

Body- Place Relationship in Edna St. Vincent Millay's  
Poems "First Fig" and "Second Fig"



علاقة الجسد بالمكان في قصائد ادنا اس تي فنسنت ميلاي  
"التينة الاولى" و "التينة الثانية"

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محمد ، غادة عبدالله، علاقة الجسد بالمكان في قصائد ادنا اس تي فنسنت ميلاي "التينة الاولى" و "التينة الثانية" ، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، تشرين الاول 2023، المجلد:13، العدد:4 .

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#### مستخلص الدراسة

لفهم مكانة الجسد في العالم يجب دراسة العلاقة بين الجسد والمكان. يعد الجسد من أهم القضايا الفكرية لما له من أبعاد دلالية وأيديولوجية شكلت الأساس لمعظم الإنتاج الأدبي. يلعب الجسد دوراً مهماً في تشكيل الهوية الفردية والثقافية. عادة ما يستخدم الشعراء والكتاب الجسد لتقصي موضوعات الجنس والعرق. توظيف الجسد في الموضوعات الأدبية يضيف عمقا واقعياً وبعدا عاطفياً لها. فضلاً عن ذلك، عندما يتم تصوير الجسد في سياق القوة، يتيح ذلك للكتاب إمكانية استكشاف واستنباط نقدية للهياكل المجتمعية، ويتيح لهم دراسة قضايا الامتياز والتهميش والمقاومة بطرق مبتكرة ومتجددة. لذلك بدأ الجسد بأخذ مساحة تحليلية في التيارات السيميائية الجديدة.

يلعب المكان دوراً مهماً ووظيفياً في تشكيل حياة الإنسان وترسيخ كيانه وتأسيس هويته وتأطير طبيعته ثم تحديد أولوياته وتوجهاته وإدراكه للأشياء، لأن المكان يستوعب الإدراك الحسي الذي يبدأ بمكان خبرة الإنسان في جسده. قد يبدو المكان في الشعر ملاذاً من فوضى العالم، و

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يمكن أن يكون مصدر إلهام ، يحرك الروح الإبداعية للشاعر . كما قد يظهر استخدام المكان في الشعر رمزياً، ويجسد مفاهيم المنزل، والانتماء، والهوية، أو حتى بمثابة استعارة لحالة الإنسان. كما يمكن أن يتكامل الجسد والمكان لتكوين القوى النفسية والعقلية والعاطفية والحيوية للإنسان.

تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين الجسد والمكان في قصائد (إدنا اس تي فينسينت ميلي) "التينة الأولى" و "التينة الثانية". وتهدف الدراسة إلى إظهار طبيعة هذه العلاقة ودورها كوسيلة للنضال من أجل أن تحصل الأنثى على المنصب والوظيفة المناسبين في المجتمع الذكوري. في كلتا القصيدتين، قدمت (ميلي) الجسد من خلال صورة "الشمعة" في قصيدة "التينة الأولى" وصورة "المنزل" في قصيدة "التينة الثانية". تعكس كلتا القصيدتين تحدي لعادات وتقاليد قديمة راسخة في المجتمع. يتميز المكان الذي يضم الجسد في القصيدتين بالضعف، إذ يظهر مظلماً في "التينة الأولى" وتظهر "الرمال" في "التينة الثانية"، التي تعكس الرؤية الشائعة تجاه مكانة الأنثى الضعيفة في البيئة الذكورية. تستخدم الشاعرة هذه الصور الهشة كنوع من التحدي لخلق وجود نسوي قوي. تحاول الشاعرة تقديم كبرياء المرأة من الناحية المكانية.

### Abstract

The corporeal-spatial relationship needs to be examined to understand the place of the body in the world. The body is one of the most important intellectual issues because of its semantic and ideological dimensions that formed the basis for most of the literary production. It plays a significant role in shaping individual and cultural identities. Poets and writers often use the body to explore themes of gender and race. Incorporating the body in literary works adds depth, realism, and emotional resonance. Moreover, Depicting the body in relation to power dynamics allows writers to critique societal structures and examine issues of privilege, marginalization, and resistance. Accordingly, the body began to take an analytical space in the new semiotic currents.

