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**Their Emily Dickinsons: Selected Women Poets Lit by Her Lamp**  
**Day 3: Edna St. Vincent Millay**  
**1892-1950**

*If Millay was the darling of her time, it was perhaps not for her poems of sorrow but because she sounded most keenly the new note of feminine arrogance, burning her candle at both ends, letting her Daphne cry "I am off; -- to heel Apollo! And defying death. . . ." She is an artist. She is also a woman. No poet ever registered herself more deliberately in that light. She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too [as do] the literary remains of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett, Christina Rossetti, and doubles, if we only had enough of her, Sappho herself.' Alicia Ostriker quoting [New Criticism critic in an essay "The Poet as Wisdom" 1938] John Crowe Ransom.*

**1892 Born, Rockland, Maine to Cora Buzelle & Henry Millay (who left); oldest of three girls**

**1904 Editing Lit Journal at Camden High; published in St. Nicholas magazine**

**1908 At 16 presented her mother (who wrote and read poetry) with *Poetical Works of VM***

**1911 Much drama – written, acted; father through letters; mother absent; "V M- -Her Book"**

**1912 "Renascence" chosen as one of best 100 poems and re-published in *The Lyric Year*."**

**Friendship with Mitchell Kennerley (Millay's version of Higginson); met Caroline B. Dow**

**1913 NYC, Barnard; subsidized by sponsors (Dow, etc.) to prepare for Vassar**

**1917 Graduated from Vassar (barely: quite a career there!)**

**1917- In NYC writing & acting (Provincetown Players)**

**1919 "Aria da Capa" (play starred sister Norma M.)**

**1920 *A Few Figs From Thistles***

**1921 To Paris; affairs; pregnancy; on return, terrible abortion**

**1923 Pulitzer for "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver"; married Eugene Boissevain;**

**The couple bought Steepletop in Berkshires, New York**

**1927 "The King's Henchman" produced at NY Met.; involved in defense for Sacco-Vanzetti**

**1936 Injured in car accident; became addicted to drugs, but also became an active pacifist**

**1942 "The Murder of Lidice" (basis of a film); famous around the world 32 page protest poem**

**1943 Honored with Frost Medal for lifetime contribution to American poetry**

**1949 Boissevain died;**

**1950 (October 19); died at Steepletop; buried there next to husband**

**1973 Norma M. and husband founded "Millay Colony for the Arts" at Steepletop**

*It wasn't only that she was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry or that Thomas Hardy once said there were really only two great things in the United States: the skyscraper and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. It was that when she first published 'First Fig' in June 1918, her cheeky quatrain ignited the imagination of a generation of American women: she gave them their rallying cry. A wild freedom edged with death. 'My candle burns at both ends;/ It will not last the night;/ But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends -- / It gives a lovely light.' Milford xiii.*

**I being born a woman and distressed**

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

From *The Harp Weaver* 1923

**God's World**

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!  
 Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!  
 Thy mists, that roll and rise!  
 Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag  
 And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag  
 To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!  
 World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,  
 But never knew I this:  
 Here such a passion is  
 As stretcheth me apart, -- Lord, I do fear  
 Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year:  
 My soul is all but out of me, -- let fall  
 No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

**Sonnet xlv**

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.  
 Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,  
 And lay them prone upon the earth and cease  
 To ponder on themselves, the while they stare  
 At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere  
 In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese  
 Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release  
 From dusty bondage into luminous air.  
 O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,  
 When first the shaft into his vision shone  
 Of light anatomized! Euclid alone  
 Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they  
 Who, though once only and then but far away,  
 Have heart her massive sandal set on stone.

**AND Dickinson's**

Myself was formed – a Carpenter Fr475 F22  
 I took my Power in my Hand – Fr666 F30  
 It was given to me by the Gods Fr455 F21  
 A little Madness in the Spring Fr1356  
 A Solemn thing within the Soul Fr467 F22  
 A great Hope fell Fr1187  
 It ceased to hurt me, though so slow Fr421 F14  
 Exultation is the going Fr143 F6  
 Exhilaration is the Breeze Fr1157  
 I taste a liquor never brewed – Fr207 F12  
 Split the Lark – and you'll find the Music Fr905  
 I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes Fr211 F12  
 Musicians wrestle everywhere Fr229 F9  
 I died for Beauty – but was scarce Fr448 F21  
 Heart! We will forget him! F64  
 He was weak, and I was strong – then Fr221 F9  
 Wild nights – Wild nights! Fr269 F11  
 He touched me, so I live to know Fr349 F17  
 Did the Harebell loose her girdle Fr134  
 I cautious, scanned my little life – Fr175 F8  
 As if some little Arctic flower Fr177 F8  
 I stepped from Plank to Plank Fr926

