

poet

Edna St. Vincent Millay

1892-1950 , Rockland , ME



Photo credit: Carl Van Vechten

Poet and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Rockland, Maine, on February 22, 1892. Her mother, Cora, raised her three daughters on her own after asking her husband to leave the family home in 1899. Cora encouraged her girls to be ambitious and self-sufficient, teaching them an appreciation of music and literature from an early age. In 1912, at her mother's urging, Millay entered her poem "Renascence" into a contest: she won fourth place and publication in *The Lyric Year*, bringing her immediate acclaim and a scholarship to Vassar College.

There, she continued to write poetry and became involved in the theater. She also developed intimate relationships with several women while in school, including the English actress Wynne Matthison. In 1917, the year of her graduation, Millay published her first book, *Renascence and Other Poems*. At the request of Vassar's drama department, she also wrote her first verse play, *The Lamp and the Bell* (1921), a work about love between women.

After graduating from Vassar, Millay, whose friends called her "Vincent," moved to New York City's Greenwich Village, where she led a Bohemian life. She lived in a nine-foot-wide attic and wrote anything she could find an editor willing to accept. She and the other writers of Greenwich Village were, according to Millay herself, "very, very poor and very, very merry." She joined the Provincetown Players in its early days and befriended writers such as Witter Bynner, Edmund Wilson, Susan Glaspell, and Floyd Dell, who asked for Millay's to marry him. Millay, who was openly bisexual, refused, despite Dell's attempts to persuade her otherwise. That same year Millay published *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920), a volume of poetry which drew much attention for its controversial descriptions of female sexuality and feminism. In 1923 her fourth volume of poems, *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to publishing three plays in verse, Millay also wrote the libretto of one of the few American grand operas, *The King's Henchman* (1927).

Millay married Eugen Boissevain, a self-proclaimed feminist and widower of Inez Milholland, in 1923. Boissevain gave up his own pursuits to manage Millay's literary career, setting up the readings and public appearances for which Millay grew quite famous. According to Millay's own accounts, the couple acted liked two bachelors, remaining "sexually open" throughout their twenty-six-year marriage, which ended with Boissevain's death in 1949. Edna St. Vincent Millay died in 1950.

Source: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edna-st-vincent-millay>