing that she had lain
> Beside him many a night in that cold bed, (CP, 622)

The body is familiar with its curves and length but in the spirit of death and emptiness, now without even his need for her, she "sees a man she never saw before" and the man who was once "small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified." Unclassified because he, in dying, has taken with him her identity as wife, housewife, and woman. And it is she now, rather than he, that is unclassified. The only identity she has was her relationship to him, however unsatisfactory. The result of this discovery is the stark loneliness of the poem.

Nowhere in Miss Millay's work is there a more tightly-knit, albeit highly individual, exploration of her concern with the human condition as the confinement of the conventional social mores and individual capabilities for error. The girl-woman has not loved; she has chosen wrongly and for the wrong reasons. "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" is a record of her discovery and the tragedy of her discovery of the "narrow room" in which she dwells.

As previously mentioned "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" is a highly structured, closely-knit sequence, and it is just such a quality that contributes to the success of the sequence as the reader finds and feels both the theme and the complex emotional tone made manifest by this

structure. The opening lines previously quoted are a statement of the entire situation of the sequence. The remaining sonnets in the sequence are an exploration of the emotional ramifications of the act of returning and "loving not at all."

The sequence may be roughly broken down into conventional structural divisions and discussed as one might discuss a short story, novel, or a drama. This sequence has elements of all three. However, these divisions advance, not the plot, as in a novel or drama, but the emotional content. The exposition, Sonnets I-IV inclusively, deal with her first entry into the house and her reactions to the simple act of getting fire wood and kindling a fire. Especially important in this expository segment are the contrasts established between life as it was and life as she finds it now. But more important, it exposes and defines her central dilemma, that of coming to terms with life and death. These lines mark the end of the exposition:

> She thrust her breath against the stubborn coal,
> Bringing to bear upon its hilt the whole
> Of her still body. . .there sprang a little blaze.
> A pack of hounds, the flame swept up the flue!--
> And the blue night stood flattened against the
> window staring through. (CP, 609)

Two items stand out from this picture: her simple act of using her breath to kindle the fire and the image of the fire as hounds sweeping up the flue. While this sequence and the whole body of work of Miss Millay are not burdened with either a vast number of broadened metaphors or symbols, nonetheless, the fire, in this instance, certainly functions as such. The girl is not prosaically kindling the home fires here upon her return nor is the fire especially representative of warmth as a life

force. Rather, she is lighting a fire in the search of knowledge and she will be the hunted rather than the hunter in the ensuing lonely days of the vigil, as she is hounded by past memories while coping with the self of the present.

The rising action, then, is this pursuit and the sonnets (V-XII) included in this group are in pursuit of memory, of knowledge, of self, juxtaposed against the unreal world of the past. Particularly typical of this segment of the sequence are the incisive, vivid descriptions of the homely farm life with its treasure-house of commonplace items. All these were taken for granted in the former life; growing larger than reality upon her return, they pose questions of significance, questions unasked before. She stands in the cellarway to escape the delivery man and sees:

> Sour and damp from that dark vault
> Arose to her the well-remembered chill;
> She saw the narrow wooden stairway still
> Plunging into the earth, and the thin salt
> Crusting the crocks; until she knew him far.
> So stood, with listening eyes upon the empty
> doughnut jar. (CP, 610)

These familiar items from her past were unthought of and unquestioned before as in another sonnet, while putting groceries away, she questions:

> Treacherously dear
> And simple was the dull, familiar task.
> And so it was she came at length to ask:
> How came the soda there? The sugar here?
> Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop,
> And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held
> his razor strop. (CP, 611)

And again near the climax of the sequence we see:

> an apron--long ago,
> In some white storm that sifted through the pane

And sent her forth reluctantly at last
To gather in, before the line gave way,
Garments, board-stiff, that galloped on the blast
Clashing like angel armies in a fray,
An apron long ago in such a night
Blown down and buried in the deepening drift,
To lie till April thawed it back to sight,
Forgotten, quaint and novel as a gift--
It struck her, as she pulled and pried and tore,
That here was spring, and the whole year to be lived
through once more. (CP, 616)

These commonplace items represent her former life which she has never before perceived and which she now realizes was lacking. But more important, she has seen herself in this milieu and found that she is lacking, too. Thus digging a familiar frozen apron out of the snow in April brings not joy, but despair.

The final poem in the rising action (Sonnet XII) or complication is the only one in which we see the girl functioning as nurse and when her patient is asleep she envisions:

Familiar, at such moments, like a friend,
Whistled far off the long, mysterious train,
And she could see in her mind's vision plain
The magic World, where cities stood on end. . .
Remote from where she lay--and yet--between,
Save for something asleep beside her, only the
window screen. (CP, 617)

But it is more than a window screen. Her husband and her former life lie between herself and escape from this world of memory and failure. She must come to terms with these before she can enter the magic World.

The climactic sonnet of the sequence (Sonnet XIII) is a dream sonnet and thus syntactically and dictionally quite separate from the other sonnets of the sequence. Gone are the short, declarative sentences and the straight-forward subject-verb-object order. The style here is more involuted than any of the earlier poems and the sonnet is composed of two

surrealistic dreams--one an earlier dream of a silent house in which she went up and down stairs and regards the marriage bed as malignant and the husband as a stranger:

> Sharply remembered from an earlier dream,
> Upstairs, down other stairs, fearful to rouse,
> Regarding him, the wide and empty scream
> Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed. (CP, 618)

And the second dream involves the old child-like game of blowing soap-bubbles and watching them break as they brush against household objects:

> Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake--
> A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet
> did not break. (CP, 618)

But the bubbles are no longer dreams and they no longer break and the woman is terrified as she makes the central discovery, that old realities, old failures, and old mistakes, like the bubbles, do not burst and disappear, but must be reckoned with and lived with as bubble after bubble crowds her life.

The sequence draws swiftly to a close. Sonnet XIV describes her fear of being alone at night, afraid that this death will occur during the hours of darkness. Consequently, the woman keeps the "kettle boiling all night long, for company"--a return to her old ways of coping with terror. The death itself finally occurs in Sonnet XV and the central image is a comparison of the dead man with a broken clock:

> The mainspring being broken in his mind,
> A clock himself, if one were so inclined,
> That stood at twenty minutes after three--
> The reason being for this, it might be said,
> That things in death were neither clocks nor people,
> but only dead. (CP, 620)

Here there is no horror, no grief, no sorrow, only a kind of sensitive observation and a passionless remorse for what was not and can never be.

The denouement (the last two sonnets) show that she is not beyond all feeling as she ties up the ends of her emotional life and ties up the ends of his physical life. To both of these her response is

> She said at length, feeling the doctor's eyes,
> "I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies." (CP, 621)

Just as she doesn't know what to do with his physical body in death, she doesn't know what to do with her spiritual self and thus:

> And she was shocked to see how life goes on
> Even after death, in irritating ways: (CP, 621)

And perhaps she is also shocked to discover that her involvement with him still goes on because it has been a part of her life and certainly one of the elements that has confined her to the "narrow room" of her life.

The final poem in the sequence describes her loss, her aloneness and her lack of ability to relate herself to any other human being. Perhaps the title of this sequence, "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" should have presaged this for the reader. The title doesn't necessarily imply that she won't or can't grow--merely that the woman has, thus far, been unable and unwilling to make the attachments necessary to life. At the beginning it was youth and ignorance that caused her failure; now that she is grown, she has pursued knowledge as it has pursued her and she must live with its narrow and empty consequences.

Thus, this highly-structured sequence is itself a narrow room and the reader feels that Miss Millay has chosen just such a tightly controlled form and has deftly knit the poems so closely together to underscore her point, for the tightness of structure cannot help but give the whole sequence a tension that is also the intent of the story of the poems.

Several other poetic elements also create tension in the sequence.

Tension as it is spoken of here indicates the contradictory pull of two elements or factors causing intellectual strain and resulting in emotional tensility. On the imagistic level the opening poems of the sequence indicate a pull between the images of life and decay:

> Where once her red geraniums had stood
> Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen; (CP, 606)

and

> The last white sawdust on the floor was grown
> Gray as the first, so long had he been ill;
> The axe was nodding in the block; (CP, 607)

and others: "ragged ends of twine" and "a brown, shriveled apple core" and "sour and damp." The tension produced by the contrast of the "then" with the "now" contributes to the loneliness and the starkness of the poems. They also indicate a life that formerly was lived, however unhappily, with hope, a life that was not questioned and not seen. And the life of now is where all the little everyday items must be reseen, revisited and re-evaluated.

A second element which creates tension is the vision of the woman trying to distinguish reality from unreality. This home to which she returns has been real in the past, has had substance and meaning, however distasteful it might have been. Now she sees her home with its possessions and they no longer function as they were intended to. A tension is created between their former reality and the unreality they have now.

> Polish the stove till you could see your face,
> And after nightfall rear an aching back
> In a changed kitchen, bright as a new pin,
> An advertisement, far too fine to cook supper in. (CP, 612)

> There was upon the sill a pencil mark,
> Vital with shadow when the sun stood still

At noon, but now, because the day was dark,
It was a pencil mark upon the sill. (CP, 620)

Formerly both the stove and the pencil mark served useful, highly practical functions and they had a reality because of this usefulness. Now, their physical form is the same, they look like they once looked but with a difference; unreality is the result of the fact that they no longer have a relative purpose or meaning to her. Tension is accomplished.

The third poetic element creating tension in this strain-filled sequence is the opposition of the emotional and the chronological movement within the sequence. As has been shown, the plot, like that of a short story, moves climactically. But the emotional movement is one from unawareness and simplicity down to despair and emptiness. The emotional movement of the poem sequence is, indeed, a downward path to emotional wisdom as it culminates in the emptiness of the woman's feelings as she stands above the dead man. Such contradictory movements cause heavy tensions in the sequence which result in the reader feeling the same emotional and intellectual pull as the woman.

Finally, relative to this matter of tension, one must draw out the difference between this sequence of non-love and all those traditional sonnet sequences by other poets that have dealt with the many facets of the love subject. Past sequences have dealt with some or all portions of the cycle of love: birth of love, discovery of the loved one, flourishing of the new found love, summer of passion, waning of emotionality and physicality, and the transcendental metaphysical leap from earthly love to celestial love. Miss Millay's concern in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted

Tree" is with none of these traditional subjects. The result is the tension produced as this sequence is read in the tradition of the sonnet as a vehicle of the expression of love. The reader, therefore, expects the same. He does not receive it and the tension between expectation and unfulfillment is the result. This use of tension is only a part of the way Miss Millay uses form to underscore meaning.

The poetic trappings of "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" are many and varied and worthy of discussion for a two-fold reason. First, the poetic machinery acts to underscore and support the poet's theme. Second, many of the traditional poetic devices of the sonnet are used--but with a difference. That difference makes this sequence uniquely modern and yet worthy of the long and venerable tradition. In matters of form, syntax, diction and image this sequence can be valuably explored.

Sonnet purists have, of course, not forgiven Miss Millay for her one departure from the standard form in using a 14th line of seven feet. To express one critic's viewpoint:

> . . .neither the story nor the poetry suffers from the spurious feet, but the form,--aye, there's the rub--and deliberately to adopt the sonnet as one's medium is tacitly to respect the form.[44]

Granting what the critic says to be true, one wonders if such critics could or would grant that, if the seven foot last line served an important and vital poetic function in the poems, it be allowed because it makes a better, more poetic and emotionally valid statement within the sequence. Thus, the question is, does the addition of the two feet

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[44]Madeleva, p. 156.

serve any purpose in the sequence? Do they make form complement and enhance the subject and the tone?

This writer contends that not only do the poetry and the story not suffer from the spurious feet, but rather they are enhanced by the form innovation. The concept of the sequence seems to be that the poet wishes to depict a series of brief emotional encounters or revelations which the woman experiences. It is important that the reader be forced to pause, to reflect, to organize at the end of each of these experiences, much as the woman does. This lengthening of the final line throws these lines out of balance with the flow of the other lines and encourages and necessitates, therefore, a kind of epiphany in the poems. To complement this kind of stoppage of action, these lines function to emphasize a particularly meaningful image almost in the way that the whole Shakespearian couplet summarizes and intellectualizes the content of the whole sonnet. The last line is never epigrammatic like the Shakespearian couplet. Since in this sequence there is no justification for such statement, or intellectualization, the emphasis must be accomplished with emphasis on a summarizing image. These examples of vivid imagery illustrate how the woman focuses her attention and the image, in turn, forces the reader's attention. These final lines exemplify the point:

> So stood, with listening eyes upon the empty doughnut jar. (CP, 610)
>
> And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop. (CP, 611)
>
> Across her teeth the grinding of a backing wagon wheel. (CP, 631)

She had kept that kettle boiling all night long,
for company. (CP, 619)

"I don't know what you do exactly when a person
dies." (CP, 621)

Again in this sequence, form underscores theme and subject.

