

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Love and Relationships

Sonnet 29 - 'I think of thee!' - *Elizabeth Barrett*

Browning



SONNET 29 - 'I THINK OF THEE'

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Brief Summary

Sonnet 29 is a poem about the speaker's borderline obsessive thoughts about their lover. The idea of vines encircling a tree is used as a metaphor for the speaker's growing love. Eventually they realise that it is better to be physically present rather than thinking about him.

Synopsis

- The speaker begins by stating how their thoughts wrap around their lover like vines around a tree
- Barrett Browning develops this metaphor further by describing the effect of the speaker's thoughts
- Eventually the speaker comes to the conclusion that now they are physically close with their lover, they no longer feel these overwhelming thoughts.

Summary

Context – Written when courting Robert Browning // Was not intended to be published
Structure - Petrarchan sonnet form // Turning point part way through the poem.
Language – Nature // Smothering love // Extended metaphor
Key Points – The narrator becomes aware of how toxic her love can become.

Context

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

She wrote this whilst courting Robert Browning so it is thought to be written about him. It was published in a collection of 44 sonnets called "Sonnets from the Portuguese" which are all thought to be written for him. The poems were written during their courtship rather than after their marriage; she didn't show him the poems until years after they married showing how **they were written for Barrett Browning herself rather than for a public audience.**

By writing about such a high-profile individual in the 1800s publicly, it would have created a heightened sense of tension around the collection. Her father did not allow marriage so they met in secret, wrote hundreds of letters to each other and eventually eloped.

When she married Robert, she was cut off from her family - she was six years Robert's senior. Both herself and Robert experienced enough success to live comfortably during their lives. **Barrett Browning was known to be socially conscious** and vocal about the issues of child labour and slavery.

During the Victorian era, **women were expected to not experience or express strong emotions** so the end of the poem may be representative of her casting off these restraints and is generally representative of a rebellion from the gender expectations she was bound to. Barrett Browning was also known to be bedridden for large parts of her life- this could be why she is writing about thinking about people rather than being with them.



The title “I think of thee!”

The use of an exclamation mark shows Barrett Browning's excitement to think of her lover.

This title is eventually denied in the final line: *“I do not think of thee- I am too near thee.”*

I think of thee!

The title echoes the opening line to emphasise how the poem is directed at another person.

Perspective

It is commonly assumed that Barrett Browning herself is the speaker of the poem. By being in the **first person**, the poem is made more personal. As only the speaker's voice is heard, her **obsessive nature** is highlighted. Although it is a **sonnet** and directed at the speaker's lover, the intimate personal nature of the poem gives the impression of it being written for herself rather than for him to read.



Sonnet 29- 'I think of thee!'

The poem consists of an extended metaphor, he is a tree and her thoughts about him are a vine. Her use of an exclamation mark shows the depth of her feelings, and may also appear defensive - perhaps as a response to an accusative letter. By directly addressing the poem at her lover, it is being set up as a personal poem initially, making it a more intimate love poem.

She has thought about him so much that she can no longer see him really, she can only see the image she has created of him. "there's nought to see" also implies that she is unable to think about anything other than him.

Her use of the pronoun "my" shows their dependency on each other. Palm tree is an odd choice of metaphor, however it has exotic and biblical connotations, so this may be representative of either the novelty of timeless nature of their relationship.

The auditory imagery used here has natural connotations, implying the inevitability of their love for each other.

This use of triadic structure marks a turning point in the poem.

I think of thee! – my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there 's nought to see
Except the stragglng green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down, – burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee – I am too near thee.

Her growing thoughts are beginning to feed off of him and become detrimental. "Tree" and "thee" sets up an internal rhyme which makes the relationship appear more harmonious.

"hides the wood" implies that she is worried that their love for each other will conceal their true selves.

Alliterative sibilance is used in "thoughts" and "thee" to create a negative tone towards the beginning of the poem.

Her thoughts are presented to be suffocating.

She eventually breaks free of her obsessive thoughts and they are able to love each other.



The Opening

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
and did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight

The first stanza begins with a heavy emphasis on the weather. Browning **personifies the weather** by describing the wind as “**sullen**” as well as trying to “**vex the lake**” and tear “**the elm-tops down for spite**”. This use of **pathetic fallacy** sets an **ominous tone** which foreshadows the coming horrific events. This tone is then shattered by the entrance of Porphyria who is given **supernatural traits** by the description of her having “**glided**” into the cottage.

Turning point

There is a turning point at line 11 - “**Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee**” - after which the speaker changes **from thinking about her lover to being with him**. This does not conform to the traditional sonnet form in which the turning point from problem to solution is usually in line 9.

Structure and form

Sonnet form

The poem is in the form of a **petrarchan sonnet**: there are two **quatrains** and one **sestet**, with each line employing ten syllables - five stressed and five unstressed. This means it is in **iambic pentameter**.

Though, by writing in a traditional format such a sonnet in **iambic pentameter**, she is suggesting the traditional nature of her love. At times she breaks from the constraints of **iambic pentameter** in the line “**put out broad leaves, and soon there’s nought to see**”. This highlights the unconventionality of their love as well as implying that the love she feels is so intense that she must express it in any way rather than worrying about rigid guidelines.

The **pronouns** “**thee**” and “**thy**” are repeated frequently throughout in order to reinforce the fact that the poem is directed to somebody

Traditionally, the first stanza presents the speaker’s problem which in Sonnet 29 is Barrett Browning’s overwhelmingly intense feelings of love towards Robert. The poem then ends with a solution which here is her moving from thinking about him to being with him. Barrett Browning’s non conformist attitude is shown in her choice of form as originally the sonnet was intended to be written by a man to a woman.

