

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

“FIRST FIG” AND “LOVE IS NOT ALL”

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An ANSWER KEY is provided at the end of this handout (p. 3).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Millay (1892-1950) is often regarded as the first modern American confessional poet. Like those of later confessional poets, Millay’s poems are often based on personal, intimate experiences.

2. Many of her best poems deal with love.

II. “FIRST FIG”

1. This poem is sometimes printed under the title “My Candle.”

2. Summarize the poem. The speaker says that she will live life to the full—both day and night—in essence “burn[ing her] _____ at _____ ends” (1).

She realizes that such excess may shorten her life. In her decision she disregards both her “_____” (3), who presumably are happy that she will soon burn out and die, and her “_____” (3), who presumably caution her to let up.

3. What is the theme of the poem? The decision to live life to the full; the speaker seems to prefer life’s essence—“a lovely _____” (4)—over longevity.

4. ALLITERATION is the repetition of the same consonant or vowel sound at the beginning of a word or a stressed syllable of a word. Copy examples from “First Fig” of the following alliterative patterns:

b - _____

f - _____

l - _____

5. On what metaphor is this poem based? The burning of the _____ is compared to the living of one's life.

What are two famous uses of this candle/life metaphor in Shakespeare's plays? In Macbeth, in his famous "Tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy, Macbeth says, "Out, out, brief _____!" (5.5.23) In Othello, just before Othello murders his sleeping wife Desdemona, he stares at the candle he is carrying and says, "Put out the _____ [of the candle], and then put out the _____ [of Desdemona's life]" (5.2.7).

III. "LOVE IS NOT ALL"

1. This poem is a SONNET, a poem with fourteen lines. There are two major types of sonnets, the Italian (Petrarchan) and the English (Shakespearean). Millay's sonnet is Shakespearean since it has three quatrains (a set of four lines) and a closing couplet (two lines) and a rhyme scheme of abab cdcd efef gg.

2. IRONY is a literary device in which the opposite of what is expected occurs. How do the last two lines of this poem make the first line ironical? In the first line, she states that "_____ is not all: It is not _____ nor drink."

The last two lines assert the opposite: "I do not think I _____" (14) "trade the _____" (13) of love "for _____" (13).

By the end of the poem, the speaker realizes that she had been deceiving herself in speaking the poem's _____ line.

3. Theme: Physical needs vs. _____ needs.

The poem gives a full and realistic catalogue of the most familiar and basic human needs: _____ (1, 11, 13), drink (1, 11), _____ (2), _____ (2), rescue (3-4, 7-8), and healing or respite from _____ (5-6, 9-10, 12).

The speaker concludes that despite the importance of these basic human needs, she would not barter—"_____" or "_____" (12-13)—love for them, even at the cost of her life.

4. Structure: The first six lines diminish the power of _____. Lines 7-8 provide a bridge to the assertion of the _____ of love in the last six lines.

ANSWER KEY

II. "FIRST FIG"

1. candle; both.
2. foes; friends.
3. light.
4. b - burns; both.
f - foes; friends.
l - last; lovely; light.
5. candle; light; light.

III. "LOVE IS NOT ALL"

2. Love; meat; would; memory; food; first.
3. emotional; food; sleep; shelter; pain; sell; trade; love; importance.