One other brief comment on the form of the sonnet itself is necessary. The rhyme scheme of "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" is basically Elizabethan although it is not one of the two most favored of the Elizabethan forms: abab cdcd efef gg; or abba cddc effe gg. Rather, it is a combination of these two and, in effect, not only culls all the advantages of the Elizabethan but also impinges upon the advantages of the Petrarchan form. The majority of the sonnets in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" rhyme as follows: abab cdcd effe gg. The third quatrain is out of order with the others and causes a subtle but unmistakable shift down in gear in preparation for that final seven-foot image which is the focus of the reader's attention. In addition, Miss Millay foregoes the need of the couplet by the use of these two devices and thus escapes all the evils of epigrammism which patently would be out of focus with the tone and mood of the sequence.

Miss Millay also subtly works with the syntax and diction of the sonnet. While at times the sonnet's sentences are lengthy, they nonetheless have a concrete subject-verb-object order and there is an abruptness, almost coldness, that startles the reader into attention. This is especially true of the first lines or phrases which serve to make the reader anticipatory of the ensuing scene:

She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin (CP, 608)

A wagon stopped before the house; (CP, 610)

She let them leave their jellies at the door
And go away. (CP, 613)

She had a horror he would die at night (CP, 619)

The doctor asked her what she wanted done (CP, 621)

Contrary to this kind of movement of the phrases, an astonishing number of the sonnets are written in one or two and, at the most, three sentences which carry the thought along and struggle against this startling abruptness. Rarely does she employ the traditional four-part Elizabethan structure of three quatrains and a couplet. Space permits only one example of the extended sentence poem:

It came into her mind, seeing how the snow
Was gone, and the brown grass exposed again,
And clothes-pins, and an apron--long ago,
In some white storm that shifted through the pane
And sent her forth reluctantly at last
To gather in, before the line gave way,
Garments, board-stiff, that galloped on the blast
Clashing like angel armies in a fray,
An apron long ago in such a night
Blown down and buried in the deepening drift,
To lie till April thawed it back to sight,
Forgotten, quaint and novel as a gift--
It struck her, as she pulled and pried and tore,
That here was spring, and the whole year to be lived
through once more. (CP, 616)

Perhaps an even more important factor in achieving the abruptness and narrowness of the tone of the sequence is the diction which is unusual in the history of the sonnet. One critic has called it the "detail of habit"[45] because the vocabulary is of the everyday, commonplace Anglo-Saxon words of daily life. Another detractor of the sequence remarks that "many of the last series of sonnets are

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[45]Genevieve Taggard, "Her Massive Sandal," The Measure, April, 1924, p. 14.

unfortunately commonplace. 'I don't know exactly what you do when a person dies' is a conversation but certainly not poetic expression and quite unsuitable for the sonnet form."[46] Certainly it is not a poetic expression, especially poetic in terms of the sonnet tradition as it has been understood. But the woman of "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" is not a poetic woman; to describe her as such would be ludicrous. The point of the sequence is not the point of the traditional sequence. Miss Millay has used this untraditional diction to contribute to the tone and meaning of the sequence. It contributes to what another critic has described as its vigor when he praises the sequence as being "flawlessly realized without hiding its vigor."[47]

Also contributing to this vigor, and thus the tone of the sequence, are the preponderance of short and one-syllable words which again are contrary to the traditional diction of the sonnet whose object has generally been a series of multi-syllabic words making the sonnet music flow. Analysis of this brief passage will illustrate the point:

> She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin
> Forward, to hold the highest stick in place,
> No less afraid than she had always been
> Of spiders up her arms and on her face, (CP, 608)

Out of a passage, four lines, of 35 words, only five words have more than one syllable; those five words have only two each.

The one exception to many of these observations is the single climactic dream sequence poem:

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[46]Joseph Collins, Taking a Literary Pulse (New York, 1924), p. 119.

[47]Francis Hackett, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," New Republic, CXXXV (December 24, 1956), 22.

From the wan dream that was her waking day,
Wherein she journeyed, borne along the ground
Without her own volition in some way,
Or fleeing, motionless, with feet fast bound,
Or running silent through a silent house
Sharply remembered from an earlier dream,
Upstairs, down other stairs, fearful to rouse
Regarding him, the wide and empty scream
Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed,
And all the time not certain if it were
Herself so doing or some one like to her,
From this wan dream that was her daily bread,
Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake--
A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet
did not break! (CP, 618)

Journeyed, borne, volition, malignant and incredulous are all words not typical of the diction of this sequence. The lines, although it is one sentence like many of the rest of the poems, flow and are much more liquid than other sonnets within the sequence although not more musical than other poems within the body of Miss Millay's work. This is why this sequence has been criticized as "bearing signs of fabrication" and sounding "more like some of her less lyrical contemporaries."[48]

As one would imagine, the images of the sequence draw upon the senses for their concreteness. Sight, sound, smell play a large part in making up the reality of the pathetic world of this lonely and lost woman. One sees, hears, and smells with great clarity the small circumference enclosed in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." These images cannot just be divided into those appealing to one sense or another but rather they uniquely appeal to a number of the senses simultaneously, giving the reader a clear total experience of the moment. Especially are these

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[48]Witter Bynner, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," New Republic, XLI (December 10, 1924), 15.

senses acute because the woman is alone, alone in a familiar place. She has been a sensual, rather than cerebral, woman and these are levels on which she lives and responds. The following are the more vivid examples of this acute totality of experience:

> The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish
> Upon the coals, exuding odorous smoke. (CP, 609)

> Smooth, heavy, round, green logs with a wet, gray rind
> Only, and knotty chunks that will not burn. (CP, 608)

> In hazy summer, when the hot air hummed
> With mowing, and locusts rising raspingly,
> When that small bird with iridescent wings
> And long incredible sudden silver tongue
> Had just flashed (CP, 607)

> the sudden heavy fall
> And roll of a charred log, and the roused shower
> Of snapping sparks; (CP, 613)

These kinds of poetic experiences are the rule of each of the sequence's sonnets.

There are also a group of animal images that are used throughout the series of poems: "her heart like a frightened partridge," "the hot air hummed," "the white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish," "a pack of hounds, the flames swept up the flue!" and "garments. . . that galloped on the blast." These are entirely consistent with the theme and the tone of the sequence. Naturalistic in a double sense of the word; the woman is a child of nature. Certainly her life has been one of association with creatures and the world of nature, living the life of an isolated farm wife. But too, she is not animalistic; her orientation has been one of instincts and sense, rather than of the intellect and rationale. It is at the moment of the poem that perhaps for the first time in her life she is thinking rather than feeling.

Finally, while the images of decay and ill-health have been previously discussed as contributing to the tension of the sequence, these are also linked with images of time as there is a shifting back and forth in the sequence from then to now. However, in the third to the last sonnet--the death sonnet--time becomes predominant in the central image wherein the death of the man is described in terms of a clock. This identification of death with time causes some need for questioning as it appears at this momentous position in the sequence. This image may function in several ways. The death of the man, first of all, signifies the end of a whole segment of her life, specifically her life within a marriage as it is represented by this house and its belongings. Ancillary to this, and certainly more important, the death signifies a stoppage of a peculiar kind of unawareness in living, and a dividing line between then and now that is so important to this sequence. Third, the dead clock symbolizes an emptiness in her life as she has rid herself of the old self by returning to this home only to learn that there was no returning. The woman finds herself in a "narrow room" of self-knowledge, narrow because of its emptiness and sterility.

Sister M. Madeleva has said that in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" Miss Millay has "got beyond loveliness at last."[49] Perhaps more astute than this appears at first reading, this statement says little but implies much that has been illustrated about this sonnet sequence. Here Miss Millay has combined two elements, theme and form, both contributing to one purpose. That purpose is not the creation of beauty, although

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[49]Madeleva, p. 153.

this is not to say that beauty has not been created. Rather, Miss Millay has utilized the strictness and confinement of the sonnet form to create a narrow tension-filled room in which she can describe and depict a woman experiencing an emotional dilemma for which the "narrow room" is an apt metaphor. She writes of both intellectual and emotional confinement and encloses them within the confinement of the strictly controlled sonnet form.

CHAPTER IV

THE NARROW ROOM OF TRADITIONAL LOVE

Perhaps no other sonnet sequence of modern time is so much attuned to the great tradition of the sonnet sequence as practiced by Petrarch, Sidney, Shakespeare, Browning, and Rosetti as Edna St. Vincent Millay's Fatal Interview. It employs all of the conventions, acknowledges all of the sonneteers, and pays tribute to the history of the tradition while not bowing to charges of plagiarism, dishonesty and imitation which have been levied against it. Phillip Blair Rice says that Fatal Interview

> contained a few sonnets that were almost flawless after their kind. But the trappings of Elizabethan pageantry had come to seem definitely faded with use and there was a forced melodramatic note. . .[50]

and another critic remarks that Fatal Interview was Miss Millay's first symphony but it does "have the flavor of the library."[51]

Fatal Interview is everything implied by the term sonnet sequence while simultaneously emerging as a new, viable, and consciously artistic endeavor in its own right. Elizabeth Atkins in her book-length study on Miss Millay comments that:

> More than any sonnet sequence since Elizabethan times Fatal Interview is filled with subtle acknowledgement of what has been said about love by earlier poets. In a sense it may almost be called a daydream of conversation with the immortals. For to a greater degree than any of Millay's other books this is poetry of overtones.

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[50] Phillip Blair Rice, "Edna Millay's Maturity," Nation, CXXXIX (November 14, 1934), 568.

[51] Thomas C. Chubb, "Shelley Grown Old," North American Review, Spring, 1938, p. 176.

> . . .But Millay is not imitating earlier poets; she is merely holding her own in conversation with them.[52]

Thus, this conversation is an illustration of Miss Millay's discontent with the conventional role of women and she would not have the woman confined within the "narrow room" of the traditional love relationship as it has been defined by conventional mores and popular usage. Further, in this sequence Miss Millay has used sonnet form and the traditional trappings of the sonnet to aid her in achieving this meaning.

Critical comments on Fatal Interview are effusive in both directions and it is difficult to see how one sequence can simultaneously elicit such positive and negative responses. One of the most often charged criticisms is the book's lack of honesty. Several critical comments will point out the essence of the critics displeasure. Louis Untermeyer quotes Theodore Morrison as objecting:

> . . .the sonnets give the air of being manufactured, of being wonderously clever, an extraordinary simulation rather than the true substance of poetry.[53]

and in the London Times, "the sequence as a whole is rather verbally than truly impassioned. . .always at the pitch of romantic extravagance."[54]

It would appear to this reader of Fatal Interview that whether the sequence is encased in trappings which make it dishonest or whether Miss Millay's ability to manipulate and avail herself of all the advantages

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[52]Elizabeth Atkins, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times (Chicago, 1936), pp. 203-04.

[53]Louis Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry (New York, 1950), p. 458.

[54]Untermeyer, p. 458.

of the tradition begs the question somewhat. The question rather appears to be this: did she within the sonnet sequence tradition say anything new, anything worth saying? Norman Brittin in his book-length study on Miss Millay, although dealing fleetingly with Fatal Interview, nonetheless, strikes the core of the matter when he applauds and delineates the modernity of the group of sonnets.

