

How do i love thee?"
by elizabeth barrett
browning essay
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How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning was written in 1845 while she was being courted by the English poet, Robert Browning. The poem is also titled Sonnet XLIII from *Sonnets From the Portuguese*. Elizabeth Barrett was born in Durham England in 1806, the first daughter of affluent parents who owned sugar plantations in Jamaica. She was home-schooled and read voraciously in history, philosophy and literature. Young Elizabeth learned Hebrew in order to read original Bible texts and she learned Greek in order to read original Greek drama and philosophy. She began writing poems when she was 12 years old, though she did not publish her first collection for another twenty years. Elizabeth Barrett developed a serious respiratory ailment by age 15 and a horse riding accident shortly thereafter left her with a serious spinal injury. Both health problems remained with her all of her life. In 1828 her mother died and four years later the family business faltered and her father sold the Durham estate and moved the family to a coastal town. He was stern, protective, and even tyrannical and forbid any of his children to marry. In 1833 Elizabeth published her first work, a translation of *Prometheus Bound* by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus. A few years later the family moved to London. Her father began sending Elizabeth's younger brothers and sisters to Jamaica to help with the family business. Elizabeth was distressed because she openly opposed slavery in Jamaica and on the family plantations and because she did not want her siblings sent away. In 1838 Elizabeth Barrett wrote and published *The Seraphim and Other Poems*. The collection took the form of a classical Greek tragedy and expressed her deep Christian sentiments. Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth's poor health

prompted her to move to Italy, accompanied by her dear brother Edward, whom she referred to as " Bro." Unfortunately he drowned a year later in a sailing accident and Elizabeth returned to London, seriously ill, emotionally broken, and hopelessly grief-stricken. She became reclusive for the next five years, confining herself to her bedroom. She continued to write poetry, however, and published a collection in 1844 simply titled, *Poems*. It was also published in the United States with an introduction by Edgar Allan Poe. In one of the poems she praised one of the works of Robert Browning, which gained his attention.

He wrote back to her, expressing his admiration for *Poems*. Over the next twenty months Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning exchanged 574 letters. An admiration, respect, and love for each other grew and flourished. In 1845 Robert Browning sent Elizabeth a telegram which read, " I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett. I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart - and I love you too." A few months later the two met and fell in love. Inspired by her love for Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett wrote the 44 love poems which were collected in *Sonnets From the Portuguese* and which were eventually published in 1850. Her growing love for Robert and her ability to express her emotions in the sonnets and love poems allowed Elizabeth to escape from the oppression of her father and the depression of her recluse. Her father strongly opposed the relationship so she kept her love affair a secret as long as possible. The couple eloped in 1846 and her father never forgave her or spoke to her. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband, Robert, went to Pisa, Italy and soon settled in Florence where she spent the rest of her life, with occasional visits to London. Soon Elizabeth's

health improved enough to be able to give birth to the couple's only child, Robert. In 1850 she published *Sonnets From the Portuguese*.

Some have speculated that the title was chosen to hide the personal nature of the sonnets and to imply that the collection was a translation of earlier works. However, Robert's pet name for Elizabeth was "my little Portuguese," a reflection on Elizabeth's darker, mediterranean complexion, possibly inherited from the family's Jamaican ties. While living in Florence, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published 3 more considerable works. She addressed Italian political topics and some other unpopular subjects, such as slavery, child labor, male domination, and a woman's right to intellectual freedom. Though her popularity decreased as a result of these choices, she was read and heard and recognized throughout Europe. She died in Florence in 1861. Sonnet XLIII, "How Do I Love Thee?" is probably Elizabeth Barrett Browning's most popular love poem. It is heartfelt, romantic, loving, elegant, and simple. It is also quite memorable. The love poem starts with the question, "How Do I Love Thee?" and proceeds to count the ways. Her Christian spirituality testifies that she loves Robert "to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach." She then professes seven more ways that she loves Robert. Her "passion put to use in my old griefs" refers to the depth of her former despair.

The love that "I seemed to lose with my lost saints" refers to the lost loves of her mother and her brother. The love poem ends with the declaration that time and death will not diminish her love for Robert because "if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death." • Repetition - The repetition of "

How do I Love Thee" emphasizes the intensity of the speaker's love. • <https://assignbuster.com/how-do-i-love-thee-by-elizabeth-barrett-browning-essay-sample/>

Theme – The poem’s theme can be found in the final six lines: True love overcomes all and is eternal in nature. • The poem is a sonnet, a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. Although it does not follow the precise rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet, the poem’s structure follow the form of an Italian sonnet, consisting of an octet – the first eight lines, and the sestet, the final six lines. The end of the octet is called the volta, meaning the turning point. • In the octet the poem’s speaker lists the depth of her love through hyperbole, or exaggeration, a fitting poetic device for a love poem. The sestet discusses a more mature love, a love that transcends all, including death.

