***Sonnets from the Portuguese,* Elizabeth Barret Browning**

**1. Poem: Sonnet III**

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!
Unlike our uses and our destinies.
Our ministering two angels look surprise
On one another, as they strike athwart
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art
A guest for queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part
Of chief musician. What hast thou to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?
The chrism is on thine head,---on mine, the dew,---
And Death must dig the level where these agree.[[i]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn1%22%20%5Co%20%22)

**2. Introduction**

There are principally two ways to read Elizabeth Barret Browning sonnets. One way is to see her sonnet sequence as autobiographical-- as personal expressions of her love and the other is to concentrate in the poem refusing the interpretation from an autobiographical point of view. Certainly it is a rather convincing way to read the love poems in the former way, given the biographical facts that correlate her writing of the sonnets to her courtship with Robert Browning. In this analysis the poem will be related with the author’s personal information, however, it will not be the central idea of this commentary, but its purpose is to add relevant information in order to clarify the author’s intention and meaning.[[ii]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn2%22%20%5Co%20%22)

**3. Historical background**

Elizabeth Barret Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese, first published in 1850, is a sequence of 44 love sonnets written in secret by herself during her courtship with fellow poet Robert Browning.[[iii]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn3%22%20%5Co%20%22)

The complete work relates an ascendant and complex evolution of Browning’s feelings towards Robert, it moves from sorrow, darkness and fear, to passion, joy and profound exhilaration. Each of the sonnets represents a point in the relationship between Elizabeth and Robert.[[iv]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn4%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Sonnet III represents the insecurity that remains in the early sonnets, where we can clearly notice Elizabeth’s self-doubt and insecurity of this relationship. Distance is the prevailing theme in Sonnet III, where EBB expresses her fears, doubts about the insincere feelings of her suitor.

Sonnets from the Portuguese stands as a significant contribution to literature: Not only does Barrett Browning successfully revive the form of the Italian sonnet developed by Petrarch in the fourteenth century – whose works she happened to be translating at the same time that these poems were written – but she also expands the traditional conventions of such a form to include a feminine variation as yet unseen in poetry.[[v]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn5%22%20%5Co%20%22)

**4. Analysis of the poem**

Abiding by tradition, each of the poems in the sequence is comprised of fourteen lines, written in iambic pentameter, and separated into an octet (eight lines), in which the poem's story or question is introduced, and a sestet (six lines), in which the topic is resolved. The rhyme scheme of the octet follows the pattern abba, abba; the sestet can typically rhyme cde, cde, or – as Barrett Browning utilized it – cdc, cdc. However, it is Barrett Browning's precise application of this rigid, long-established, masculine structure that allows her innovative feminine (even feminist) deviations to show up so significantly.[[vi]](http://mural.uv.es/xiliu/POETRY/second%20individual.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn6%22%20%5Co%20%22)

Two characters are present in this poem: the author and the beloved (the author is present and the beloved is absent).

In this first quatrain, the author already introduces the mood and tone of the whole poem: ‘distance’, the main idea stressed throughout Browning’s text, her prime concern is expressing her doubts, her sadness and the distance she feels between her and her beloved.

From the very beginning of the poem, EBB starts repeating the word ‘unlike’, she wants to stress the ideas of difference and distance, as if ‘thou’ belonged to a world completely different from the speaker’s. So the anaphora makes the relationship between the two characters ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ distant, just as the apostrophe ‘O princely Heart’ she tries to catch the reader’s attention to the fact that the male character’s nature is splendid and generous (this idealization is used in the next stanzas to contrast with the speaker’s own nature).

***Unlike****are we,****unlike****, O princely Heart!****Unlike****our uses and our destinies.*

Preserving the same idea mentioned before, in the following two lines she uses the image of ‘ministering two angels’ being the metaphor of each character’s soul, who looks on one another surprised as if they are from completely different worlds and for them to be together is a strange thing.

