

ELIZABETH BARRETT-BROWNING – SONNET 43

Elizabeth Barrett-Browning (1806 – 1861) was a successful poet in her own right and was married to Robert Browning, also a poet.

Sonnet 43 is part of a sequence of poems written for her husband. She shows a great intensity of feelings in the poem and even goes as far as to say that her love will continue after death. The sequence of sonnets was called 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' and is derived from his nick-name for her 'My Little Portugee'.

The form of the poem is important. There are two different types of sonnet – the **Petrarchan Sonnet**, named after a thirteenth century Italian poet, Petrarch, and the **Shakespearean Sonnet**. The idea of the sonnet as a form of poetry came about in thirteenth century Italy where it was known as a '**sonnetti**', meaning small song and was written as a song that would be accompanied by a lute. These poems are usually about love, although the form has been used for poetry on other themes too. Most sonnets are written as part of a sequence, hence the numbering of them so that they could be read in order. This was the penultimate sonnet in a series of 44 written by Browning, secretly before her marriage and exploring her feelings towards her husband to be.

It is a Petrarchan Sonnet, which can be separated into two parts. The first part being the octave, which is eight lines in length and then the sestet, consisting of six lines. The theme of the poem is set out in the octave part of the poem. The sestet then goes on to develop the theme further and explore the different types of love felt by Browning throughout her life.

The poem uses iambic pentameter in its structure. Each line consists of ten syllables: five unstressed and five stressed in pairs together. Each pair is known as a foot. Hence each line has ten syllables and five feet (pentameter):

I love / thee to / the depth / and breadth / and height/

My soul / can reach / when feel /ing out /of sight/

There are many allusions to religion in the poem, both in the type of language used; the comparison of her love to religious zeal; and also the structure of the poem which in parts takes on a deliberately prayer-like quality.

This pattern creates a rhythm within the sonnet that is entirely in keeping with the original idea that it could be set to music.

The poem begins with a rhetorical question directed at her husband. This sets the tone of the poem as deeply personal and directs the sentiments it carries at her husband. The phrase **'I love thee'** is repeated for emphasis throughout the poem. When used at the start of lines in a stanza it is known as anaphora. It gives the poem a prayer like quality and matches the emotions that Browning is expressing.

Browning begins to express the extent of her love using measurements of the places her soul can reach – making the point that her love is immeasurable as her soul fills the whole of her life and extends into death. It also associates her love with the most sacred part of her being – her soul thus enforcing the religious associations of her love:

'I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach'

There is an internal rhyme of breadth and depth that gives the line greater resonance and makes the reader put stress on these two words.

She continues with religious imagery of the soul in its different states of life and death:

'My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace'

The first line refers to the soul not being visible, so after life has ended (the ends of Being) and the ideas of Ideal Grace is what state the soul will be in after a life lived righteously – which is what Browning is obviously hoping for her own soul. The religious nature and importance of 'Being' and 'Ideal Grace' is indicated through the capital letters which marks them out as specific names rather than just vague ideas.

She then moves into a slightly more prosaic (ordinary) assessment of her love – the way that she loves him on a day-to-day basis:

'I love thee to the level of everyday's

Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight'

There is stress placed on 'I love thee' at the beginning of the line as it is part of the anaphoric repetition of the poem. This is done deliberately to create an effect of someone chanting or praying. It also provides answers to the question posed at the outset of the poem. She demonstrates her love by going about her daily business quietly and meekly – she sees everything that she does as part of her expression of

love. The reference to sun and Candlelight suggest that she served him both day and night – her love is not diminished by the fact that she is sleeping.

Her love is given completely freely and willingly.

'I love thee freely, as men strive for Right'

Browning compares it to the love of freedom fighters – quite a dramatic image of the passion she feels. Again, the meaning of the line is reached through the capital in the final word, giving it a specific meaning.

She goes on to highlight the purity of her love and links it the idea of turning from Praise – she stops short at worshipping him like a God as this would be wrong.

She goes on to say that her love is felt with the same intensity she felt at grief when she was younger. It is as all-consuming as the grief felt at death.

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

She implies that she loves him in the same way as a child – blindly and completely, not seeing any of his faults. She continues the comparison with childhood loves by stating that as she grew and lost her fervour for the saints, her love of God became less keenly felt. She likens her love of him to the love she felt before this loss of faith.

The use of an ellipsis makes the reader pause in the middle of the line – almost as if the second part of the line has just occurred to her.

The next lines become more sentimental:

'I love thee with the breath,

Smiles and tears of all my life'

This is a very melodramatic description of her love, verging on gushing with sentiments. The hyperbole exaggerates her feelings. It implies that her whole life is devoted to this love – even the part of it before she met him!

The final point of the poem informs the reader that her love will outlast life itself and continue into death:

'I shall but love thee better after death'.

It is quite incredible to the reader that all the love she has already expressed is not enough – it must be eternal.