Mr. Brittin points out that, first, the woman of the sequence is married and the lover of the sequence will come between the man and wife:

> The scar of this encounter like a sword
> Will lie between me and my troubled lord. (CP, 631)

This is an extra-marital relationship in the modern twentieth century concept of love and marriage. Second, the first poem anticipates the end and that, unlike traditional sequences, the end is the final breaking of the relationship. Third, Brittin sees the woman scorning coquetry and "love tactics" and disapproving of the possessiveness of love which has been its tradition throughout the centuries. Finally, this independent and high-minded woman finds a conflict of her instincts with a sense of honor,[55] certainly not a concern of woman in the love relationship of ages past. Thus, it is the modern note which Fatal Interview strikes while being true to all the traditions of the sonnet convention and form that makes it worthy of praise and attention. Miss Millay has confined her ideas within a "narrow room" much as her heroine has been confined by a conventional relationship.

A look at its title also gives insight to its modernity. The book

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[55] Norman A. Brittin, Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1967), p. 126.

was originally intended to be issued under the title of Twice Required which is a phrase taken from Sonnet XIV:

> Since of no creature living the last breath
> Is twice required, or twice the ultimate pain,
> Seeing how to quit your arms is very death,
> 'Tis likely that I shall not die again; (CP, 643)

The year 1931 was, however, Donne's tercentenary year and so the title was taken from his "Elegy XVI":

> By our first strange and fatall interview,
>
> * * *
>
> Thou shalt not love by wayes so dangerous.[56]

These two titles do give the reader of Fatal Interview an insight into the intent of the sequence as both imply a fatality and a mortality, not so much in the lover as he is consumed by the passion, but in the love itself and the mortality of the act of loving. This concept is contrary to the whole tenor and intent of the love poetry of pre-twentieth century poets.

Miss Millay has chosen the confinement of both the form and the tradition of the sonnet sequence in which to encase her comments on modern love and the woman's role in the modern love relationship. Here, she finds a narrow room of ambiguity of the struggle of independence versus dependence, and a narrow room of the traditional role of the woman in the man-woman relationship. She attempts to define woman's position within these narrow walls of tradition and begins pushing them back.

In what sense then is Fatal Interview so much a part of the tradition

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[56]John Donne, The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, ed., Charles M. Coffin (New York, 1952), p. 77.

of the sonnet sequence and is Miss Millay so much a student of the sonnet form? The sonnet sequence traditionally has been the exploration of the love relationship in many of its facets. The sequence has not generally been characterized by any tightly-knit situation or story but rather a delineation of the emotional movement in a love relationship, say from the birth of love to its culmination and full-flowering. The end result has often been a movement from earthly or physical love to transcendental love although this need not be the case.

Examined in this light, Fatal Interview can precisely be considered a part of the tradition. It records the woman's "responses to a passionate love affair from first attraction through ecstasies of consummation to the sorrows of break-up and eventually to resignation."[57] Sonnets I and LII deal with or have as their controlling image the Diana-Endymion story. The 50 sonnets in between imply a story and lead the reader through the gamut of emotion of passionate love. Sonnets I through XII tell of the beginning of the relationship, the first bittersweet ecstasies of love--a love combined with doubt and despair because it is an all-consuming passion.

> 'Swift wing, sweet blossom, live again in air!
> Depart, poor flower; poor feather you are free!'
> Thus do I cry, being teased by shame and care
> That beauty should be brought to terms by me;
> Yet shamed the more than in my heart I know,
> Cry as I may, I could not let you go. (CP, 639)

Sonnet XII marks a consummation of the relationship:

> Olympian gods, mark now my bedside lamp

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[57]Brittin, p. 124.

Blown out; and be advised too late that he
Whom you call sire is stolen into the camp
Of warring Earth, and lies abed with me.
Call out your golden hordes, the harm is done;
Enraptured in his great embrace I lie; (CP, 641)

Sonnets XIII through XXIV explore the many facets of the state of being in love--desire, regret, fascination, repulsion, joy; but the high point of the group and also the first chink in the wall is the rebellion against possessiveness expressed in Sonnet XX:

Think not, nor for a moment let your mind,
Wearied with thinking, doze upon the thought
That the work's done and the long day behind
And beauty, since 'tis paid for, can be bought.

* * *

you shall not hood her to your wrist,
Nor sting her eyes, nor have her for your own
In any fashion; beauty billed and kissed
Is not your turtle; treat her like a dove--
She loves you not; she never heard of love. (CP, 649)

This is followed by a separation of the lovers and the ensuing anguish which culminates in the decision of the final line of Sonnet XXIV "and I walk forth Hell's mistress. . .or my own." It reiterates the two tension building elements of the sequence this far: passion for love and desire for independence. The woman will not settle for less than independence but she wants her love also.

Sonnet XXV is a renewal of the love affair, and the woman reaffirms her passionate love with a comparison of herself with the great ladies of love of the past in Sonnet XXVI:

Women have loved before as I love now;
At least, in lively chronicles of the past--
Of Irish waters by a Cornish prow
Or Trojan waters by a Spartan mast
Much to their coast invaded--here and there,
Hunting the amorous line, skimming the rest,

I find some women bearing as I bear
Love like a burning city in the breast. (CP, 655)

But from that point there is no calm joy and a foreboding of the end is felt but not expressed. Sonnets XXVIII and XXIX express the carpe diem theme which is so common to love poetry, especially in the tradition of the sonnet:

When we are old and these rejoicing veins
Are frosty channels to a muted stream,
And out of all our burning there remains
No feeblest spark to fire us, even in dream,
This be our solace: that it was not said
When we were young and warm and in our prime,
Upon our couch we lay as like the dead,
Sleeping away the unreturning time. (CP, 657)

The first real premonition of grief and the transcience of love occurs in Sonnet XXXIII and the first notes of despair are struck:

Desolate dream pursue me out of sleep;
Weeping I wake; waking, I weep, I weep. (CP, 662)

After six sonnets which explore despair and a growing fear of the loss, the final break is made in Sonnet XXXIX which serves as the emotional climax of the sequence and is generally held to be one of the finest sonnets in the sequence:

Love me no more, now let the god depart,
If love be grown so bitter to your tongue!
Here is my hand; I bid you from my heart
Fare well, fare very well, be always young.
As for myself, mine was a deeper drouth:
I drank and thirsted still; but I surmise
My kisses are now sand against your mouth,
Teeth in your palm and pennies on your eyes.
Speak but one cruel word, to shame my tears;
Go, but in going, stiffen up my back
To meet the yelping of the mustering years--
Dim, trotting shapes that seldom will attack
Two with a light who match their steps and sing:
To one alone and lost, another thing. (CP, 668)

The final twelve sonnets of this sequence serve to describe the

end of the emotional ties of the relationship but they do not contain the expected falling off from emotional intensity. True the woman has her ups and downs in coping with her emotional loss but there is a counter-acting upswing of emotion, an almost, but not quite, joyous overcoming of the burden of grief and the surging of pride and independence at having emerged from the relationship, not untouched, but victoriously triumphant over love--its anguish and its despair. Wisdom is the result:

> O ailing Love, compose your struggling wing!
> Confess you mortal; be content to die.
> How better dead, than be this awkward thing
> Dragging in dust its feathers of the sky: (CP, 671)
>
> I know my mind and I have made my choice;
> Not from your temper does my doom depend;
> Love me or love me not, you have no voice
> In this, which is my portion to the end. (CP, 674)
>
> If in the years to come you should recall,
> When faint at heart or fallen on hungry days,
>
> * * *
>
> Indeed I think this memory, even then,
> Must raise you high among the run of men. (CP, 680)

Certainly this sequence is parallel to and incorporates all of the sequential conventions of the sonnet tradition from the emotional movement at the beginning to the transcendence at the end of the affair. It differs only in that the transcendence is not to some metaphysical plane but to a rather existential affirmation of the existence and supremacy of self. Both the lover and the loved-one have been elevated by the trials of passion and emerge stronger and wiser. The sequence is truly a fatal interview: "interview" because of its brevity and inability to hold sway as an undying immortal passion; "fatal" because it was fatal to the idea of the love itself and not to the lovers.

The individual sonnet also has throughout the years accreted to itself a number of conventions and traditions which Fatal Interview partakes, shares, and employs. Miss Millay's sequence utilizes them for advancement of her theme. Thus, she is working within the strict confines of her tradition and using this strictness for a modern theme.

One of the reasons why the sonnet has been considered so difficult is that it has repeatedly employed the extended metaphor within the single unit poem. This approach is not unique to the sonnet, but has certainly been the most popular form and often the quality of the sonnet has been determined by the ability of the poet to deftly enfold his extended metaphor into the strict rhyme and rhythm demands of the sonnet. Miss Millay's work is not deficient in this respect and Fatal Interview includes many superbly-used extended metaphors. One such example early in the sequence finds the woman confined in the prison of love. Her lover has imprisoned her with fingers neither "kind nor clean." The experience is made more poignant with the reference to the freedom of the crowds passing outside the prison, but the point of the metaphor is the woman's affinity with the others who have been sentenced and have awaited death within these same walls:

> Shall I be prisoner till my pulses stop
> To hateful Love and drag his noisy chain,
> And bait my need with sugared crusts that drop
> From jeweled fingers neither kind nor clean?--
> Mewed in an airless cavern where a toad
> Would grieve to snap his gnat and lay him down,
> While in the light along the rattling road
> Men shout and chaff and drive their wares to town?. . .
> Perfidious Prince, that keeps me here confined,
> Doubt not I know the letters of my doom:
> How many a man has left his blood behind
> To buy his exit from this mournful room

These evil stains record, these walls that rise
Carved with his torment, steamy with his sighs. (CP, 647)

Sonnet XLVI illustrates a different type of extended metaphor equally well used. Rather than the woman acting out a role in a dramatic metaphor of love, this sonnet utilizes the images of nature and sets up a series of equations between the seasons of the year and the seasons of the love relationship: the earliest kiss equals the budding flower but said flower is also freighted with the seeds of its own death; the last line of the sonnet marks the end of the relationship which was foretold by its own flowering. The woman is not an actor in but the originator of the metaphor because she has been able to comprehend its meaning:

Even in the moment of our earliest kiss,
When sighed the straitened bud into the flower,
Sat the dry seed of most unwelcome this;
And that I know, though not the day and hour.
Too season-wise am I, being country-bred,
To tilt at autumn or defy the frost:
Snuffing the chill even as my fathers did,
I say with them, "What's out tonight is lost."
I only hoped, with the mild hope of all
Who watch the leaf take shape upon the tree,
A fairer summer and a later fall
Than in these parts a man is apt to see,
And sunny clusters ripened for the wine:
I tell you this across the blackened vine. (CP, 675)

Thus, Miss Millay has made extensive use of the poem-length metaphor in Fatal Interview in keeping with the tradition of its use in the sonnet.

Another such tradition is the repetition of certain kinds of imagery, specifically references to mythology and the use of the trappings of the medieval period of history to add richness and overtones to the poetry. This sequence is not deficient in either of these kinds of imagery and it certainly avails itself of all the splendor that the comparisons can offer. As previously mentioned the enclosing sonnets are

mythologically oriented and carry overtones of those fabled times when men might be gods and the world was people with deities imbued with beauty and power, but a time when love could be fatal or end in disaster. In Sonnet I the poet sees herself casting off "winged helmet and heel" to journey "barefoot with mortal joy." Sonnet LII more clearly evokes the story of Diana and Endymion with the charge to "sleep forever in the Latmian cave," Endymion being another lover for whom the interview was not fatal. It concludes the sequence with the lines:

> Whereof she wanders mad, being all unfit
> For mortal love, that might not die of it. (CP, 681)

This is the conclusion and conclusive reference of Fatal Interview from one who may now, because she has experienced mortal love, not die of it--it has not been "fatal" to her.

The intervening sonnets are also interspersed with mythological references. These generally take the form of comparisons of the woman to famous lovers of the days of Greece and Troy such as Helen in Sonnet VI and Cressida in Sonnet XV. One complete poem describes and draws upon the woman's identification with Danae, Europa, Leda, and other mortal women who were supposed to have been loved by the gods:

> I dreamed I moved among the Elysian fields,
> In converse with sweet women long since dead;
> And out of blossoms which that meadow yields
> I wove a garland for your living head.
> Danae, that was the vessel for a day
> Of golden Jove, I saw, and at her side,
> Whom Jove the Bull desired and bore away,
> Europa stood, and the Swan's featherless bride.
> All these were mortal women, yet all these
> Above the ground had had a god for guest;
> Freely I walked beside them and at ease,
> Addressing them, by them again addressed,
> And marvelled nothing, for remembering you,
> Wherefore I was among them well I knew. (CP, 645)

The man, the lover, too, is characterized at this point in the sequence in terms of mythology; he is given all the qualities, not only of the perfect Greek male, but also with all the implications that the lover assumes the proportions of a deity. This is apparent in Sonnet XVI just quoted. Another brief reference reinforces this:

> but I shall bear a son
> Branded with godhead, heel and brow and thigh. (CP, 641)

But toward the end of the sequence as the love wanes, she more and more sees him, not as god-like, but as very human.