Volta

In traditional sonnets there is a **volta after the eighth line** which is used to **change the tone or mood**. However, in Sonnet 29, the volta is found in **line five** which starts with “**yet**”. Here, it could



be argued that she is reflecting the nontraditional and non-conformist attitude of the poem by breaking tradition and hosting her volta earlier in the poem.

Rhyme scheme

The rhyme scheme of the poem is ABCCBBCDBDBDB this is more typical of the Italian style of sonnet writing rather than English so shows the slight unconventionality of her affections. At her time of writing the English, Shakespearean style sonnet was more popular however, these generally focussed on physical affection whilst **petrarchan sonnets are usually centred on prospective love from a distance**.

Language

Intimate language

Barrett Browning's use of language creates the impression of intimacy between the speaker and her lover. The **pronoun "thee"** is repeated throughout the poem to show that whilst the poem is an exploration of the speaker's thoughts, it is still closely centred on her lover. This also has the effect of showing the speaker's longing.

The impression of physical closeness is further created by Barrett Browning's use of **auditory imagery**. It is clear that the speaker and her lover are very familiar with each other as a result of the use of **"rustle"** and **"shattered"**. Although it is known that when writing the poem, Barrett Browning would not have slept with Browning, this use of language shows her excitement for her relationship to develop in this way.

Natural imagery

References to the natural world are prominent in the poem. The **active verbs "twine"** and **"bud"** have wild connotations which allude to the untameable nature of the speaker's love. By referring to the speaker's lover as **"palm-tree"** and a **"strong tree"** Barrett Browning characterises him as stable and dependable. The parasitic connotations of a vine imply that her loving thoughts may have a negative impact on Browning; her love can topple even the strongest of trees.

Flower imagery is also commonly used to **symbolise female sexuality**. In Browning's time flowers were representative of the beautified female appearance, yet in modern literature has been subverted to symbolise female empowerment through sexuality. This expression of desire would be unexpected of a Victorian lady hence why this poem was not intended to be published when written.

Intense emotions

The intensity of Barrett Browning's love is shown by her use of suffocating language. All description of her lover is put in the context of herself, showing how she is cannot fathom them existing separately.

What other effects of the natural imagery used can you identify?

Use of metaphors

The whole poem is an **extended metaphor** based on **natural imagery**. The vine is used to represent the speaker's thoughts and the tree which the vine grows on represents the speaker's lover. These images are recurrent throughout the poem until they are eventually **"shattered"**.



Comparisons

Love's Philosophy

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelley and Barrett Browning both use natural imagery as a metaphor for romantic love. Shelley states that "The winds of heaven mix for ever" and that "<i>the waves clasp one another</i>". Barrett Browning similarly attributes physical intimacy to nature in her comparison of her thoughts to "<i>wild vines, about a tree</i>" and "<i>bands of greenery</i>". Both poems are short and concise, showing the speaker's emotions to be highly intense. The two stanzas used in both could represent two people as a couple.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In typical sonnet form, Sonnet 29 ends with a feeling of resolution, created by the manipulation of the first line, "<i>I think of thee!</i>", in the last line "<i>I do not think of thee – I am too near thee.</i>". Contrastingly, in "Love's philosophy", the poem ends in the same tone with which it began. The first stanza ends with the speaker asking "<i>Why not I with thine?</i>" and the second and final stanza ends with "<i>What are all these kisses worth, // If thou kiss not me?</i>", this shows how there has been no progression in his romantic pursuit.

Porphyria's Lover

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both speakers have an unhealthy fixation on the object of their affection. In "Sonnet 29", this is shown through the active verbs "twine" and "bud" which imply that her love is smothering. Browning's speaker is equally transfixed and this is shown by the way in which he objectifies Porphyria in "<i>her smooth white shoulder bare</i>" and "<i>spread o'er all her yellow hair</i>". There is natural imagery used in "<i>Porphyria's lover</i>" in the pathetic fallacy used in "<i>The sullen wind was soon awake</i>", "<i>It tore the elm-tops down for spite</i>" and "<i>did its worst to vex the lake</i>". In "Sonnet 29", Barrett Browning uses the extended metaphor of nature. Her love is symbolised by "<i>wild vines, about a tree</i>" and "<i>the straggling green which hides the wood</i>". In both poems, the speaker is unfulfilled and then they become fulfilled in their relationship. In "Porphyria's lover", initially, the speaker is unsettled by Porphyria's autonomy which is shown in "<i>Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour, // To set its struggling passion free</i>". Eventually the speaker is shown to be satisfied in the exclamatory "<i>And I, its love, am gained instead!</i>". Likewise, in "Sonnet 29", the speaker is initially desperate to be with her lover and this is shown by the poem beginning with "<i>I think of thee!</i>", a repetition of the title, which shows how she is only able to think of her lover rather than be with him. The turning point in the sonnet however, leads to a subverted repetition of the opening line in "<i>I do not think of thee – I am too near thee.</i>", this shows the speaker's change in situation from disillusionment to satisfaction.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In "Sonnet 29", the speaker recognises that her obsession is unhealthy for



their relationship. At the turning point in the sonnet, she states that ***“I will not have my thoughts instead of thee”*** showing how she admits that thinking constantly about her lover will ruin their relationship. The speaker in “Porphyria’s lover” does not have the same self awareness and this is shown by the final **hubristic** line ***“And yet God has not said a word!”*** which demonstrates the speaker’s lack of remorse.

- In “Sonnet 29”, Barrett Browning employs the rigid sonnet form whilst Browning’s poem is continuous and not separated into stanzas. This shows that “Sonnet 29” is a more conventional depiction of love than “Porphyria’s lover” which also sporadically employs **iambic tetrameter**.

