

# A comparison of two sonnets essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



## **‘ How do I love thee let me count the ways’ – Elizabeth Barratt Browning**

‘ Sonnet 138’ – William Shakespeare

Both these sonnets are very famous in the English-speaking world and both deal with a relationship between a man and a woman. However, Barratt Browning and Shakespeare adopt a very different tone and attitude when talking about love; use language in very different ways; manipulate the form of the sonnet in contrasting ways; and produce very different emotional effects on the reader. In short, the sonnets represent two very different attitudes to love in their content and different attitudes to the sonnet as well.

The subject matter of each sonnet is vastly different. Barratt Browning’s sonnet is an unequivocal declaration of her devotion and complete love for Robert Browning – written before she married him. The statement “ I love thee” is repeated nine times in the sonnet and shows her complete adoration for the man she was to marry against her father’s wishes. Because of the unequivocal nature of her feelings her tone is assertive, strong and full of confidence. By contrast, Shakespeare describes a much more complicated relationship. The sonnet opens with a paradox: he believes her, even though he knows she is lying. He suspects that she sleeps with other men but is prepared to ignore it; by the same token, he ignores the fact that there is a large age gap between them, and his lover too is kind enough not to mention it or draw attention to the disparity in their ages. In as sense, they are both lying: she lies when she “ swears she is made of truth” and Shakespeare, as it were, lies to himself when he thinks or says that the age gap between

them is not problematic.

This acute difference in subject matter and content leads to the differences in language and the different ways the sonnet form is used. Shakespeare's sonnet is so ambivalent about his lover and their feelings for each other, that it is hard to be certain of the tone of the final couplet:

**Therefore, I lie with her and she with me,**

And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

We might note the pun in the word 'lie' - meaning both to tell each other lies and also to sleep with each other. But how typical that in a poem about deceit Shakespeare should end with a pun - a word that also might be thought of as a lie, because it means two different things! As for the tone, is it bitter and sad, as the words "faults" and "lies" might suggest; or is he happy to be "flatter'd," the lies being worth the price of sleeping with a younger woman who never mentions his age?

Traditionally, sonnets pose problems or present difficulties which they resolve through the development of thought in the poem. The two sonnets differ in form, because Barratt Browning's is a Petrarchan sonnet which is divided into two quatrains and two tercets; Shakespeare is writing in a form which became known as the Shakespearean sonnet: three quatrains followed by a final rhyming couplet which acted as a summary or resolution of the problem posed by the rest of the sonnet. In both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets it is traditional to have a change of thought or direction in line 9 - often called the sonnet's 'turn.' Shakespeare's sonnet has a conventional turn because line 9 asks a question which introduces a new perspective on the relationship. Barratt Browning does not have a turn:

there is no change of thought because her sonnet deals with a more straightforward relationship: her feelings are so clear and so profound that the sonnet as a whole poses no problem or posits no difficulty – essentially Barratt Browning repeats the same idea all the way through the sonnet, simply searching for different ways to assert her love for her husband-to-be. By contrast, Shakespeare's sonnet is more thoughtful, more analytical and his feelings more complex – which in as sense is why there is a turn in Shakespeare's line 9.

The appeal of Barratt Browning's sonnet must lie in the strength and simplicity of her feelings, because she uses hardly any images to explain her feelings and no striking figurative language: she convinces the reader of her sincerity by assertion and repetition. It is also interesting that attempts to define 'love' not by comparing it to physical things (that would introduce imagery and perhaps similes and metaphors), but by comparing the abstract emotion of love to other abstract ideas – "the ends of Being," "Ideal Grace," "Right." The images she does use are very simple – "sun," "candlelight," "smiles," "tears," – and this simplicity may be why the poem seems so popular. We might note too that some of Barratt Browning's words – "Ideal Grace," "Right," "lost saints" – place this poem firmly in a Christian tradition. There are no words with specifically Christian associations in Shakespeare's sonnet. By contrast, and appropriately given the relationship he is describing, Shakespeare use of language is much more complex and there is a line of thought that is developed over the fourteen lines of the sonnet. Shakespeare pretends to believe that his lover is loyal to him and, in doing so, he shows the innocence of an "untutor'd youth" – which is ironic

because he is much older than her. This naive, innocent faith (even though it is not genuine) allows her to think of him as younger than he is (or so Shakespeare tells himself). Therefore, in line 8 Shakespeare comes to the conclusion that “ On both sides... is simple truth suppress'd.” The turn in line 9 introduces a new thought by means of two questions: why do Shakespeare and his lover pretend and play this game of double bluff? Why does she swear that she is loyal and why does he “ say not I that I am old”? Because life is easier, Shakespeare suggests, if neither he nor his lover face the truth:

**O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,**

And age in love loves not to have years told.

They tacitly agree to deceive each other.

These two sonnets are very different from each other. Barratt Browning's sonnet is straightforward and simple, and her language and use of the sonnet form reflect this simplicity. By contrast, Shakespeare's sonnet is full of deceit and lies. His lover pretends that she is faithful; Shakespeare pretends that he believes her; he tells himself that this makes him look younger, so that his lover thinks he is a “ youth,” even though his “ days are past the best.” But the end result of this duplicity still sees them in bed together at the end of the sonnet. Barratt Browning's poem is memorable because of its simplicity and honesty; Shakespeare's is more intellectually engaging and interesting because he is describing a more complex relationship.

## **Work Cited**

Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.'

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Shakespeare, William. 'When my love swears that she is made of truth.'

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