

How Do I Love Thee?

by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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 every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love 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.

The Author:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was the most highly regarded woman poet of the nineteenth century. She was profoundly innovative in form, fusing traditional elements, such as the Petrarchan sonnet, or Greek tragedy, with her own personal subject matter, such as her love life or liberal politics. She was tremendously passionate in both areas; her romance with Robert Browning, an American poet six years her junior is legendary, and the source of her most famous work, this sonnet above all; and her politics were very personal as well, an expression of her moral passion. For example she was a fierce abolitionist, opposed child labor, the oppression of women, and after moving to Italy upon her marriage she became concerned about national issues there.

Elizabeth Browning's immediate family, aside from herself, had all been born and lived in Jamaica for two hundred years. Her family owned sugar cane fields and were slavers. They were also part creole.

Elizabeth Barrett, (Browning is her married name), was at the same time a prodigy who was fascinated with literature and assiduously self-taught; and also a very slow developing writer. On some reports her work even into her mid to late twenties still failed to develop its real qualities of attraction. She was very well read in classics, even in the original languages, unlike her 11 siblings. Her visionary imagination was somewhat Miltonic at

times, creating original verse dramas of traditional Biblical scenarios.

The Poetry Foundation has written the following in their article on Browning:

“Having begun to compose verses at the age of four, two years later she received from her father for 'some lines on virtue penned with great care' a ten-shilling note enclosed in a letter addressed to 'the Poet-Laureate of Hope End.'”

“The critics reviewing *Poems* praised her for her intellectual power, originality, and boldness of thought; but most agreed that her weakness lay in her frequent vagueness of concept and obscurity of expression.”

Reflection:

Like almost everyone I am familiar with the first line. True I thought it was Shakespeare's. Something like the beginning of Sonnet 18,

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate...

Or even along the lines of Sonnet 130, which is also famous,

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

All three after all, are litanies of praise of the beloved (or sarcasm in s. 130). Or so it seems, and on this point Browning is more subtle. By this I mean that Browning's sonnet only subtly works as a portrait of her beloved, and instead is a meditation on the nature of her love itself, and how that love affects her. The first line truly rolls off the tongue more memorably than even the opening of those two sonnets by Shakespeare,

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. (line 1)

To answer her question, Browning establishes a thesis in this poem, which she expands on from a couple of angles and then elevates to the level of a “sworn vow” as her conclusion.

The thesis is given in lines 2-4, and has two parts, which are fixed as contrasting variables. This poem is organized in a very logical way, even though it concerns such personal and mysterious love. The first 4 lines then, form the introduction to the key idea, and the first answer to her question in the first line.

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. (lines 2-4)

In the spiritual plane, Browning claims she loves to the greatest extent she can. That is the first part of her answer (*how* do I love thee?). It is a love that searches recesses through feeling even beyond her capacity of “sight” to the ultimate terminus of “Being and ideal Grace”. This manner of her searching love, that it goes to places beyond conscious understanding is the primary element, as we will see, of the second variable of her loving way. When Browning says, I love to the “ends”, she may be saying the ends of the relationship, the ends of her beloved husband, Robert Browning, or the ends in some sense of Being and Grace themselves, in a more full religious or cosmic context. It is apparently all three at once. So her initial answer is that (1) she loves to all her reach, (2) even to ends she cannot fully understand, or “see”.

Let's try to see how she develops this thesis in lines 5-8.

I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

What is really odd about this poem is that the love she describes is characterized by absence, at least in the sense it cannot fully be grasped, claimed, located concretely. But that is not exactly it. The love is present in the absence, just so quietly, it is not loss, it is not gone, but we see it present beyond what is seen, as by faith.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

She would seem to be boasting a great love, but there is absence or anticlimax in loving to “every day's most quiet need.” Where is that? She states positively that she loves “as men strive for Right”. Some do right? But she contrasts this statement, which could be either ambivalent, or bland, with the counterpoint, “I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.” So she is almost praising souls, “men”, (her beloved?), who strive for right, but also turn from praise. And is this not the quietude of her poem. She is loving beyond Shakespeare in his sonnets by following after the virtue of her beloved in her praise, writing after her love. Shakespeare does not do this. He scarcely ever praises the young beloved for character traits, especially specific ones. His love was a more tragic one in the sonnets. But back to the case at hand.

Lines 9-12,

I love 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,

In the preceding quatrain the present was like a subtle absence filled with a positive love. In this stanza the absences of the past, the great resources of love, are redeemed and put to use. Here the "old griefs" "childhood faith", lost care for saints, seeming lost faith in God, are redeemed and made new by being put to the use of loving her husband. Let's look at the last couplet for her conclusion.

Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Here Browning is saying that she has hope to love even better if God should redeem them. This is a beautiful hope to share, and moreover follows on the claim of her thesis of a searching total love, into things known and unknown, that the steadfast and faithful love, according to the level of the day's need, in sun or candlelight, has resulted for her in great hope and a redemption of grief, a redemption of lost faith, such that she is reconciled to a positive eternity according to the Lord's will.

Two little technical notes:

1. This sonnet's rhyme scheme is divided in the scheme of the octet (the first 8 lines) and the sestet (the last 6 lines). The first part rhymes abbaabba. The sestet rhymes cdcdcd. I just thought it was interesting that the final rhymes are:

use, lose, choose,

alternating with rhymes

faith, breath, death

2. This is an example, like the sonnets by Shakespeare quoted above (18 and 130) of a list poem. It is closely related to a fill-in-the-blanks poem, though I believe the latter tend to be characterized by more partial and selective details, and are not as comprehensive or logical as the sonnet traditionally is, or as the sonnets mentioned here.