Literary Analysis

"I, being born a woman and distressed”, a sonnet by Edna St Vincent Millay, communicates the double consciousness that a woman endures during sexual engagement with a partner. While the first eight lines are written in a sensual tone, the famous tone shift of a sonnet does not fall short. The poem ends with a casual yet powerful tone, Millay asserting that sexual relations with a man have no affect over the author’s sense of belonging to him. “I, being a woman and distressed”, author Edna St. Vincent Millay challenges the emotional power dynamic that is known occur when a woman and man engage in a sexual relationship. Millay uses the poem’s sonnet style, descriptive language, and female voice to address and disprove the idea of ownership that is societally implicated with sex.

The first lines of this poem describe the emotions of the speaker as she is pursuing this man and how she is moved by her feminine desire. The man’s presence alone entices her and draws her in immediately. She writes, “So subtly is the fume of life designed, / To clarify the pulse and cloud of the mind, / And leave me once again undone and possessed (Millay)”. In the first line, she illudes to how society and sex have both been designed so that women’s main purpose is pleasing men. Although it is not officially stated anywhere, the idea that males possess a sense of ownership women is still subtly (and not so subtly) present. Millay continues into her next line by describing how the mind is clouded over, indicating that although there is a physical rush, women do not have access to their full sense of self. The phrase in the next line, “once again undone” indicates that the man has not only taken a part of the female body, but also her mind. Millay uses her these examples in her writing to show that women are being taught and internalizing these ideas that are societally enforced.

The sonnet shifts into Millay’s speaker making a conscious decision for herself that she does not need nor want to be possessed by this man for she does not have any feelings of love towards him. The speaker's thoughts contrast with social “norms” and teachings presents in the beginning, demonstrating that there is no natural sense of emotional ownership that men possess over women. This is restated through a straightforward tone in her last three lines: “My scorn with pity, --let me make it plain: / I find this frenzy insufficient reason / For conversation when we meet again” (Millay). Although the speaker states that she will remember this man, the Millay’s description of the encounter as a “frenzy” alludes to the lack of long-term effect that this encounter had on her. This example shows us the inner consciousness of the speaker, who has separated her desires from her identity. Millay effectively communicates the idea of the double consciousness that comes with being socialized as a woman.

Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet “I, being born a woman and distressed”, effectively communicates the complicated emotions that accompany the double consciousness of womanhood. She uses the sonnet’s poem style and descriptive language to challenge the societal norms that are being enforced for women and shows that women are capable of their own consciousness. Although this poem was written in the 1920s, the double consciousness of women is still prevalent as society continues to plague us with unequal rights and social rules in order to appear desirable to men.

**References**

Millay, E. S. V (n.d.). I, being born a woman and distressed. *Poetry Foundation .* Retrieved October 2, 2022 from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148564/i-being-born-a-woman-and-distressed