Conscientious Objector

Edna St Vincent Millay

Apple Inc.

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Context

Pre-Reading Questions:

Which figure is represented here?
Look up the phrase “the four horsemen of the apocalypse.” Where does it come from, and who does it refer to?

What is a “conscientious objector?” Look it up online if you do not know.

From the two questions above, what do you think the poem might be about?
Edna St. Vincent Millay was an American poet and playwright. She was born in 1892 and died in 1950. A bohemian feminist, Millay lived in New York City after graduating from college, where she developed a considerable reputation as a poet.

Millay was famous for her political activism, and held left-wing political views. She was against war and had campaigned against American
involvement in World War I. This poem was written after World War I, in 1931.

Although she was a peace activist, towards the end of her life she supported American involvement in World War II, believing that the Nazi regime to be so evil that fighting against it was justified.

Conscientious Objector

I shall die, but
that is all that I shall do for Death.
I hear him leading his horse out of the stall;
I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.
He is in haste; he has business in Cuba,
business in the Balkans, many calls to make this morning.
But I will not hold the bridle
while he clinches the girth.
And he may mount by himself:
I will not give him a leg up.

Though he flick my shoulders with his whip,
I will not tell him which way the fox ran.
With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where
the black boy hides in the swamp.
I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death;
I am not on his pay-roll.

“Death” - the capital “D” tells us that she is writing about the personification of death - the ‘Grim Reaper.’

Death is on a “horse” because the four horsemen of the apocalypse traditionally arrived on horseback.

“Cuba” probably refers to the Spanish-American War of 1898 (where the Americans supported the Cuban independence movement against the Spanish); the “Balkans” is a reference to WW1, which started in the Balkans in 1914.

“Fox” - this is probably a reference to military deserters - she is saying she will not tell death where they are.
I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends
nor of my enemies either.
Though he promise me much,
I will not map him the route to any man's door.
Am I a spy in the land of the living,
that I should deliver men to Death?
Brother, the password and the plans of our city
are safe with me; never through me Shall you be overcome.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Initial Response

What do you think is the key message of the poem?

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“Black boy” - this is probably a reference to racism in the United States (Millay was anti-racist).
S.M.I.L.E. Analysis

Remember, to analyse a poem we need to look at:

- Structure
- Meaning
- Imagery (similes, metaphors, personification)
- Language
- Effect on the reader
“Meaning” is a good place to start when thinking about a poem, as here you can discuss the principal theme(s) of the poem and why you think the poet has written it.

*Meaning - Key points:*

- In this poem, Millay is asserting that she is anti-Death; she will not help “Death” in his efforts to kill people (e.g. “I shall die, but that is all I shall do for Death”) and will not betray her fellow human beings to him (e.g. “I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends/ nor of my enemies either”).

- Death is **personified** as the figure of “Death” (one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse in Christian tradition, although Millay herself was not religious).

- The poem could be Millay taking on the **persona** of a conscientious objector (a soldier who refuses to fight), and speaking from this perspective.

- Alternatively, a wider reading of the poem would suggest that, as someone who is anti-Death, Millay is asserting that she herself is a “conscientious objector” to all those actions that harm human beings. The reference to racism (“I will not tell him where /the black boy hides in the swamp.”) could support the wider reading of the poem.
Exploration - Meaning

What emotions do you think are present in the poem?

Which reading of the poem do you prefer? Do you think Millay is just writing about war, or is she “anti-Death” in general?

Structure

Structure refers to the way a poem is set out and organised. Here, you write about things like rhyme scheme, length, repetition and the flow of ideas throughout the poem.
Why might Millay not have used a rhyme scheme or a fixed stanza form here (she did in many of her other poems)?
What effect does the repetition of “I will not” have upon how the tone of the poem?

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**Imagery**

This is where you look at techniques such as similes, metaphors and personification. What pictures has the poet tried to create in your head?
“Business” Imagery:

“many calls to make this morning”

“I am not on his pay-roll”

Hunting Imagery

“I will not give him a leg-up” (pretend the little girl is Death - it is impossible to find a picture of somebody helping Death onto a horse!)

“Though he flick my shoulders with his whip”
Do you think the personification of “Death” is effective?

Why do you think Millay at times personifies “Death” as a businessman and includes metaphors connected with business? Could this be significant? (NB Millay was left-wing, and when the poem was written in 1931 the USA was in the middle of the Great Depression).
What do you think is the significance of the “fox” within the poem?

Language

This is where you comment on the language the poet uses. What choices has he/she made, and why?

Key Points - Language

• There are a lot of personal pronouns (“I,” “he” and “you”) in the poem.

• Millay creates a defiant tone through the repetition of “will not.”

• The juxtaposition (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/juxtaposition) of “friends” and “enemies” in the lines “I will not tell him the whereabout of my friends / nor of my enemies either” creates the sense that Death is the real enemy, and that humans should all unite against him.
Millay creates a sense of fellowship of humanity against death by the juxtaposition of “friends” and “enemies,” by the use of personal pronouns (“I” and “you”), and by words such as “Brother.” However, all the references within the poem are to men, not women. Is this significant? Why might she have chosen to do this?

The line “though he promise me much” is interesting. What sort of promises might Death be making to the narrator? (NB - Some people think this line is another Biblical reference to Jesus’ temptation in the

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**Effect on the reader**

*Exploration - effect on the reader*

Who do you think the narrator is in Millay’s poem? Do you think it is Millay herself, or an actual “conscientious objector?”

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What is your own personal response to the poem? Did you like it? Why or why not?
Sample Exam Question Part A

3. a) “Explore how the writer presents her ideas about violence in “Conscientious Objector.””

Use examples of the language from the poem to support your answer. (15 marks).

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.
Comparison

My suggested poem to compare this to would be either “The Drum” by John Scott, which is another anti-war poem, or “O What is That Sound” by W.H. Auden. “O What is That Sound” was written only a few years after “Conscientious Objector,” and deals with people who feel threatened, so might be an interesting comparison.

Sample Exam Question - Part B

Answer EITHER 3(b)i OR 3(b)ii

3 b) (i) Compare how the writers of “Conscientious Objector” and “O What is That Sound” present their views about violence (15 marks).

3 b) (ii) Compare how the writers of “Conscientious Objector” and one other poem of your choice from the Clashes and Collisions collection present their views about conflict in any setting. (15 marks)
Use examples from the language of both poems to support your answer.

NB - In the exam, you would have about 30 minutes to complete this question.

Write an answer to this question and email it to me.