> If in the years to come you should recall,
> When faint at heart or fallen on hungry days,
> Or full of griefs and little if at all
> From them distracted by delights or praise
> When failing powers or good opinion lost
> Have bowed your neck, (CP, 680)

Most of the metaphors, similes and comparisons which are threaded through Fatal Interview are, however, taken from medieval times which tends to give them an antique, archaic flavor to the tone of the sequence. This statement will be repeated again and again as both diction and syntax are discussed, so it is perhaps best to deal here with the problem of why such a tone is desirable in this sequence. To say that it more nearly links this sequence with those of Shakespeare, Petrarch and the whole tradition is poor excuse for such usage. Rather, the ideas and conventions which Miss Millay explores are modern. Thus, we have modernity of idea juxtaposed against antiquity of form represented by these references to Medievalism. It is this dissimilarity that jolts the reader into an examination of the woman's vision and clarity as she describes, emotionalizes and intellectualizes her affair. The incongruity between the modernity and the antiquity gives tension and introspection to the

sequence.

Medieval imagery is more obvious in individual images and vocabulary than it is in extended metaphor although the prison sonnet, XVIII, is an example of its broadened use. There follow a number of quotations of lines or couplets which indicate how the accoutrements of the Middle Ages and the Age of Chivalry permeate the sequence:

> The scar of this encounter like a sword
> Will lie between me and my troubled lord. (CP, 631)

> Nay, learned doctor, these fine leeches fresh
> From the pond's edge my cause cannot remove;
>
> * * *
>
> And you, good friar, far liefer would I think
> Upon my dear, and dream him in your place, (CP, 633)

> you shall not hood her to your wrist,
> Nor sting her eyes, nor have her for your own
> In any fashion: (CP, 649)

> Feet running in the corridors, men quick-
> Buckling their sword-belts bumping down the stair,
> Challenge, and rattling bridge-chain, and the click
> Of hooves on pavement--this will clear the air. (CP, 653)

> Believe, if ever the bridges of this town,
> Whose towers were builded without fault or stain,
> Be taken, and its battlements go down,
> No mortal roof shall shelter me again; (CP, 666)

Falconry, castles, battlements, swords, lords and ladies--all of these recall what the modern reader supposes to be the romantic days of old when every knight was bold, every lady lovely. Symbolically this dim landscape of a medieval town and castle might represent a citadel of love which, in the course of the sequence, is ultimately vanquished. This is just what Miss Millay wishes to evoke so that she might make this knight and this lady appear out of step with this old and revered

tradition. As Ludwig Lewisohn has pointed out, the mood of the sequence is "pagan with a troubled conscience and a peaceless heart but it goes beyond paganism to the very heart of man's dilemmas."[58] This is precisely what the poet achieves by making her knight a modern man and her lady, a modern woman.

The same period is evoked for the same reasons by the use of archaic diction. By creating with her words the narrow world of ancient times, Miss Millay encloses and confines her emotions, the more so that the lady might struggle against this obsolete concept of the love duel as it has been understood in traditional poetry. O. W. Firkins has said that Miss Millay "conveys us into a world of primalities and finalities, a world in which the fountains of the great deep of human possibility are broken up, and the windows of heaven--or some contrasting, equally unearthy spot--are opened up."[59] Through such diction this is what Miss Millay opens up for the reader.

A brief listing of some of the words chosen will indicate the degree and depth to which Miss Millay has delved to produce words with the flavor of the past: pearled and roseate plain, winged, liefer, philtre, noddle (head), gaoler, ichor, dragon, kennel (gutter), legend (inscription), sire, sanguine, harry, forsworn, brooch, vessel, bethought, mewed, wares, sooth, mephitic, patchouli, feudal, kinsman, leman, dolorous, tumbrel. Even the spelling has an antique quality as she has chosen the older British spellings instead of the Americanized versions: colour for

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[58]Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. 580.

[59]O. W. Firkins, "The Reascending Sonnet," Saturday Review, VII (May 2, 1931), 793.

color; centre for center; clamour for clamor; as well as using the older practice for marking words with accent marks to indicate their two-syllable pronunciation as in winged and learned. It might be pointed out that these archaisms in diction become more infrequent as the sequence progresses and the woman becomes more independent and is able to overcome the power of this love over her, as if to say she had also overcome this ancient, outmoded concept of love represented by this kind of diction.

The syntax of Fatal Interview must acknowledge a debt to that syntax of the tradition. This syntactical style has been characterized by convolution, repeated phrasing, and long sentences which include many lines. These conventions have largely been dictated by two things: the fact that many of the important and imitated sonnets and sequences were written during an early period when this style and syntax were the accepted usage, but also the fact that the sonnet form itself with its strict meter and rhyme scheme has made it necessary for poets, in order to fulfill both of these requirements, to rework word order and extend sentences to suit their medium. Tradition aside, however, such disordered and tortured syntactical arrangements suit the emotional mood of the poet attempting to portray the mind and feelings in a similar state. An example will illustrate the technique:

> No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise
> How love may be acquired and how conserved
> Warrants this laying bare before your eyes
> My needle to your north abruptly swerved;
> If I would hold you, I must hid my fears
> Lest you be wanton, lead you to believe
> My compass to another quarter veers,
> Little surrender, lavishly receive. (CP, 632)

The real tour de force of the sonneteer is, however, the single

sentence sonnet, fourteen lines before an end-stop is reached. Still retaining the four-part Elizabethan structure, Miss Millay illustrates her abilities in Sonnet XI:

> Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
> Or rich with red corundum or with blue,
> Locked, and the key withheld, as other girls
> Have given their loves, I give my love to you;
> Not in a lovers'-knot, not in a ring
> Worked in such a fashion, and the legend plain--
> Semper fidelis, where a secret spring
> Kennels a drop of mischief from the brain:
> Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
> Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
> As one should bring you cowslips in a hat
> Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
> I bring you, calling out as children do:
> "Look what I have!--And these are all for you." (CP, 640)

Oscar Cargill has commented on the form of Fatal Interview that there is "no element of falseness in their building," they are technically flawless and verbally rich and musical.[60] While this assessment is perhaps a bit injudicious and lacking in balance, nonetheless, in matters of form, the sonnets of the sequence rank with the best in the language. Miss Millay, true to the tradition in this as in everything else, has wrought no great innovations of form in this sequence. The sonnets utilize the Shakespearian rhyme scheme, but in nearly half of the sonnets the final couplet is incorporated into a sestet which becomes a firm unit in the manner of the Petrarchan sonnet. Here are several examples which illustrate her standard usage. In Sonnet XXIX, examine lines 9-14 with the traditional third quatrain plus the couplet in the Shakespearian mode:

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[60]Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America: Ideas on the March (New York, 1941), p. 646.

All that delightful youth forbears to spend
Molestful age inherits, and the ground
Will have us; therefore, while we're young, my friend--
The Latin's vulgar, but the advice is sound.
Youth, have no pity; leave no farthing here
For age to invest in compromise and fear. (CP, 658)

But in Sonnet XXX she makes one kind of change to the last few lines by breaking not at the couplet position after line twelve, but after line thirteen to give line fourteen that added stress:

It well may be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would. (CP, 659)

The more common change in the sequence is, however, to make these last six lines a sense unit as has already been noted:

How simple 'tis, and what a little sound
It makes in breaking, let the world attest:
It struggles, and it fails; and the world goes round,
And the moon follows it. Heart in my breast,
'Tis half a year now since you broke in two;
The world's forgotten well, if the world knew. (CP, 679)

But through all of these minor changes she retains the Shakespearian rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg.

Several other poetic devices which have been common to traditional poetry, especially to the sonnet, are the caesura, assonance, consonance, apostrophe, and personification. The caesura is used with differing emphasis in a number of individual sonnets such as coupled by the word however in Sonnets II and VII but the sestet in Sonnet XI exhibits a more usefully poetic display:

Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
As one should bring you cowslips in a hat

Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
I bring you, calling out as children do:
"Look what I have!--And these are all for you." (CP, 640)

The examples of well used alliteration do not abound in the sequence as well they shouldn't, for she uses the device, not obviously or overgenerously, but judiciously and with effective results as the "c" sound in Sonnet XI:

Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
Or rich with red corundum or with blue (CP, 640)

and the "m" sound in Sonnet IV:

Breathes but one mortal on the teeming globe
Could minister to my soul's or body's needs--
Physician minus physic, minus robe;
Confessor minus Latin, minus beads.
Yet should you bid me name him, I am dumb;
For though you summon him, he would not come. (CP, 633)

and the consonances in the "c" sounds in this passage:

I find again the pink camellia bed
On the wide step, beside a silver comb. . . .
But it is scentless; up the marble stair (CP, 650)

Assonance, a more subtle technique, is also well used as in "Gone in good sooth you are:" and "His wing is limed and his wild virtue tamed," and "what you cannot do/ Is bow me down, who have been loved by you." Apostrophe, that poetic device of address so commonly used in traditional effusive poetry, is employed in a number of instances in the sequence:

O sweet, O heavy-lidded, O my love, (CP, 657)

"Sweet Love, sweet cruel Love, have pity!" (CP, 634)

Oh, monstrous parting, oh, perfidious deed, (CP, 642)

O ailing Love, compose your struggling wing! (CP, 671)

Finally, personification is not a device strange to Fatal Interview

as Night is found in Sonnet VII:

> Night is my sister, and how deep in love,
> How drowned in love and weedily washing ashore,
>
> * * *
>
> No one but Night, with tears on her dark face,
> Watches beside me in this windy place. (CP, 636)

and Time in Sonnet XIV:

> And likely 'tis that Time whose gross decree
> Sends now the dawn to clamour at our door,
> Thus having done his evil worst to me, (CP, 643)

and Falsehood in Sonnet XXIII:

> I know the face of Falsehood and her tongue
> Honeyed with unction, plausible with guile
> Are dear to men, whom count me not among,
> That own their daily credit to her smile; (CP, 652)

All these devices are the trappings of the traditional form so closely does Fatal Interview adhere to the conventions of the sonnets and sonneteers of the past. But in no way should this imply that these devices are used for the sake of devices. Rather, they are an integral part of the tone and mood of the sequence, or as Francis Curley says, "Rarely does she use a figure that is not in harmony both with its fellows and the emotional quality of the whole."[61]

The final element or poetic device which has been so much a part of the apparel of the sonnet is that of the adoption of a persona or a voice with which the poet speaks. Fatal Interview is no exception to the general convention that the poet is seemingly speaking in her own voice, a first person point of view. The danger inherent in this point of view

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[61]Curley, p. 168.

is that the poetry will be too personal, too subjective to attract the attention of the reader or as Harriet Monroe charges, "permitting its [intellect's] guiding hand to loosen its grip on the emotional life and leave passion too powerfully in control?"[62] June Nelson, however, holds the opposite point of view and points out that in this sequence, unlike Miss Millay's earlier work, there is the "presence of a vis-a-vis" and that the poet with her use of the persona is

> thinking, comparing, analyzing, remembering. She puts thought between herself and every passionate moment. . . .She is talking to someone; trying to share, not an experience, but a thought about an experience. . . .[63]

Thus, Fatal Interview not merely reflects a powerful overflow of emotion, but, like its predecessors, gains universality because it is a conscious comment on love, a universal experience which through Miss Millay's masterful control of form and images touches not the emotional alone but also intellectual roots of this very universal experience.

It has been shown that in structure, form and poetic devices this sequence rests upon the long history of the sonnet sequence tradition. Miss Millay, to elaborate and underscore her theme, has very deliberately used all the devices of the love sonnet tradition to better point out the difference between her concept of love and that concept of love represented by the sonnet tradition of the past.

Against this backdrop of medieval imagery or what one critic has

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[62]Harriet Monroe, "Advance or Retreat?" Poetry, XXXVIII (July, 1931), 217.