Place plays a crucial and functional role in shaping a person's life, consolidating his being, establishing his identity, framing his nature, and then determining his priorities, orientations, and his perception of things, because the place grasps a sensory perception that begins with a person's experience in her/ his body. In poetry, place may appear as a refuge from the chaos of the world. It can be a source of inspiration, stirring the creative spirit of the poet. Furthermore, the usage of place in verse can be symbolic. It may embody notions of home, belonging, identity, or even act as a metaphor for human condition.



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However, the body and the place can be integrated to form the psychological powers mental, emotional and vitality of a human being. The present study deals with the body- place relationship in Edna St. Vincent Millay's poems "First Fig" and "Second Fig." It intends to show the nature of this relationship and its role as a means of struggle to get the female wits right position and function in a patriarchal community. Millay's poems present the body through the images of a "candle" in "First Fig" and a "house" in "Second Fig." The poems resonate with defiance of conventionality. In both poems, the space that includes the body is characterized by its fragility; a dark atmosphere in "First Fig" and "sand" in "Second Fig," that reflects the common vision towards the female's weak place in a masculine environment. The poet uses such fragile images as a kind of challenge to create a vigorous female existence. Millay tries to present female pride in spatial terms.

### 1.Introduction

Creative and intellectual expressions do not occur separate from the body, (Cucinella, 2010, p.1) which must affect and be affected by the place in which it exists. The body and body image turn to be a kind of a text or a map that leads to much better understanding of the female identity. However, this understanding would be incomplete if we overlook the place in which the body is located. The connection between the human body and the natural world is a scientific fact. Scientists have proved that toxins in the surrounding environment could have an effect on the interior function of the body. This fact can be also applied to poetry, which concentrates on the sensual observation, and by engaging the human senses, it centers the poetic experience in the body. Poetry, then, can be considered a complex act of a complex creature, who is both matter and flesh in a universe that is matter as well.

Poetry and life originate from inside the female body, and with the post- modern realization that the outer workings of the natural world affect the inner workings of the body, a link is created between poetry and the state of the environment.

The representation of the body and particularly the female body is substantial in the modernist poetic creative process. Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) celebrates the body and acknowledges the precarious position of the female body within American patriarchal culture. She investigates the body's relationship to place. She offers multiple representations of the body and its parts by which she explores social, political, and historical issues. Millay's poetic body circulates in registers of desire, creativity, and intellectuality. She utilizes the tropes of the body

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within certain place to inspect construction of self, knowledge, language, and poetry.

### 2. "First Fig"

"First Fig" is the first poem in Edna St. Vincent Millay's collection *A few Figs from Thistles* (1922). A fig is a classical symbol for the female body, which is round, plump and sweet, whereas the thistles are the thorny, hateful men that besiege her. As a female poet in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Edna St. Vincent Millay strove to create her identity in male-dominated culture, in which masculinity was associated with "superior poetic talent and sanctioned High Art." (Helal, 2004, p.78) She wrote poetry during a period, "when a woman was expected to find total fulfillment as wife and mother," as a result, female poets should fight back against males' hostility "to make their place in the world." (Holland, 1999) Through poetry, Millay displays the function of the female and her right position in the environment.

The use of "first" in the title implies that there may be additional "figs" or phases in the poet's life, suggesting a continuation of this intense and vibrant existence. It hints at the possibility of exploring different aspects of life, experiencing new challenges, and embracing subsequent stages of personal growth. Additionally, by using "first," Millay may also be suggesting that her approach to life is characterized by a sense of urgency or immediacy. The word "first" implies a desire to seize the present moment, to live life to the fullest, and to prioritize personal fulfillment over societal expectations or long-term consequences.