*Our****ministering two angels******look surprise*** *On one another, as they strike athwart*

After staying the ideas of difference and distance in the first four lines, she justifies why that distance by defining each character’s nature. In the following quatrain we can clearly appreciate that the author starts a comparison, she delimits these two worlds, she is aware of the fact of each one’s position: heaven and darkness.

*[…]****Thou****, bethink thee,****art*** *A guest for queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than****tears****even can make mine, to play thy part*

*of chief musician*

The speaker feels that her lover's talent and nobility of character place him in a higher order and worship him exaggeratedly. Elizabeth identifies her lover as “A *guest for queens to social pageantries*”, a beautiful creation surrounded by luxury and richness, that even his “*tears*” which she cannot even reach are the metaphor of that world impossible for her to achieve. The author’s intention is to show the one loved in the best possible light, she uses this idealized description to stress the idea of distance between her and her beloved.

In contrast with her lover, she is defining herself as ‘*poor*’, ‘*tired*’, ‘wandering singer’… words full of negative connotations due to her physical state and her mood was absolutely dark at the time  she was writing, she was an invalid woman 6 years older than her suitor and with health problems. So she is reluctant to accept the affections of her suitor, unsure if his sentiments can possibly be sincere. She asks:

*[…] What hast thou to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through*

She represents herself as a “*wandering singer, singing through the dark*”. The references of darkness related to the poet and the lattice lights to the suitor stress again the general mood of distance between these two characters.

On the other hand, the cypress tree, a symbol of mourning, represents not only Barrett's own nearness to death, but also her perpetual sadness since the loss of her mother and, even more, her closest brother, Edward, years before.  The author continues emphasizing the idea of distance using another comparison: ‘he’ has the chrism, synonym of holy or sacramental and ‘she’ the dew, seems to be connected with tears, sadness and melancholy, again she establishes a boundary between the two characters that separates them.

Elizabeth finishes the last line with the most pessimistic end: the ‘Death’, deliberately written in capital letter to give prominence to this word. The end is the death and for her, the death is the only way that can make equal their existence. The author is foregrounding her negative impression of the future, a tragic end that makes this love impossible.

[…]The **dark**, and leaning up a **cypress tree**?

The chrism is on thine head,---on mine, the dew,---
And **Death** must dig the level where these agree.

In general terms, we can understand throughout the sonnet the poem's speaker mistrust about her suitor's attraction to such a gloomy creature, while at the same time, doubts her own ability to reciprocate his generous affection.

**5. Conclusion**

Elizabeth Barret Browning brings a new vision to the sonnet after the romantics. She uses the traditional “love poem” form but from a feminine point of view, and her dark tone adds a new vision of love within the sonnet.

This sonnet provides the common theme of love but reflecting a more sensitive part of human being: the instability and insecurity that love produces.

The sonnet has had a powerful effect on me as reader, as these emotions come from real life experience, from universal feelings. My point is that the Victorian love represented by Elizabeth Barret Browning could also be applied to modern love.

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Sonnets from the Portuguese 26: I lived with visions for my company

BY [ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-barrett-browning)

I lived with visions for my company,

Instead of men and women, years ago,

And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know

A sweeter music than they played to me.

But soon their trailing purple was not free

Of this world's dust, — their lutes did silent grow,

And I myself grew faint and blind below

Their vanishing eyes. Then THOU didst come ... to be,

Belovèd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,

Their songs, their splendours, (better, yet the same,

As river-water hallowed into fonts)

Met in thee, and from out thee overcame

My soul with satisfaction of all wants —

Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

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Sonnets from the Portuguese 35: If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange

BY [ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-barrett-browning)

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange

And be all to me? Shall I never miss

Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss

That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,

When I look up, to drop on a new range

Of walls and floors ... another home than this?

Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is

Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?

That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,

To conquer grief, tries more ... as all things prove;

For grief indeed is love and grief beside.

Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.