[63]June Nelson, "Miss Millay's Fatal Interview," Standard, January 1932, pp. 145-46.

called "fifty-two Gobelin tapestries,"[64] Miss Millay, exploring perhaps the oldest subject of poetry, sees with the eyes of a modern woman as "she treats of love. . .with a connoisseur's enjoyment of all its hues and shades of feeling."[65] But the sequence is more than just a search for a metaphor for love; it is more than Norman Brittin would have us believe when he indicates that there is "no new philosophical territory."[66] He finds in Fatal Interview the feminist, the hedonist, and the rebel of earlier volumes, who praises beauty, defies time, and glorifies fulfillment while it lasts, and "explores the emotional vicissitudes of woman in love."[67]

What Mr. Brittin ignores is the references to time within the sequence and the fact that unlike her other group of sonnets early published in Reedy's Mirror, this is a sequence which has a conclusion. These two elements have caused critic June Nelson to comment that these sonnets, unlike her earlier ones, are less personal, less subjective. "Their frank intention is to be understood."[68] And what must be understood is that the sequence as a whole takes a position, reaches a conclusion, and advances a statement. And this is why numerous critics have repeatedly commented on the intellectualizing and emotional remove of the sequence.

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[64] Curley, p. 166.

[65] Walter F. Taylor, A History of American Letters (New York, 1936), p. 430.

[66] Brittin, p. 128.

[67] Brittin, p. 128.

[68] Nelson, p. 148.

In exploring this area of statement the analysis must deal with several conflicts which are dominant in the sequence to determine just what statement it is that Miss Millay is making about her subject of love. The following conflicts are present in the sequence: time versus death; intellectuality versus passion; debilitating love versus the independent spirit; and the ideal man-woman relationship versus the conventional-traditional relationship. An examination of some of the individual sonnets throughout the group will indicate how Miss Millay has created and then refined these conflicts which she sees inherent in the love relationship.

In the earlier discussion of the images, mention was not made of the large preponderance of natural and animal images which make up Miss Millay's work here. One of these areas of comment of the group deals with the intellect (areas of control) versus passion (areas of lack of control where the instincts of desire and need are the ruling forces.) This theme or aspect of love is developed with the opening sonnet where the poet with winged helmet and heel is saying:

> What sweet emotions neither foe nor friend
> Are these that clog my flight? What thing is these
> That hastening headlong to a dusty end
> Dare turn upon me these proud eyes of bliss? (CP, 630)

This opening motif is further developed and enlarged in Sonnet II with the whole sonnet devoted to describing love as a "beast":

> This beast that rends me in the sight of all,
> This love, this longing, this oblivious thing,
> That has me under as the last leaves fall,
> Will glut, will sicken, will be gone by spring.
> The wound will heal, the fever will abate,
> The knotted hurt will slacken in the breast; (CP, 631)

Sonnet III further develops this idea, not with animal imagery, but with

the much-used device of making the lover a compass, powerless to move in any but the direction of the loved one:

> No lack of counsel from the shrewd and wise
> How love may be acquired and how conserved
> Warrants this laying bare before your eyes
> My needle to your north abruptly swerved; (CP, 632)

And in speaking with her lord, the lady envisions herself:

> If I have flung my heart unto a hound
> I have done ill, it is a certain thing: (CP, 648)

In Sonnet XXXV, as the affair is reaching its end, the poet describes the remnants of her love and passion in terms of a ruined garden:

> Clearly my ruined garden as it stood
> Before the frost came on it I recall--
>
> * * *
>
> Though summer's rife and warm rose in season,
> Rebuke me not: I have a winter reason. (CP, 664)

In all these examples the poet clearly regrets and rues the ravages of nature, the results of the beast in her. And when love is gone and the passion stilled, the lady would spend one last night with him, not in abuse and retribution, but in discussion, albeit vindictive discussion directed against:

> senators and popes and such small fry
> And meet the morning standing, and at odds
> With heaven and earth and hell and any fool
> Who calls his soul his own, and all the gods,
> And all the children getting dressed for school. . . (CP, 669)

This kind of discussion is in direct contrast to her non-intellectuality when she was in the throes of her passion.

The crowning statement of the death of passion and the return to intellectuality and reason is found in Sonnet XLIV where she finds herself alone again and takes down her old gods from the shelf:

If to be left were to be left alone,
And lock the door and find one's self again--
Drag forth and dust Penates of one's own
That in a corner all too long have lain;
Read Brahms, read Chaucer, set the chessmen out
In classic problem, stretch the shrunken mind
Back to its stature on the rack of thought (CP, 673)

But with the loss of love the days are endless and empty, "Loud days that have no meaning and no end." Thus, one of the first themes that the poet explores in Fatal Interview is the intellect versus the passion, and she finds there a dichotomy of body and mind--with the physicality holding sway at the height of love. It is woman's role according to convention to be imprisoned in this kind of "narrow room." It is a masculine reaction to set out the chessmen and stretch the shrunken mind and the poet resents this domination of mind by the physical body and returns to the old pasttimes with sorrow but relief that she is once again in control "to lock the door and find oneself again," for she considers being oneself an intellectual rather than just a physical state.

A second and ancillary statement on love is discovered when noting the frequent references to love as a disease, not only in this sequence but in the whole tradition, as well as noting the frequent references to love as a condition of imprisonment. Again Miss Millay examines love in this regard and finds it lacking when she sees love as a debilitating force, sapping the independent spirit. This is especially true of the woman's role which has always been that of being subordinate to the male.

The first of these images is found in Sonnet IV which begins:

Nay, learnèd doctor, these fine leeches fresh
From the pond's edge my cause cannot remove;
Alas, the sick disorder in my flesh
Is deeper than your skill, is very love. (CP, 633)

and, of course, the conclusion is that:

> Breathes but one mortal on the teeming globe
> Could minister to my soul's or body's needs-- (CP, 633)

The lover is the cause of the disease and, therefore, the only one who can relieve her suffering. The sonnet immediately following, Sonnet V, presents the jail motif and the lady concludes:

> But that my chains throughout their iron length
> Make such a golden clank upon my ear,
> But that I would not, boasted I the strength,
> Up with a terrible arm and out of here
> Where thrusts my morsel daily through the bars
> This tall, oblivious gaoler eyed with stars. (CP, 634)

This sonnet presents an interesting aspect of the problem for the lady dislikes imprisonment in love and would be free but even if she could, she would not free herself if it meant relinquishing the love. To use an expression, she is "damned if she does" and "damned if she doesn't." Neither the imprisonment of love nor the emptiness of freedom are desirable alternatives. This is one of the flaws Miss Millay is painting in the love relationship as it exists for modern woman.

Sonnet XVIII repeats this same image and the lady chastises love and addresses it as "hateful Love." These images, all occurring in the earlier part of the sequence and illustrating the debilitating and demeaning aspects of love are counterbalanced by a number of sonnets positioned in the latter part of the group which demand the independent spirit and release from this emotion and the resulting debasing of the human spirit. This attitude was recognized early in the sequence as in the sestet of Sonnet X:

> "Swift wing, sweet blossom, live again in air!
> Depart, poor flower; poor feather you are free!"
> Thus, do I cry, being teased by shame and care

That beauty should be brought to terms by me;
Yet shamed the more that in my heart I know,
Cry as I may, I could not let you go. (CP, 639)

But the woman was powerless against it and would have her way with love:

Whereas at morning in a jeweled crown
I bit my fingers and was hard to please,

* * *

Lulled by the uproar, I could lie serene
And sleep, until all's won, until all's lost,
And the door's opened and the issue shown,
And I walk forth Hell's mistress. . .or my own. (CP, 653)

She realizes the danger involved in such abandonment of spirit to love in the following sonnet dealing with that "glorying in danger which was typical of Elizabethan men, but which they prohibited to women."[69] She says:

Peril upon the paths of this desire
Lies like the natural darkness of the night,
For me unpeopled; let him hence retire
Whom as a child a shadow could affright;

* * *

let him alone remain,
Lanterned but by the longing in the eye,
And warmed but by the fever in the vein,
To lie with me, sentried from wrath and scorn
By sleepless Beauty and her polished thorn. (CP, 654)

However, the independent spirit does assert itself at the end of the affair and the relinquishing is not easy but the poet would answer the kind of love she has experienced at this juncture of the affair:

Oh, tortured voice, be still!
Spare me your premise: leave me when you will. (CP, 667)

O ailing Love, compose your struggling wing!
Confess you mortal; be content to die.
How better dead, than be this awkward thing

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[69]Atkins, p. 226.

Dragging in dust its feathers of the sky; (CP, 671)

I know my mind and I have made my choice;
Not from your temper does my doom depend;
Love me or love me not, you have no voice
In this, which is my portion to the end.

* * *

What you cannot do
Is bow me down, who have been loved by you. (CP, 674)

The woman will not let love or its lack from this man be her undoing. She demands and regains control of her emotions as in the same sonnet:

Mistake me not--unto my inmost core
I do desire your kiss upon my mouth;

but she will have it on her own terms or not at all. She is finally able to confess and her pride asserts itself as she admits:

Well, I have lost you; and lost you fairly;
In my own way, and with my full consent. (CP, 676)

She realizes that on other terms than her own she could have remained his lover a little while longer:

If I had loved you less or played you slyly
I might have held you for a summer more,
But at the cost of words I value highly
And no such summer as the one before. (CP, 676)

Unlike the traditional loved one, she will not be undone by this love and perish of it:

Should I outlive this anguish--and men do--
I shall have only good to say of you. (CP, 676)

Thus, Miss Millay has outlined her second requirement for woman in modern love. Not only must love not rob the loved one of his intellectuality and appeal only on an instinctive level, but it also must leave the spirit free. Anything less is disease or tantamount to captivity. True love only exists when the lovers are free.

But acting or struggling against mind and spirit, the conventional concept of the love relationship also has a third foe--Time. This is, of course, a traditional subject of love poetry and ghosts of poets of past ages intently listening to "time's winged chariots" stand behind every reference to it. Poets of the past, especially sonneteers, have tried to find a transcendence or immortality for the love; to make it live beyond its instant of mortality. Miss Millay very frankly says it is not so. This love will die, and if not, will remain only as a pleasant memory--not as an immortal passion. And the sequence itself records this death, this passing on, not of love, but of this love. It is with this subject she will come to terms as she begins Sonnet I:

> What thing is this that, built of salt and lime
> And such dry motes as in the sunbeam show,
> Has power upon me that do daily climb
> The dustless air? (CP, 630)

and in this first sonnet she predicts its end and says "Go labouring to a doom I may not feel, . . ."

It is true that occasionally throughout the sequence she imagines or wishes for immortality for herself or for her lover and she tries on all the conventions of the traditional attitude:

> But pass in silence the mute grave of two
> Who lived and died believing love was true. (CP, 660)

> Never shall he inherit what was mine,
> When Time and all his tricks have done their worst,
> Still when I hold you dear, and him accurst. (CP, 661)

But in Sonnet XLI she admits or charges him that she was aware of the result of their relationship as she refers back to Sonnet I, "I said in the beginning, did I not?--" and she sees herself alone facing advancing time and age with no crumb or immortality to offer herself:

To meet the yelping of the mustering years--
Dim, trotting shapes that seldom will attack
Two with a light who match their steps and sing:
To one alone and lost, another thing. (CP, 668)

And further in Sonnet XLVIII she sees love as, not moving to a new and higher plateau, but as a descent, a moving backward, as she tries to regain herself:

Now by the path I climbed, I journey back.
The oaks have grown; I have been long away.
Taking with me your memory and your lack
I now descend into a milder day;
Stripped of your love, unburdened of my hope,
Descend the path I mounted from the plain; (CP, 677)

This is illuminated by the fact that the last three sonnets of the sequence are timed at least a half year after the affair is finished and the lady attests that within that time--a brief half year--"the world's forgotten well, if the world knew." In Sonnet LI the poet's concern is not how she has been immortalized by her love and how their love will live on, but what she has learned and what she has become as a result of their affair. She imagines him, not as returning god-like in stature, but as one with failing powers or "good opinion lost" and she envisions that even if she should be dead, their affair "must raise you high among the run of men." But she is not assigning any metaphysical transcendence, any immortality to their affair--and when he dies, even that memory will be dead.