Nonetheless, Millay establishes a relationship between the body and the place. She writes from within personal, social and cultural ideological structure. For Jane Rendell, "space is socially produced but also a condition of social production." (2000, p. 101) Millay's beliefs and doctrines are product of her social life. She refuses the subjection of women and denies the culture that privileged men. She is an ardent advocate for women's rights. In "First Fig," Millay defies the traditional place of women which is designed for them by men, who placed them "in the position of being 'guardians' of their bodies and their spaces, the condition of both body and space without body or space of their own." (Grosz, 1995, pp. 121-122) In this short poem, Millay presents her own body as a "candle" that "burns at both ends." (1) As a poet and a playwright, Millay works ceaselessly and fights for her literary place in a patriarchal artistic culture. She wants to deviate from the traditional image of women as domestic creatures. Through her rebellious tone, Millay creates a poetic world of perseverance and sacrifice in an attempt to drag the woman from that traditional space.







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"First Fig" is presented as a space to investigate and display the troubles and delights of the body. Females, who had been the properties of male desires and representations, had to explore and reshape their identity away from the silent place to which they had been associated. In this sense, the poem inspires personal as well as collective liberation. Women had been considered as "life giving bodies" rather than art creators. (Abril-Hernández, p.12) Millay realizes the limits of the woman because of the restrictions of the patriarchal community, however, she challenges these obstacles through the metaphor of "the candle." As a woman, she struggles for her usurped place as an active partner of man rather than a slave, and as a poet, she fights for a distinguished artistic position, thus her body "burns at both ends" to enlighten the dark world of women.

As a Bohemian, Millay revolts "against Main Street, against the power of money, against Victorian morals," freedom is her main goal. (Hamilton, 2008, p. 2) Hence, the candle as a female body is seen as an agent of resistance, which advocates light and truth rather than darkness and evil. Millay is aware of her artistic ability and her literary production. Her poetry had a great impact upon the New York literati and Greenwich village. Millay's passionate sonnets were admired by writers in a period when avant-garde formalism dominated literary criticism. Her verses convey the emancipation of young woman of the 1920s and display her social and sexual mutiny against the tradition and norms of an older generation. Millay's poetry is a release of feminine emotions. (Gregory, 1946, pp. 267-269)

The dark place of "First Fig" encapsulates the poet's bright body. Here, the place is produced conceptually. It refers to Millay's concept about the females' world, which is controlled by males' restricted patterns and rules, that have turned the former's life into darkness. In this sense, the poem presents two opposing forces; the power of darkness, which stands for the place, and the power of light, which symbolizes the body. Millay's body engages in the creative and the intellectual work of the mind.

Nevertheless, this luminous body "will not last the night," (2) an allegory to man's mortality and the transience of life. The poet devotes her life and consumes her body to defend her poetic site in the literary world and to protect woman's rights. Millay recognizes that life is too short to achieve man's ambitions and aspirations. However, the duration of the brightness of her body, which implies her literary, personal, and social achievements, gives her a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction, "It gives a lovely light." (4)

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Millay's thoughts and beliefs were opposed by some critics and writers. Millay's literary reputation was shaped by confused inference about gender. Unfortunately, the inaccurate conceptions continue to shape her poetic reputation. Thus in "First Fig," Millay addresses her enemies, "But ah, my foes," (3) and defies them that she has succeeded in defeating them through her poetry and through her revolutionary intellect. She also informs her supporters, "and oh, my friends" (4) about the greatness of her fulfillment, which "gives a lovely light." Light can be associated with man's ability to take the right decisions to be on the right path in life. Accordingly, Millay has chosen the right fruitful direction since her efforts enlighten the dark environment that is inhabited by those who attack her opinions about gender, social freedom and political issues. Millay's lovely light may also allude to immortality and a higher power. It is the immortality of the body's sacrifice and struggle to get the female rights.

In short, "First Fig" displays a mutual connection between the body and the place. The latter functions as a stimulus to the former's action.