Yet love me—wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,

And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

The sentiment of this sonnet is concluded in abjuration of the familiar life, Elizabeth writes that she is ready to sacrifice everything for the love of Robert. Nevertheless, emotionally this sonnet is restless and anxious. The poetess takes the liberty to allow the thought, that later, when the voile of amourness will subside, may be the sadness will permeate through their relationship. Again she brings to mind sadness and sorrow which are always around her. This is the sonnet where Elizabeth talks to

Robert about the complexity to love her. She asks him if she should donate her erstwhile life for a new one, which is unbeknown. Undoubtedly, she is awaiting of an assertive answer from the lover.

"If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange And be all to me?…"

The poetess asks the most important question for her: If I leave all, could you leave all for me too? During all that correspondence time she was always asking herself: could he give me all from him, as I gave him. Asking these questions, she wants to obtain an answer which is so indispensable for her.

She uses the pronoun "thee", like in the previous sonnets, to stress that she asks him - her lover. One more detail should be mentioned - she never named him as Robert, she always uses pronouns "thee" and "thou" to emphasize intimacy of these sonnets, which the poetess did not intend to publish. It was a gift for her husband, which later he published and presented to the literature’s world.

"...Shall I never miss

Home-talk and blessings and the common kiss…"

The second and the third lines describe speaker’s usual life: her home and family. Her home was a dungeon for her, but it was a place where she was safe and where all accepted her with her sorrow and illness.

The epithet "common in ―common kiss" includes all her family members. By using the word "kiss" the speaker wants to show the most heartwarming and affectionate senses which she has to them.

The poetess shows that this part of her life has a significant importance for her.

With these lines she asks herself to give reasons for her to miss her home, her family, her past life. Evidently this question troubles her.

"That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,

In this line the speaker says that homesickness is an inherent part of life for every human being.

"When I look up, to drop on a new range

Of walls and floors, another home than this?"

Lines five and six say that her love demands a lot of changes from her, it demands sacrifices of what was dearly to her. "To drop on a new range of walls and floors…"- with this metaphorical line Elizabeth draws a parallel with her room, where she was in durance. However, this room becomes very dear to her. It is connected with the emotional mood, psychological and physical condition she once had. Her room was the keeper of her soul’s revelations, prays and dreams. It was her own small world - naive and inoffensive. She could not imagine another place which could interchange her faithful for year's room. She wants to say that she sacrifices all this in the name of love.

"Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is

Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?"

The speaker is ready to quit all what she has forever, if her lover is with her. She is bountied with his love; she believes that being together with Robert will help her cope with everything. The poetess uses the epithet "dead eyes too tender "- to accent again that loneliness which she lived with for such a long time, gave her wistfulness and mourning. Her eyes mirrored the death of her soul and heart, but with the emerging of love, they tried to see the light, tried to be tender.

"That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,

To conquer grief, tries more, as all things prove;

For grief indeed is love and grief beside."

The lines from nine till eleven tell about the complexity "to conquer love." The speaker starts a discourse which has a deep philosophical meaning with a rhetorical tone. She says it is hard to open the heart for love; it is difficult to let another person in your life, to let him depend on her emotional feelings. It is not too easy to evince love to another person, to have strong faith that this sense is true and pure. But the speaker says that it is much harder "to conquer grief" - this is a metaphor of her soul. The poetess again shows to her lover that all what surrounds her is "grief"- deep and bitter. It is like a wall between the lovers, and love like a gentle flower tries to grow under this wall, but could not. The wall should be shattered, and then the flower could feel the sunshine’s warm and see the sky, and grow up, passing into a gorgeous flower.

However, Elizabeth’s reasoning leads her to grasp that "for grief indeed is love and grief beside"; she comes to the conclusion that these two senses have something that unifies them. Love brings not only happiness, but sadness too. If it could find a way to your soul, it could present you different emotional senses. Here the poetess scrutinizes love from different sides. She says that the sense of love for her is felt by her soul and analyzed by her mind.

"Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.

Yet love me--wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,

And fold within the wet wings of thy dove."