James Gray has said, "It is because she was bold enough to examine the problem of the psychological distance between man and woman--one that cannot be breached and should not be violated--that Edna Millay may be said to have made an original contribution to the literature of the

love duel."[70] Her original contribution is not so much a delineation of psychological distance between man and woman as it is the woman's role in that relationship as it has been determined by convention and as she would like to have it be determined by herself. Miss Millay is deploring the conventional role of the woman in such an affair who, as tradition and history have it, gives up her mind, her spirit, her pride, and her independence. Her reward was to be that she was not only gratified by her love but she was made immortal by it. Miss Millay is denying, not that this has not been true, but that this is desirable and as modern woman, she would not see the female partner confined within the "narrow room" of traditional love as has been defined by convention and social mores.

Miss Millay has made her comments more poignant and penetrating because she has encased her condemnation of the woman's traditional confining role within a showcase of the splendor of conventions of the sonnet sequence as they have been used in the history of the form. Fatal Interview is a traditional sonnet sequence complete with all the trappings, the form, the imagery, the subjects: time, passion, and death. But she denies to these trappings their traditional, their time-honored purpose. She has given these trappings their modern definition and this is why critics have complained that "it springs from no inner compulsion."[71] It does spring from an inner compulsion but the critics are misreading that compulsion.

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[70] Gray, p. 19

[71] Walton, p. 481.

CHAPTER V

THE NARROW ROOM OF THE NATURE OF MAN

Throughout a long and distinguished history, the love motif has been a particular favorite of the sonneteer and sonnet sequence. The most famous single and collected poems in the tradition which come to mind are concerned with the love theme: Sidney's Astrophel and Stella, Spenser's Amoretti, Mrs. Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, as well as Shakespeare's most memorable sequence of the persona's relationship with the "man right fair" and "a woman colored ill." All have as their subject some facet of the eternal love relationship.

This does not mean that the sonnet has not been a viable form for other subjects, nor does it mean that the tradition does not have a number of notable examples of sonnets written on other themes. John Donne, for instance, saw in the sonnet a perfect vehicle to contain the message and feeling of his religious fervor and he employed the sequence to create the Holy Sonnets. Milton was another poet who returned to the past, writing sonnets for one of its earliest known uses as a "poem concerned with a specific, detached subject, it might be a public event, great personage, or special occasion."[72] And the English Romantic poets wrote non-love sonnets such as Wordsworth's "Composed on Westminster Bridge" and his sequence "Ecclesiastical Sonnets"; Keats' "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"; and Shelley's brilliantly well wrought "Ozymandias."

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[72]Patrick Cruttwell, The English Sonnet (London, 1966), p. 28.

Modern poetry has also seen the use of the sonnet form for more serious purposes with such works as Rupert Brooke's sonnets on war, patriotism and honor; W. H. Auden's Journey to War, and any number of Robert Frost's individual sonnet variations. But the one sequence in modern poetry which stands apart from these is Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Epitaph for the Race of Man." It is one of the few consciously conceived and constructed sonnet sequences of the 20th century which doesn't have as its main focus the subject of romantic love. It adds a new dimension to the sonnet tradition in modern American poetry for as one critic remarks, "I know of nothing in American literature to compare in scope and grandeur of intellectual grasp and eloquence to 'Epitaph for the Race of Man'."[73]

This sequence certainly adds a new dimension to the poetry of Miss Millay and shows that she had something more to say than the usual analysis of love. As Louis Untermeyer said, "she turns from the prettiness and pangs of love and concerns herself with the bewildered and self-torturing human spirit."[74] Harold Cook, in the long essay which introduces the 1937 Millay Bibliography by Yost, contrasts "Epitaph for the Race of Man" with Fatal Interview, her other sonnet sequence of the same period. Cook points out that Fatal Interview is lyric and personal while "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is epic and impersonal; the images of Fatal Interview are bounded by intimacy of emotion while "Epitaph" has images of space and magnitude; and Fatal Interview has mingled

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[73]Eastman, p. 83.

[74]Untermeyer, p. 458.

figures and symbols from most various sources, while "Epitaph for the Race of Man" has imagery of heaven and earth which become the very poem itself."[75] Cook feels that taken together these two sequences are one of the glories of American poetry.

"Epitaph for the Race of Man" was a project of considerable importance to Miss Millay and a number of years elapsed between the initial projection of the theme and poems and their actual publication as a sequence in 1934. Edmund Wilson reports that in 1920 Miss Millay was working on a long poem in iambic tetrameter for which she had that early indicated the title "Epitaph for the Race of Man." Eight years later the St. Louis Post-Dispatch published only ten sonnets under that title. The Yale Library's typescripts in the Ficke Collection indicate that problems of organization and alternation troubled her before publishing the sequence as an eighteen-sonnet unit.[76] Although this sequence is published later than either "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" (1922) or Fatal Interview (1931), it was being conceived and executed during the period when both of them were also being formed. It not only differs from these other two sonnets in theme, but "Epitaph for the Race of Man" shows Miss Millay's poetry as being objective and philosophical.

Reviews both positive and negative have likewise been the fate of this sequence as with the other two Millay sequences. The main charge against "Epitaph for the Race of Man" opened by the critics is that in

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[75]Harold L. Cook, "Introduction," to Karl Yost's A Bibliography of the Works of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1937), pp. 43-44.

[76]Brittin, p. 129.

this sequence Miss Millay says what she said before and as a result the sequence "doesn't come off,"[77] or as Winfield Townley Scott said,

> I like a couple of these as well as anything Edna Millay has ever written, but as a whole it is a sequence that suffers from repetitiousness and from the later grand manner of the poet. . . .
>
> Two of the sonnets are certainly among her best; the much admired "See where Capella with her golden kids" and the not enough admired "Observe how Miyanoshita cracked in two." (By the way, if the reader will look at that sonnet and then at the two immediately following he will see what I mean by the repetitiousness: how immediately the poet says over again, not once but twice, what she has just said and has said better.) [78]

But the opposite point of view is expressed by Cook, who praises her "masterly control" of sonnet form and sees it reaching a culmination with a subject of magnitude in "Epitaph for the Race of Man," and by Norman Brittin who also acknowledges the quality of the sequence when he indicates:

> Critics have paid more attention to the panoramic breadth of imagination these sonnets exhibit than to their technique, which is generally excellent. [79]

Thematically, Miss Millay was attempting to create in poetry her vision of man and the universe in this sequence. In her personal and public life Miss Millay struggled against and fought injustice.[80] This sequence is an extension of that struggle. In explaining her theme of

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[77]Chubb, p. 176.

[78]Scott, pp. 337-38.

[79]Brittin, p. 131.

[80]Louise Bogan, "Conversion into Self," Poetry, XXXXV (February, 1935), 155.

the projection of the extinction of man[81] she also projects her displeasure with the theme of injustice for in the eighteen sonnets she summarizes the biological, eventual, and emotional record of man. Miss Millay evidently did not intend the sequence to be regarded as a "gloomy, dispiriting pronouncement."[82] In 1941 she told her friend Grace King that "Epitaph for the Race of Man" was her "challenge to men to thrust out the 'bad cell'" and that she was expressing her "heart-felt tribute to the magnificence of man."[83]

What becomes increasingly clear as the sonnets are studied and read is that, in prognosticating the end of the race of man, Miss Millay was attempting to point out not only man's beauty and magnificence but also his smallness and his limitations. She saw man as living in a "narrow room" bounded by his humanity; his weaknesses are the limitations of the race. "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is a larger and more universal facet of the theme of the "narrow room" than either of the other sequences discussed. Miss Millay sees woman confined within the enclosure of society and cultural mores as in "Sonnets from the Ungrafted Tree" and Fatal Interview. On a broader level, and more far-reaching in scope, she sees mankind confined and doomed to extinction by his humanness. Thus, she defines the human condition and sees the fate of man:

> O race of Adam, blench not lest you find
> In the sun's bubbling bowl anonymous death,
> Or lost in whistling space without a mind

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[81] Rice, p. 570

[82] Brittin, p. 131.

[83] Brittin, p. 131.

To monstrous Nothing yield your little breath:
You shall achieve destruction where you stand,
In intimate conflict, at your brother's hand. (CP, 715)

As is the case with the other sonnet sequences, Miss Millay's mastery and control of form is superbly suitable when the form is seen as a coupling and as an extension of her subject matter. While it might at first seem that a subject of broad scope and grandeur was not appropriate to be treated in the sonnet form, nevertheless, the sonnet has qualities, as Miss Millay employs it, which are admirably fitted to her subject. While Mr. Cook felt that consistently Miss Millay was less interested in craftsmanship than in the intrinsic poetry of her subject, he said of "Epitaph for the Race of Man" and the poetry of her later years that "its rooms are marvelously suited to their guests."[84]

The subject matter or, as Mr. Cook would have it, "the guests" of this sequence can best be assessed by first taking a look at the sequence as a whole to determine the unifying elements. The sequence of eighteen sonnets has no consciously conceived story such as is found in "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" nor does it trace one of the basic human emotions through its many phases as in Fatal Interview. The subject content is based rather on an idea, the nature and fate of the human race, and its main intent through the series of sonnets is to create thoughtful reflection rather than vicarious experience or poignant emotion.

The sequence begins with a projection of the demise of the planet earth, at once announcing its cosmic intentions as the poet suggests the earth's end will come about as a result of stars leaving their courses

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[84]Cook, p. 13.

and the earth finding itself on a collision path with the star Vega in the constellation of the Lyre:

> Before this cooling planet shall be cold,
> Long, long before the music of the Lyre,
> Like the faint roar of distant breakers rolled
> On reefs unseen, when wind and flood conspire
> To drive the ship inshore-- (CP, 701)

Later in the sonnet, however, the poet reduces her attention from the universe to the inhabitants of the earth. She observes that before such a collision takes place that

> Earth will have come upon a stiller day,
> Man and his engines be no longer here. (CP, 701)

This is the subject and the main intent of the sequence: to determine why, on the day which is the end of all things, man will no longer be here to observe that end. The sestet of the sonnet then concludes with this image of one of the still living inhabitants of earth on that day of destruction.

> High on his naked rock the mountain sheep
> Will stand alone against the final sky,
> Drinking a wind of danger new and deep,
> Staring on Vega with a piercing eye,
> And gather up his slender hooves and leap,
> From crag to crag down Chaos, and so go by. (CP, 701)

In this first sonnet Miss Millay has introduced and projected her three concerns in the entire sequence. First, she is intent upon showing man as not the center, but as part of the entire physical universe. Second, she is concerned with the qualities of man, both his strengths and weaknesses, which foretell his eventual destruction. Third, the sequence sees man as a part of the natural world and attempts to fix his place in regard to nature, especially the nature of the animal world. While the sequence may represent "her misgivings at its most

bleak,"[85] the main intent of the sequence does not seem to be to imbue the reader with a fatalistic terror of his own end, but rather to exemplify Wordsworth's statement that "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." By giving the reader this knowledge, he might throw off the constriction of his vision and alter the course of destruction at least until the cosmos so wills it. The next pages will explore Miss Millay's concern with these three aspects of her theme.

The sequence as a whole is divisible into what seems to be consciously arranged sections. Sonnets I-V, while indicating the end of man as already seen in Sonnet I, also pictures the whole breadth of the history of the earth from a primeval past to a far distant future. Sonnet II shows the evolutionary processes of life as it tells of the life cycle of one of the mightiest and earliest of earth's inhabitants:

> The dinosaur at morning made his way
> And dropped his dung upon the blazing dew;
>
> * * *
>
> He woke and hungered and rose and stalked his prey,
> And slept contented, in a world he knew.
> In punctual season, with the race in mind,
> His consort held aside her heavy tail,
> And took the seed; and heard the seed confined
> Roar in her womb; and then made a nest to hold
> A hatched-out conqueror. . .but to no avail:
> The veined and fertile eggs are long since cold. (CP, 702)

But as is the way of nature, and perhaps higher on the evolutionary scale, the way of man with the possibility of perpetuating his own kind, the dinosaur is incapable of averting his own extinction. Sonnet III also focuses on another primeval creature, a cretaceous bird, who

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[85] Gray, p. 15.

succumbed to extinction at the same time that a stronger, more powerful creature, man, "But lately crawled, and climbing up the shore?" (CP, 703) Then, in Sonnet IV the poet describes this creature who but lately came out of the ooze at his full potential in a later time:

> Of Man, who when his destiny was high
> Strode like the sun into the middle sky
> And shone an hour,
>
> * * *
>
> Man, with his singular laughter, his droll tears,
> His engines and his conscience and his art, (CP, 704)

This sonnet is, however, addressed to the planet earth. The poet chastises the earth and nature for not being able to differentiate between the conscious engines, conscience, and art of man and the natural functions of the rest of the animals for, to the earth, man

> Made but a simple sound upon your ears:
> The patient beating of the animal heart. (CP, 704)

The sonnet implies that because nature does not distinguish him from the other animals, man with extra-animal endowments is responsible for his own fate.