### 3. "Second Fig"

In "Second Fig," Millay is aware of her ability to exercise spatial judgment and make decisions about the place in which she lives and the places which are inhabited by others, thus she states:

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:  
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand! (1-2)

The first line implies an attack upon the concept of masculinity, which was one of the basic principles during the twenties of the last century. It can be considered an attack upon "Essentialism," which is defined by Diana Fuss as "a belief in true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing." (1989, p. 2) Millay cannot believe in such essential classical concept which, according to her, adheres men's power, supports women's oppression, and deprive them of the pleasures of life. Hence, She originates her own essence. For Gregory, Millay's early poems are "the essence of the younger generation" because they answer the requirements of this generation to be free on the personal, social, and political levels (p.268) However, Millay crystalizes her belief in social and political change for women through comparing men to "ugly houses." In this respect, the houses symbolize the male bodies that stand on "solid rock," a reference to their strength, solidity and immovability.

In his *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard asserts that the house is man's first universe. It is one of the greatest powers of





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integration for the thoughts, its body and soul. (1958, p.41) In this sense, Millay defies man's first universe (place), the house, that embraces and raises individuals and teaches them the traditional norms and values including male dominance and patriarchal structures. She confronts dominant ideology of gender privilege and male supremacy, which allows men to hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. The males' physical power as well as the patriarchal social beliefs, which endow them with authority over females, are described as "solid rock," upon which their bodies (houses) are built. However, this power fails to give them beauty. Hence, they look repulsive and unattractive. Millay uses the metaphor of the "ugly houses" to show her rejection to males' hegemony. Through this body -place allegory, the poet expresses her resistance to the patriarchal dominance.

The poet employs the words "safe," "solid," and "stand," which are associated with powerful manhood. They are the essence of maleness since men provide food, shelter and protection to their families and stand against the troubles that they may face. Nevertheless, Millay invites her audience to come and see her own palace, which is based on the sand. The poet has a great confidence in the ability of the female body, thus she presents her own body as a palace, a reference to her luxurious, stately and regal state. In this respect, she is not a common woman, she is a distinguished one and her palace is superior to the ugly houses of the strong men. According to the poet, the body participates in the inventive and the ideological work of the mind. (Cucinella, p. 16) Thus Millay's palace can be also a reference to the body of her own literary work. Hence, her palace is fortified by her own thoughts and doctrines about the capacity of her talent and about the power of her literary role that makes her palace looks good, shining and comfortable.

Although the palace is associated with power and authority, yet Millay's palace is built upon the sand, an indication to women's fragility. The poet realizes the restrictions of women and the narrow space that has been given to them in a rigid patriarchal society. Sand is not a stable substance, so it can symbolize instability, changeability, or frailty. It also symbolizes the transient nature of life. So, the poet acknowledges the body's vulnerability and mortality. The metaphor of the sand is versatile, so the sand of the poem can be the foundation upon which Millay's thoughts and beliefs are built therefore her palace appears shining. The poet, then, prefers the ephemeral beauty of her palace to the permanent strong ugly houses.



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### 4. The Power of Body in Millay's Poems

The body is a vast concept that includes many phenomena, forms, notions and representations. In Millay's poems, the body seems a discovery that formed a new vision in her understanding of herself, others, and the world. The female body, becomes an imaginary text from which the poet derives her symbolic revelations, making it the mirror that reflects her interior and her emotional state. Millay uses the body as a tool within which all other subjects are located, and a general framework for relationships, images, semantics, and a self-mirror of the ego in its unification, fragmentation, and its pleasure and pain.

The body is considered the second in the existential hierarchy, the bad in the ethical hierarchy, and the relative in the aesthetic hierarchy. (Chirpaz,1968) Millay breaks with this stereotyped view of the body and treats it as a cultural data and as an influencing factor that helps to change convictions and values. In "First Fig" and "Second Fig," the poet employs the body to celebrate its beauty and its influential power. The poet's description of her powerful body reflects her ability to reveal her identity away from the hostility of others. She determines to confront and she confirms the legitimacy of her violation of the norms. She proceeds from an overwhelming tendency towards liberation and emancipation. In both poems, Millay utilizes the female body as a source of light, a "candle" and a "shining house," which is a symbol of beauty and allure. The luminous female body may also symbolize inner radiance and spirituality. It suggests that women possess an inherent luminosity that shines from within, representing qualities such as wisdom, enlightenment, and inner strength. (Rhys, 2021) The presentation of the female body as a source of light can also be seen as a symbol of empowerment and liberation. It challenges traditional notions that associate women with darkness or obscurity and instead celebrates their ability to illuminate spaces, ideas, and perspectives.