“ How Do I Love Thee?” by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Line 1

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

•The speaker poses the question that’s going to drive the entire poem: how does she love “ thee,” the man she loves? •She decides to count the ways in which she loves him throughout the rest of the poem. (For an explanation of why we think the speaker is female and the beloved is male, see the “ Speaker” section.) •Now, this all might seem pretty straightforward – after all, the line is simply “ How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” But we’d like to point out that deciding to “ count” the ways you love someone does seem a bit, well, calculating. The speaker’s initial decision to count types of love is intriguing. For her, love is best expressed by making a list, and that just seems weird to us. However, since she wants to “ count the ways” – and she seems to have forgotten the actual numbers – we’ll try to help her out by

putting them back in! As you read on, we'll keep a count of Ways of Loving.

Lines 2-4

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

•The speaker describes her love using a spatial metaphor: her love extends to the " depth" and " breadth" and " height" that her soul can " reach." It's interesting to think of love as a three-dimensional substance filling the container of her soul. •Notice also that her love extends exactly as far as her soul in all directions - maybe her love and her soul are the same thing. Cool, eh? •The next part of the sonnet is a little bit trickier: " when feeling out of sight / For the ends of Being and ideal Grace" (3-4). This is an ambiguous passage, but we like to interpret this as the speaker " feeling for" the edges of her " Being" that are just " out of sight" - just the way that you try to feel for a glass of water on your bedside table that's just beyond your peripheral vision.

As she's trying to feel the full extent of her soul, she realizes that she loves " thee" in every part of it - to the " depth and breadth and height" that it reaches. •To put it another way, when the speaker is trying to figure out (" feeling") how far her soul (her " Being") extends in the world, she realizes that her love for the beloved extends just as far (that's all the " depth and breadth and height" stuff in line 3). •Notice that if you put the " feeling" together with the " reach," this metaphor is very reliant on images of touch.

We get the sense that the speaker is stretching out with both arms, trying to

explain how broad and wide and deep her love is. It's a much more poetic
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version of saying " I love you THIS MUCH" with your arms flung wide.

- Anyway, this spatial love is the first of the " ways" of loving that the speaker lists. Lines 5-6

I love thee to the level of everyday's

Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

- The poem becomes much more grounded and down-to-earth in the description of the next way to love. As the speaker explains, she loves her beloved " to the level of everyday's / most quiet need." This is a reminder that, even though she loves him with a passionate, abstract intensity (see lines 2-4), she also loves him in a regular, day-to-day way. •Even though it's not directly described, we get a sense of everyday domestic living here - the reality of wanting to be with someone all the time in a low-stakes kind of way. This is a " married-and-hanging-out-watching-TV-on-the-couch-each-night" kind of love, instead of a " Romeo-and-Juliet-are-going-to-die-tomorrow" kind. •It's important, however, that this doesn't mean the love is any less significant. The everyday " need" for love may be " quiet," but it's definitely there. •The speaker completes the description of this everyday love with two images of light: " by sun and candle-light." Basically, this is just a way of saying " in the day and at night," but it also reminds us that the lovers are looking at each other all the time - and that the speaker here loves her beloved no matter what light she sees him in. •If you're counting, this everyday love is the second of the " ways" of loving that the speaker lists. Lines 7-8

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

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•The first half of each of these lines is extremely simple: " I love thee freely" and " I love thee purely." Those seem like pretty good ways to love - after all, you wouldn't want love to be forced or impure, right? The tricky part comes in the second half of each line, where the speaker describes something else that's supposed to happen " freely" or " purely." •First, the speaker tells us, " I love thee freely, as men strive for Right" (7). If you turn this around for a moment, the speaker is implying that " men strive for Right" in a " free" way. That is, trying to be morally good isn't something anyone has to do - it's something they choose to do of their own free will. Isn't it? •Well, in a way it is, because everything we do is a choice, but in another way, people try to do the right thing because they think they ought to. So, if the speaker's love is just as " free" as being ethically good, then maybe it's not quite as free as we thought. Maybe it's something she feels she has to do, even when she doesn't want to. The poem is getting edgy!