Sonnet V, the last sonnet of the first section, records a time when man is gone and nothing is left but a skull of man, a "toothy gourd" and the poet laments that nothing is left to

> . . .tell the marvel of the human brain?
> Heavy with music once this windy shell,
> Heavy with knowledge of the clustered stars; (CP, 705)

The first five sonnets, then, project not just the history of man but the history of earth, assigning to man his role. To the natural world, man will, like Ozymandias, have nothing to show for his "marvel of a human brain" as the sands, lonely and level, stretch far away.

Norman Brittin would divide the remaining thirteen sonnets into three sections saying that VI through XI illustrate man's heroic capacity, that XII and XIII indicate his alienation from nature, and that XIV through XVII emphasize his tendencies to self-destruction which culminate in the extinction of the race.[86] This breakdown seems inaccurate. It appears that Sonnets XII and XIII should be grouped with the last set rather than standing alone. These two sonnets speak of an alienation from nature and man's inability to associate himself with natural creatures' instinct to survive. This may well be another facet of man's tendencies to self-destruction as described in the last set.

Before Miss Millay can warn of these tendencies she must point out all man's glories and virtues. This is the first theme of the sequence. Sonnet VI pictures Egyptian slave labor acting out their rulers' will toward immortality in building pyramids so that

> The kings of Egypt; even as long ago
> Under these constellations, with long eye
> And scented limbs they slept, and feared no foe.
> Their will was law; their will was not to die:
> And so they had their way; or nearly so. (CP, 706)

The first virtue that Miss Millay assigns to man is his tremendously strong will to impose himself on time and beyond it.

Sonnet VII poses the problem of survival and the poet shows how man protects himself, not through superior strength, but through intelligence and cunning. The predator is a beast of nature:

> He heard the coughing tiger in the night
> Push at his door; close by his quiet head
> About the wattled cabin the soft tread

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[86] Brittin, p. 119.

Of heavy feet he followed, and the slight
Sight of the long banana leaves; (CP, 707)

But because of his shelter, "his engine," and "his art," the primitive man protects himself and lives:

What time the Centaur and the Cross were spent,
Night and the beast retired into the hill,
Whereat serene and undevoured he lay,
And dozed and stretched and listened and lay still,
Breathing into his body with content
The temperate dawn before the tropic day. (CP, 707)

Another admirable quality of man is exposed as the symbolic sun of civilization dawns, and man proves himself worthy of life by outwitting natural predators.

The next four sonnets pit man against disasters which have plagued the natural world from the beginning of time. Miss Millay illustrates man's indomitable spirit as she shows him rising from the ashes of each of these tragedies. Sonnet VIII asks the reader to picture an earthquake and to "Observe how Miyanoshita cracked in two/ And slid into the valley;" (CP, 708) but man, living on the brink of this disaster, is not encompassed by "dread and dismay" and as the days pass and the ashes cool

he builds again
His paper house upon oblivion's brim
And plants the purple iris in its roof. (CP, 708)

Similar to the earthquake in Sonnet VIII is the volcano in Sonnet IX as the man awakes "in terror to a sky more bright/ Than middle day." In the sestet the poet pictures this reaction after the terror:

Where did he weep? Where did he sit him down
And sorrow, with his head between his knees?
Where said that Race of Man, "Here let me drown"?
"Here let me die of hunger"?--"let me freeze"?
By nightfall he has built another town:

This boiling pot, this clearing in the trees. (CP, 709)

Likewise, a flood overtakes man in Sonnet X, drowning his whole farm, fields, beasts, tree and home. The poet asks:

was this the day
Man dropped upon his shadow without a sound
And died, having laboured well and having found
His burden heavier than a quilt of clay? (CP, 710)

The sestet of the sonnet gives the answer:

No, no. I saw him when the sun had set
In water, leaning on his single oar
Above his garden faintly glimmering yet. . .
There bulked the plough, here washed the updrifted weeds. . .
And scull across his roof and make for shore
With twisted face and pocket full of seeds. (CP, 710)

This third disaster does not vanquish mankind's indomitable spirit.

The last of these disasters is not specified as Sonnet XI begins:

Sweeter was loss than silver coins to spend,
Sweeter was famine than the belly filled;
Better than blood in the vein was the blood spilled;
Better than corn and healthy flocks to tend
And a tight roof and acres without end
Was the barn burned and the mild creatures killed,
And the back aging fast, and all to build: (CP, 711)

And this sonnet, concluding this section on the spirit of man, not only shows his ability to rise and rebuild it again, but outlines an advantage to disaster. "For then it was, his neighbour was his friend," and this is a very portentous advantage for this is the very quality, exercised in reverse, that Miss Millay will say dooms man by his own hand. She herein indicates one of man's most positive qualities and certainly the one that differentiates him from the animals: man is capable of friendship, love and compassion toward his fellows.

Sonnet XII begins the final section of "Epitaph for the Race of Man" and presages man's end. This sonnet, following Sonnet XI showing

man's tendency to compassion and kindness, pictures the gulf between man and the animal world. Man, the grandest of creatures, is pictured in a parallel situation with the ant, one of the lowliest of creatures, as both go out to milk:

> Now forth to meadow as the farmer goes
> With shining buckets to the milking-ground
> He meets the black ant hurrying from his mound
> To milk the aphis pastured on the rose; (CP, 712)

But as they continue about their work

> But no good-morrow, as you might suppose,
> No nod of greeting, no perfunctory sound
> Passes between them; no occasion's found
> For gossip as to how the fodder grows. (CP, 712)

The poet is here pointing out one of the flaws in the nature of man, that not only does he ignore and disown his kinship with other creatures but, as a previous sonnet has told us, the natural world, the earth, can not distinguish the beating of man's heart from that of the other creatures. So like the dinosaur, both man and ant are doomed unless man perceives his own nature and his role in the natural world.

One of man's great flaws is pictured in Sonnet XIII where sophisticated man, highly civilized, trains his telescope upon the stars and smugly applauds his own ability to observe the universe. So smug is he that he doesn't hear premonitions of disaster in "the busy chirp of Earth" and the many problems of his own planet. The poet concludes that

> Earthward the trouble lies, where strikes his light
> At dawn industrious Man, and unamazed
> Goes forth to plough, flinging a ribald stone
> At all endeavor alien to his own. (CP, 713)

Not only has man failed to learn his role in the natural world, but he has also failed to learn what he could observe from seeing orderliness

of the universe and applying it to his own life on earth. What he has refused to observe and learn, he mockingly rejects. Man, says the poet, has limited his intelligence by his unwillingness to observe, to learn, and to synthesize the known with the unknown.

The final five sonnets point out the basic weakness of man which contains the germs of his ultimate destruction. Sonnet XIV explains

> That in the end returned; for Man was weak
> Before the unkindness in his brother's eyes. (CP, 714)

And Sonnet XV says:

> You shall achieve destruction where you stand,
> In intimate conflict, at your brothers' hand. (CP, 715)

Miss Millay points out that for all of man's reason, intellect, his powerful qualities, he is unable to control his emotions and instincts; for all of his cognizance and terror at the universe:

> Now sets his foot upon the eastern sill
> Aldebaran, swiftly rising, mounting high,
> And tracks the Pleiads down the crowded sky,
> And drives his wedge into the western hill;
> Now for the void sets forth, and further still,
> The questioning mind of Man. . .that by and by
> From the void's rim returns with swooning eye,
> Having seen himself into the maelstrom spill. (CP, 715)

he was unable to conceive the void within himself, his capacity for vindictiveness, disorder, betrayal, and greed as in Sonnet XVI:

> Alas for Man, so stealthily betrayed,
> Bearing the bad cell in him from the start,
> Pumping and feeding from his healthy heart
> That wild disorder never to be stayed
> When once established, destined to invade
> With angry hordes the true and proper part,
> Till Reason joggles in the headsman's cart,
> And Mania spits from every balustrade. (CP, 716)

Mankind, says Miss Millay, has been unable to heed his own spirit and his own art and instead of trying to understand "alien endeavor," he has

rejected it. Millay's man is unlike the speaker of Robert Frost's poem "Desert Places" who says:

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places.[87]

Frost's man learns something about the nature of himself by gazing at the stars; Millay's man in unable to make this equation. The result:

> So Man, by all the wheels of heaven unscored,
> Man, the stout ego, the exuberant mind
> No edge could cleave, no acid could consume,--
> Being split along the vein by his own kind,
> Gives over, rolls upon the palm abhorred,
> Is set in brass on the swart thumb of Doom. (CP, 717)

Neither the universe nor the natural world is able to ultimately defeat him because of his qualities of spirit, "stout ego," or because of his qualities of "exuberant mind," but his indomitability stops short when confronted with the essential nature of himself. After describing the universe, man's role in it, and his virtuous qualities, she strikes her main point, man's weakness and his failure.

The last sonnet of the sequence summarizes and concludes the theme as it draws together the three elements of the series:

> Here lies, and none to mourn him but the sea,
> That falls incessant on the empty shore,
> Most various Man, cut down to spring no more;
> Before his prime, even in his infancy
> Cut down, and all the clamour that was he,
> Silenced; and all the riveted pride he wore,
> A rusted iron column whose tall core
> The rains have tunnelled like an aspen tree.
> Man, doughty Man, what power has brought you low,
> That heaven itself in arms could not persuade

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[87]Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1964), p. 386.

> To lay aside the lever and the spade
> And be as dust among the dusts that blow?
> Whence, whence the broadside? whose the heavy blade?. . .
> Strive not to speak, poor scattered mouth; I know. (CP, 718)

The opening image is of the world, empty and without man as it guide and controller. No record of man remains in spite of his attempt to impose himself on the world. Thus, Miss Millay disposes of man's role in the universe; his existence is not an integral, necessary, or even perhaps desirable, part of the natural world. Also, in this final sonnet, she again applauds man's spirit, his commendable qualities as she describes him as "various," proud, "doughty" and recalls his creations and his engines that made him the ruler of the world while he inhabited it. She concludes by implying the third element of the sequence when she asks the rhetorical question, "what power has brought you low?" This and the following enumerations are tinged with irony because the implication is that man has been defeated, been leveled to dust, by some universal force mightier than himself. The sequence has, of course, as its main purpose the proving that this is not so--that man himself with "his singular laughter, his droll tears,/ His engines and his conscience and his art," was his own destroyer who bore within himself "the bad cell from the start," and was "split along the vein by his own kind."

In "Epitaph for the Race of Man" Edna St. Vincent Millay writes again of a narrow room of limitation, of confinement, of restriction. But this time she does not concern herself with the individual, the personal, the subjective human being, involved and limited by the narrow confines of the historical concept of the emotional and physical relations of man as she did in the two sonnet sequences already discussed.

Rather, she sees man as confined and limited by himself, but on a broader, universal, cosmic level, and her concern is not merely with the death of love but the death of all mankind. On a broader scope, however, here her concern is with love, too; not individual, erotic love, but universal love of mankind for his brother. The sequence asks that man not "achieve destruction" where he stands, "in intimate conflict at [his] brother's hand."

Then, rather than being a "tight-lipped acceptance"[88] of the fate of man, this sequence is a plea for acceptance, for understanding "before the unkindness in his brother's eyes." In this sequence the poet exhibits her belief in man's will to live and that "it can't be driven from an unyielding intelligence."[89] "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is a plea to that unyielding intelligence.