Millay, then, elevates the body and defies the "western system of thought that casts the body and all things associated with it to the realm of the inferior other." (Cucinella, p.17) She attempts to prove that the body, which has been denied in cultural production has the ability to access pure knowledge and reality. The employment of the body in her poems is a declaration of Millay's desire to create an unrepressed self. The poems might be regarded as a departure from the ordinary and a transgression of the established and the usual.





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### 5. Place in Millay's Poems

Place can be understood both as a context and a concept. Place as a context refers to the physical, social, or cultural environment in which something exists or occurs. In this sense, place provides the setting or backdrop within which events, interactions, and phenomena take place. Place can also refer to the geographical location, the specific physical surroundings, or the social and cultural milieu. On the other hand, place can be seen as a concept. In this respect, place is an abstract dimension. It can be explored in relation to questions of existence, perception, and the nature of reality.

Human perceptions of place are vague and mixed, and s/he considers that phenomena in space result from mixed sensory perceptions. Millay's "First Fig" does not provide a specific physical setting, however, the place may represent the poet's existence or the stage of life she finds herself in. Hence, Millay's perception of place in "First Fig" depends upon assuming a dark place that is enlightened by her body. Therefore, the physical surrounding or the context of the poem is darkness. The dark place spurs the body to give "a lovely light." The place in "First Fig" can also be understood as a concept. The burning candle in the poem shows the poet's rejection of societal norms and expectations, choosing instead to live passionately and fully, even if it means a shorter lifespan or potential consequences.

The mention of "foes" and "friends" in "First Fig" suggests that the poet's choices and way of life might be met with both criticism and admiration. Millay acknowledges the potential consequences of her actions but emphasizes the beauty and brilliance of her existence despite its transience. In this interpretation, the place in the poem represents the poet's personal identity, her attitude towards life, and her defiance of societal conventions. It reflects a state of being rather than a physical location.

In "Second Fig," the contrasting imagery of the "solid rock" and the "sand" alludes to different metaphorical places. The "solid rock" represents stability, security, and conformity, symbolizing a conventional and predictable life. On the other hand, the "sand" is an emblem of feebleness, impermanence, and conformity, symbolizing a life that is more spontaneous and unconventional. The poem is a reflection on Millay's choice to embrace a life of passion, creativity, and individuality, even if it means sacrificing the safety and stability that the "ugly houses" on the solid rock represent. The poet invites others to witness her "shining palace" built on the sand, emphasizing the allure and beauty of a life lived on one's own terms, even if it is less secure and more vulnerable.



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Overall, the place in "Second Fig" can be perceived as a symbolic representation of one's choices s/he makes in life and the paths s/he takes in life. It explores the tension between conformity and individuality, stability and risk, and invites readers to reflect on the possibilities and consequences of embracing a different less conventional path.

### Conclusion

The poet's sense of her body as an object motivates herself towards creativity to curl around the ego a voice that does not get marginalized, and a transcendent and ecstatic entity that knows no form of silence, nor a way of repression to form her identity with its dimensions of loftiness.

Millay attempts to present the female body as a source of strength, confidence and vigor rather than being submissive and subject to alienation and enslavement. She trusts the female body, thus she employs it in her poetry as a tool of resistance. The interconnectedness between the body and the space shape the poet's thoughts and beliefs. The body in "First Fig" and "Second Fig" challenges and threatens the foundation of masculinity; the poems suggest the possibility of disrupting patriarchy through compliancy. Both body and place are interrelated to depict the constructive as well as the destructive nature of the female body.

The place speaks of the truth of the poet. Hence, the poet of the present study, successfully articulates the drama of her personality by presenting the body on spatial stage. Millay uses both the body and the place to define each other and to delineate her own identity. Both poems reflect a kind of inevitability to positioning motivation and meaning in the female body in terms of environment.

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