In these last lines the speaker confirms that it is difficult to love her, because the sadness of her life will be with her for ever - "I have grieved". She asks with an expectancy "Yet love me--wilt thou?" She wants to know that sadness and grief of her life do not scare her lover, she is awaiting for reaffirmation of this love. She feels certain that a real love could transcend all.

"Open thine heart wide" - the command is heard in this line. She is brave, she understands that his love is so great and strong, he could protect that love from everything. She believes in her lover, in her only one lover forever. She says: Open your heart! She is bold, for her it is necessary to counter all her doubts and hesitance.

"Dove" is the symbol of bravery, it is the yen of sky and freedom, and the poetess names it as "dove" something which is inside her, something which is close to the potential to love.

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**Sonnet 43**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
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.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, --- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

**Analysis**
The second to last and most famous sonnet of the collection, Sonnet 43 is the most passionate and emotional, expressing her intense love for Robert Browning repeatedly. Elizabeth says in the second to third lines that she loves Browning with every aspect of her soul. She then goes onto say that she loves him enough that it meets the needs of every day and every night in lines 5 and 6. Through lines 7, 8, 9 and 11 Elizabeth repeats the phrase, "I love thee..." to build intensity and show emphasis. Line 7 says that she loves him "freely," or willingly, as men who try and reach "Right," which in this case could mean righteousness, or in correlation with the previous word "freely" it may mean freedom. Line 8 means that she loves him, as it says, purely, without any want for praise. It is interesting that line 9 says that she loves him as passionately, or intensely, as she experienced her old griefs or sufferings, and with a faith as strong as a child's. This helps to transition into line 11, expressing she loves him as much as she used to love the saints as a child. And the last three lines state that she loves him with all of her life and, God willing, she'll continue to love him that deeply in the afterlife. It is not surprising that this sonnet is so passionately written, as it helps to show how her love for Robert Browning grew intensely over time, starting out as nothing and blooming into a love that most of us could only wish to experience.

**Structure**

*Sonnet 43* is the length of a traditional sonnet (14 lines) but otherwise does not follow the rules. There is a fairly **regular rhyme scheme**, but this is flexible, and Browning often makes use of *assonance* (for example "Praise" and "Faith"), which is striking because the poem is about defining the perfect love, and yet the poem avoids perfection. Perhaps this is deliberate.

**Language**

The poem makes use of **repetition**: "I love thee" is used eight times and reflects the devotion the poet feels for her lover as well as the persistent nature of that love. Repetition is also used in a list on line 2 "depth and breadth and height" to suggest this poem is comprehensive; it aims to fully define the poet's love. Repetition here also suggests breathlessness and excitement.

Love is compared to weighty, important concepts like "Being and ideal Grace", "Right" and "Praise". Browning's use of **capital letters** emphasizes these words.

The opening rhetorical question implies a **conversation between lovers**, and the exclamation mark at the end of the first line makes the poem seem lighthearted and playful. The speaker is responding enthusiastically to the challenge of listing the ways in which she experiences love.

Lines become frequently broken up by **punctuation** by the end of the poem, another suggestion that the speaker is excited. "I love thee with the breath,/ Smiles, tears, of all my life!". She is passionate in her explanation.

**Attitudes, themes and ideas**

*Sonnet 43* presents the idea of **love as powerful** and all-encompassing; her love enables her to reach otherwise impossible extremes:

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.

As well as the use of lists to imply the comprehension of her love, "feeling out of sight "tells us that the speaker sees her love not as something tangible but instinctive or even spiritual.

The poem is *autobiographical*: it refers to "my old griefs". (Browning had strong disagreements with her parents and was eventually disinherited.) The passion she applied to these "griefs" has been applied more positively to her love, demonstrating that **she sees love as a positive, powerful and life-changing force**.

Barrett Browning mentions her loss of religious faith in this sonnet: "I love thee with a love I seemed to lose/With my lost Saints!" Her lover becomes a **spiritual saviour**. She is not totally without faith, however: "if God choose,/I shall but love thee better after death". Here she asserts the idea that if God controls her future then she hopes to be reunited with her lover in the afterlife.

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