Not only is the sequence a plea from an intelligence to the intelligent, it is an example of the sonnet form being intelligently deployed as an aid and reinforcement to meaning. As indicated earlier in this chapter, the sonnet form was early used for subjects other than the love motif which is so often associated with it. A brief glance at the history of the sonnet shows that most often the Shakespearian mode has been used for sequences of "comparative lightness and gracefulness." It, above all, has been the favored form for the love poems. The Italian, or Petrarchan, on the other hand, has been associated with occasions of dignity, development of religious themes, or to depict situations of great

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[88]Gray, p. 15.

[89]Gray, p. 15.

moment.[90] Thus, Miss Millay, rightly according to tradition, has chosen the Italian sonnet form, with some variation, to advance her theme. This is only one of the ways that "Epitaph for the Race of Man"'s rooms are marvelously suited to their guests.

The poet gets movement and flow from her language by using the two-part Petrarchan structure to full advantage. The normal course of events in this sequence is the two-sentence sonnet, wherein the first sentence forms the octave; the second, the sestet. Sonnet I which illustrates the technique also shows the two-part image, one in the octave and one in the sestet, characteristic of this sonnet mode:

> Before this cooling planet shall be cold,
> Long, long before the music of the Lyre,
> Like the faint roar of distant breakers rolled
> On reefs unseen, when wind and flood conspire
> To drive the ship inshore--long, long, I say,
> Before this ominous humming hits the ear,
> Earth will have come upon a stiller day,
> Man and his engines be no longer here. (CP, 701)

In this octave Miss Millay focuses upon the vastness of the universe and the absence of man. Contrasted with this general statement is the specificity of the sestet wherein she focuses upon the sheep, alone.

> High on his naked rock the mountain sheep
> Will stand alone against the final sky,
> Drinking a wind of danger new and deep,
> Staring on Vega with a piercing eye,
> And gather up his slender hooves and leap
> From crag to crag down Chaos, and so go by. (CP, 701)

A second way that Miss Millay has taken advantage of the sonnet form is using its concentration to bring intensity of thought and emotion to the work, exercising a needed discipline on a work of this scope.

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[90] Cruttwell, p. 5.

All the poems, filled with high seriousness, are formal, weighty, and dignified, although no strain is obvious in the poet's attempt to contain an idea within the five-foot line. Inversion is one of the ways that the poet not only lends dignity to the poems but also gives momentousness and an indication of their complexity of idea. The implication of the use of inversion is that a treatment of theme of such scope and depth is too complicated to be approached directly. The poet has especially favored the device at the opening of the individual sonnets:

> His heatless room the watcher of the stars
> Nightly inhabits when the night is clear; (CP, 713)

> Now set his foot upon the eastern sill
> Aldebaran, swiftly rising, mounting high,
> And tracks the Pleiads down the crowded sky,
> And drives his wedge into the western hill; (CP, 715)

> Him not the golden fang of furious heaven,
> Nor whirling Aeolus on his awful wheel,
> Nor foggy specter ramming the swift keel,
> Nor flood, nor earthquake, nor the red tongue even
> Of fire, disaster's dog--him, him bereaven
> Of all save the heart's knowing, and to feel
> The air upon his face: not the great heel
> Of headless Force into the dust has driven. (CP, 714)

Each of the phrases shows a different number of lines, from the blunter two-line phrase in Sonnet XII all the way to the eight-line phrase in the last example. In each the inversion indicates complexity and seriousness of idea and dignity of tone.

The two major image clusters which permeate the sequence are stars and animals. These represent respectively the sequence's focus upon the cosmic or the universal and upon the earthy or natural aspects of the totality of life as it touches man. These two image clusters seem to represent the two facets of the world man inhabits which he might learn

from and emulate, but doesn't.

Sonnet I introduces both of these motifs with the image of Vega rushing on a collision course with earth. Other references to stars and constellations are manifold in the sequence:

> See where Capella with her golden kids
> Grazes the slope between the east and north; (CP, 796)

> The Centaur and the Cross now heralded
> The sun, far off but marching, bringing light. (CP, 707)

> Aldebaran, swiftly rising, mounting high,
> And tracks the Pleiads down the crowded sky, (CP, 715)

Nor are the planets left out. Note such a reference as to

> Saturn his rings or Jupiter his bars
> He follows, or the fleeing moons of Mars, (CP, 713)

Generally, all of these celestial images are used to compare the insignificant earth and man's role on it with the vastness of the heavens. The purpose is to generate a kind of cosmic terror:

> Now for the void sets forth, and further still,
> The questioning mind of Man. . .that by and by
> From the void's rim returns with swooning eye,
> Having seen himself into the maelstrom spill. (CP, 715)

Man has neither been able to comprehend his place in the universe nor to learn from it.

The animal images abound in the sequence to illustrate the natural, animal world of which man is, or the poet says must be, an integral part. Especially well drawn are the dinosaur image in Sonnet II, the description of the tiger in Sonnet VII, the cretaceous bird in Sonnet III, and the mountain sheep in Sonnet I who after staring on Vega with a "piercing eye,"

> And gather up his slender hooves and leap
> From crag to crag down Chaos, and so go by. (CP, 701)

The unique aspect of the use of these two clusters is that they are joined, or associated, each in terms of the other, both by old usage and by the poet's new usage and vision. Capella is a "she-goat" accompanied by her "golden kids"; Centaur is half-beast, half-man; Aldebaran is described as hunting the Pleiads; and the "busy chirp of Earth" is heard in the sequence. And in Sonnet I, the mountain sheep is described as going down the rocks as though he were traveling "down Chaos"; and as with the tiger, "night and the beast retired into the hill." Thus, Miss Millay makes a special attempt to describe these two kinds of images in terms of each other to indicate their relation as each being a part of the whole of the world man inhabits.

Another way the poet makes form underscore theme is through the use of alliteration and assonance as seen in Sonnet XVII:

> Only the diamond and the diamond's dust
> Can render up the diamond unto Man;
> One and invulnerable as it began
> Had it endured, but for the treacherous thrust
> That laid its hard heart open, as it must,
> And ground it down and fitted it to span
> A turbaned brow or fret an ivory fan,
> Lopped off its stature, pared of its proper crust.
> So Man, by all the wheels of heaven unscored,
> Man, the stout ego, the exuberant mind
> No edge could cleave, no acid could consume,--
> Being split along the vein by his own kind,
> Gives over, rolls upon the palm abhorred,
> Is set in brass on the swart thumb of Doom. (CP, 717)

This sonnet employs alliteration in various ways; the two-word alliterative device such as in treacherous thrust and hard heart; the three or four-word alliterative explosion such as found in the first two lines with the "d" sound in diamond and diamond's dust; but more common to the poem, and certainly more effective, are the uses of

consonance which employ a sound at the beginning of several words and also includes the same sound with another word as is used in line eight with the "p" sound in lapped, pared, and proper. Lines ten and eleven are also a rich example of assonance and alliteration with their repetition of the "e" sounds in words ego, exuberant, edge, and cleave. And the phrase "on the swart thumb of Doom" in line fourteen is an especially good example of assonance with all of its mellow, tolling sounds, indeed giving the impression of the knell of doom.

Other sonnets are equally rich in poetic sound devices but the example of Sonnet VI which is considered by many critics to be technically one of the best sonnets of the sequence will conclude the discussion of poetic devices:

> See where Capella with her golden kids
> Grazes the slope between the east and north;
> Thus when the builders of the pyramids
> Flung down their tools at nightfall and poured forth
> Homeward to supper and a poor man's bed,
> Shortening the road with friendly jest and slur,
> The risen She-Goat showing blue and red
> Climbed the clear dusk, and three stars followed her.
> Safe in their linen and their spices lie
> The kings of Egypt; even as long ago
> Under these constellations, with long eye
> And scented limbs they slept, and feared no foe.
> Their will was law; their will was not to die:
> And so they had their way; or nearly so. (CP, 706)

Note the "s" sound consonance and the "f" sound alliteration in line twelve. The repetition of the "w" sound in lines thirteen and fourteen is especially effective when employed before the semi-color and the last three words: there is an abrupt stoppage of the "w" sound pattern but the whole couplet is held together by the "o" sounds. Thus it makes way for the three-word thought-provoking understatement at the end of

the sonnet, separating it, yet not separating it from the whole couplet and the whole poem. This is the way a master of the poetic form uses poetic devices, not just for beautiful language, but because they advance meaning. Here Miss Millay has used her sounds to underscore the words and control the pace and tone of the poem. Throughout "Epitaph for the Race of Man" as well as her other sequences, Miss Millay similarly uses poetic form to support meaning.

The poet employs true personification very little in this sequence and when used seems, as Brittin puts it, "old-fashioned," as in Sonnet XVI:

> Would he had searched his closet for his bane,
> Where lurked the trusted ancient of his soul,
> Obsequious Greed, and see that visage plain;
> Would he had whittled treason from his side
> In his stout youth and bled his body whole,
> Then had he died a king, or never died. (CP, 716)

This is old-fashioned in terms of the medieval morality play wherein the quality became an abstraction and did not function metaphorically.

On a broader level in this sequence, however, the universe, man, and animals take on the aspect of characters in a drama. This is not to say, again, that they function as they would in an allegory such as Everyman or Pilgrim's Progress, but "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is the drama of man's journey through the history of the universe; he encounters the universe from which he fails to learn; and he encounters the animal world, which he conquers for a while, but from which he fails to perceive his relationship to them. This is the reason for the personification of the ant in Sonnet XII:

> In chilly autumn on the hardening road
> They meet again, driving their flocks to stall,

> Two herdsmen, each with winter for a goad;
> They meet and pass, and never a word at all
> Gives one to t'other. On the quaint abode
> Of each, the evening and the first snow fall. (CP, 712)

The extinction of man will also preclude the extinction of the animals as we have seen with the dinosaur and the cretaceous bird. If man cannot survive with his superlative qualities, surely the natural world creatures will fail too.

And like an allegory, the aim or intention of this sequence is moral in the broadest sense as Miss Millay attempts to point out to man the flaws of his character, his lack of perception, about the nature of the universe and his lack of perception about the nature of himself. She attempts to justify the ways of the world to man and why

> Earth will have come upon a stiller day,
> Man and his engines be no longer here.

The intent of the sequence has been to point these things out to man that when we ask "what power has brought you low?" then man may also answer, "Strive not to speak,. . .I know."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Edna St. Vincent Millay said of the sonnet form in the sonnet form:

> I will put Chaos into fourteen lines
> And keep him there; and let him thence escape
> If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape
> Flood, fire, and demon--his adroit designs
> Will strain to nothing in the strict confines
> Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,
> I hold his essence and amorphous shape,
> Till he with Order mingles and combines.
> Past are the hours, the years, of our duress,
> His arrogance, our awful servitude:
> I have him. He is nothing more nor less
> Than something simple not yet understood;
> I shall not even force him to confess;
> Or answer. I will only make him good. (CP, 728)

Without a doubt, this discussion of her sonnet sequences, "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," Fatal Interview, and "Epitaph for the Race of Man," proves that Miss Millay was able to put "Chaos into fourteen lines." The chaos, or subject matter of these sequences has been the concern of the poet for the status of modern man and his relationship to the limitations of his own nature and the limitations of the society he has created or in which he dwells. This confinement has been termed the "narrow room."

But Miss Millay has done more than just pursue Chaos, for she has been able to "put him into fourteen lines" and also to "keep him there." The genius of her sonnets and sequences lies in the fact that she was able, brilliantly, to contain the "essence and amorhpous shape" until it "with Order mingles and combines." Miss Millay not only wrote in a form but she used that form to enhance her subject matter and aid her in

advancing her ideas. This duality, the combination of form and idea, is how she has both emotionally and intellectually proved her point. And she has been superbly able to make that "something simple" very well understood for her readers.

Finally, not only has she pursued idea and used form to underscore this idea, but she has also been able to "make him good." Her sonnets, an unusually large number of them, are some of the best in the language and certainly some of the best in modern poetry. She has employed all the techniques and conventions of the sonnet tradition, at the same time making her usage fresh and viable. Not only has it exacted an "awful servitude" of her, but she has also made the tradition serve her purposes and those of poetry.

In a modern world concerned with the status of man, Miss Millay has addressed herself to the problems of the twentieth century. But by using a form of tradition, of pre-twentieth century, she has gained a perspective and has enriched modern poetry.

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