•Next, the speaker tells us, " I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise." That is, her love is " pure" in the way that being modest and refusing everyone else's admiration is pure. •Perhaps the speaker is also implying that she's not proclaiming her love in order to be applauded by her readers. She's not seeking praise for writing a great poem about love; she loves without wanting any reward or commendation. •If you're counting, " freely" is the third way and " purely" is the fourth way of loving that the speaker lists. Lines 9-10

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.

•First we'll need to explain what " old griefs" are. Think of an incident in your

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past that you still feel really angry about. Consider the intensity of your feelings when you think about this incident - you know, the sort of thing that absolutely has you gnashing your teeth and spitting and swearing and absolutely seething with bitter fury. No, no, we're not thinking of any particular personal example...*ahem*. •Where were we? Oh, right, " old griefs." Incidents like that one - the teeth-gnashing one - are your " old griefs." Now imagine if you could use all the " passion" and intensity of that bitter feeling and convert it somehow into love. That's what the speaker is talking about. •It's a little like when people say " you could power this whole city with the energy he spends playing Mario Kart on his new Wii." The speaker of this poem is saying " I love you with all the energy I used to spend being bitter about stuff in my past." •Of course, what we worry about is: how effectively is this bitterness being converted into love, anyway? Maybe some of the bitterness on one side of the metaphor is, well, oozing over onto the other side.

This poem is starting to get interesting! •The speaker also claims that she loves her beloved " with my childhood's faith." We're going to have to do another thought exercise to explain this one... •Remember how thoroughly you believed in stuff when you were a kid? You know, stuff, like the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus, and your mom's ability to fix anything you broke, and your dad's ability to answer any question, and the way you believed that adults mostly knew what they were doing and everybody followed the rules. That's your " childhood's faith." •Now imagine if you could divert that kind of energy into loving someone. Yes, our speaker loves her beloved in that way, too. Of course, just as the previous metaphor seems to inject an odd kind of

bitterness and anger into the world of love, this metaphor seems to bring with it connotations of naïveté and simplicity. •If you're counting, the " old griefs" way of loving is number five, and the " childhood's faith" way is number six. Lines 11-12

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints -

- The " lost saints" aren't misplaced Catholic statues. Instead, they're the people you used to believe in that you don't have faith in anymore. You know, heroes who let you down, whether they're famous people (Roger Clemens? Britney Spears?) or just friends or family members who you once had a really high opinion of and now, well, they seem merely human. •So this kind of loving is also about faith: what if you could take the love you had for your heroes, before you were disillusioned about them, and channel that into loving someone? That's the kind of love the speaker is describing here.

- This is the seventh kind of love mentioned in the poem, but who's counting?

Lines 12-13

I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life! -

- The speaker tells us that she loves her beloved " with the breath, / Smiles, tears of all my life!" (12-13). What does that mean? •Well, obviously she loves him with every smile that crosses her face - her happiness is always an expression of loving him, even when she's smiling about something else.

- But it's not just her happy moments that go into loving him; it's the sad ones, too (the " tears") and even the regular, unemotional moments - the continuous " breath" of life. Even breathing in and out seems to be a way of

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loving in this poem. •If you count “ breath,” “ smiles,” and “ tears” separately, these are ways number eight, nine, and ten of loving described in the poem. Lines 13-14

and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

•Now that the speaker has claimed every single breath she takes is an expression of love for her beloved, what’s left? •Well, what about the time when she’s not breathing? You know, when she’s dead? The speaker’s final claim is that, if God lets her, she’s going to love her beloved even more intensely “ after death.” •Of course, the poem isn’t totally clear about whether the speaker or the beloved is the one who’s going to die. That’s left ambiguous, but it could really be either or both of them – the point is that, even in death, this speaker is going to find a new way of loving. •We’ll just call this “ afterlife” way of loving “ number eleven,” since it’s the eleventh and final way to love that appears on the list given in this poem.

QUOTES:

How do I love thee? (1)

In this sonnet, the speaker establishes her own identity by thinking about the relationship that she has with her beloved. By asking “ How do I love thee?” she also asks “ Who am I and what kind of love do I feel?” I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith. (10-11)

In these lines, the speaker hints at other aspects of her personality besides

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her love for "thee." She has "old griefs," things in her past that she's bitter about. She's also separated from the innocent faith in the world that she was able to feel as a child. All this suggests that she's a bit more mature and jaded than you might expect the speaker of a love poem to be. if God choose (13)

Throughout this poem, the speaker seems all-powerful, conquering everything around her with her love. However, at the very end of the poem, she admits that there are limits to her power: she will only be able to keep loving "thee" after death if God allows her to do so.