Fame is a bee. Fr1788

Fame is a fickle food Fr1702

I reason, Earth is short – Fr403, F20

Beauty is not caused – It Is --

I died for Beauty – but was scarce Fr448 F21

**Sonnet lxix**

*On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven*

Sweet sounds, oh beautiful music, do not cease!  
 Reject me not into the world again.  
 With you alone is excellence and peace,  
 Mankind made plausible, his purpose plain.  
 Enchanted in your air benign and shrewd,  
 With limbs a-sprawl and empty faces pale,  
 The spiteful and the stingy and the rude  
 Sleep like the scullions in the fairy-tale,  
 This moment is the best the world can give:  
 The tranquil blossom on the tortured stem.  
 Reject me not, sweet sounds! Oh, let me live,  
 Till Doom espy my towers and scatter them.  
 A city spell-bound under the aging sun,  
 Music my rampart, and my only one

**Ebb**

I know what my heart is like  
 Since your love died:  
 It is like a hollow ledge  
 Holding a little pool  
 Left there by the tide,  
 A little tepid pool,  
 Drying inward from the edge.

**Sorrow**

Sorrow like a ceaseless rain  
 Beats upon my heart.  
 People twist and scream in pain, --  
 Dawn will find them still again;  
 This has neither wax nor wane,  
 Neither stop nor start.

People dress and go to town;  
 I sit in my chair.  
 All my thoughts are slow and brown:  
 Standing up or sitting down  
 Little matters, or what gown  
 Or what shoes I wear.

**Passer Mortuus Est**

Death devours all lovely things:  
 Lesbia with her sparrow  
 Shares the darkness, -- presently  
 Every bed is narrow.

Unremembered as old rain  
 Dries the sheer libation;  
 And the little petulant hand  
 Is an annotation.  
 After all, my erstwhile dear,  
 My no longer cherished,  
 Need we say it was not love,  
 Just because it perished?

**Renascence**

All I could see from where I stood  
 Was three long mountains and a wood;  
 I turned and looked another way,  
 And saw three islands in a bay.

So begins Millay's first triumph, her most famous poem, and one of her longest. We WILL read this together, but it is too long for this packet. I ask you to download it or find it in a book you treasured in high school: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55993/renascence> (you can hear it too)

The Ballad of the Harp Weaver: Some of you may find this too saccharine, others lovely and appealing:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53241/the-ballad-of-the-harp-weaver>

**Czecho-Slovakia**

If there were balm in Gilead, I would go  
 To Gilead for your wounds, unhappy land,  
 Gather you balsam there, and with this hand,  
 Made deft by pity, cleanse and bind and sew  
 And drench with healing, that your strength might grow,  
 (Though love be outlawed, kindness contraband)  
 And you, O proud and felled, again might stand;  
 But where to look for balm, I do not know.  
 The oils and herbs of mercy are so few;  
 Honour's for sale; allegiance has its price;  
 The barking of a fox has bought us all;  
 We save our skins a craven hour or two, --  
 While Peter warms him in the servants' hall  
 The thorns are platted and the cock crows twice.

**Apostrophe to Man**

(on reflecting that the world is ready to go to war again)

Detestable race, continue to expunge yourself, die out.  
 Breed faster, crowd, encroach, sing hymns, build bombing  
 airplanes;  
 Convert again into putrescent matter, drawing flies  
 The hopeful bodies of the young; exhort,  
 Pray, pull long faces, be earnest, be all but overcome, be  
 photographed;  
 Bacteria harmful to hyman tissue,  
 Put death on the market;  
 Breed, crowd, encroach, expand, expunge yourself, die out,  
*Homo* called *sapiens*.

**The Goose-Girl**

Spring rides no horses down the hill,  
 But comes on foot, a goose-girl still.  
 And all the loveliest things there be  
 Come simply, so, it seems to me.  
 If ever I said, in grief or pride,  
 I tired of honest things, I lied;  
 And should be cursed forevermore  
 With Love in laces, like a whore,  
 And neighbors cold, and friends unsteady,  
 And Spring on horseback, like a lady!

### For Further Reading

Epstein, David Mark. *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Henry Holt, 2001.

McClatchy, J. D. "Like a Moth to the Flame" (review of two biographies): *The New York Times Book Review*. September 16-2001. 12-14,

Milford, Nancy. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. New York: Random House, 2001.

Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986/

Thurman, Judith. "Siren Songs: The poet-diva Edna St. Vincent Millay is the subject of two new Lives." *The New Yorker*. September 3, 2001. 86-91.

