

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

Sonnet 43 - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

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SONNET 43

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Brief Summary

In Sonnet 43, Barrett Browning explores the many ways the **speaker** (thought to be a persona of herself) loves the addressee of the poem (assumed to be her husband Robert). To an extent, it conveys how love and relationships can **transcend** (go beyond) earth and daily conventions of society. However, the poem can also be interpreted as a warning on self-indulgent relationships.

Synopsis

- The speaker introduces the theme of love instantly and begins to list the emotions she feels when with her beloved, claiming that she loves him in any kind of place or dimension, or time or day.
- Goes on to claim that she will love the addressee past death, seemingly referencing the afterlife.

Context

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 - 1861)

Barrett Browning married poet Robert Browning, who was six years her junior, against her father's will. After eloping they settled down in Florence. The Sonnets Barrett-Browning wrote are dedicated to Robert, which shows how besotted (very in love) she was with him. Their relationship broke social conventions and liberated Barrett Browning, who as a woman had to live under her father's tyrannical rule. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had many different ailments, and growing up suffered from various health conditions which is why the sonnets explore the theme of transience. But through her writing, she is able to construct a poetic self or persona that is not threatened by the inevitability of death and mortality.

Victorian Genre

Victorian literature was often **neoclassical**, which is a movement characterised by order and structure, and one which would typically portray man as inherently flawed. The Victorians were preoccupied with **antiquity** - this meant **older traditions** of poetry, such as the "Sonnet". Victorian poems would often draw on Greek mythology, historical figures, and **religion**



The collection “Sonnets from the Portuguese”

Sonnet 43 is part of the **series** of “Sonnets from the Portuguese”; Barrett Browning **posed** the series of sonnets as translations, when she had in fact **written** them herself. This is because **translation** was **perceived** as a female **occupation**, and **female writers** were **rejected** by society.

The form of sonnets are mainly associated with **Shakespeare** and **Petrarch**, who traditionally wrote Sonnets to express love to their objects of desire. Petrarchan Sonnets were often about a **self-conscious suffering** and followed the **tradition** of **courtly love**, where the **male subject** commonly **laments** over his **unrequited** love. This tradition of poetry can be understood as **eradicating** female agency; they are **reduced** to mere **accessories** and **objects**.

Gender & female writers in the Victorian Period

Barrett Browning was writing in a time when society was not accepting of female writers. As a result, most female writers had pseudonyms in the 19th Century so readers thought they were male writers. For example, Charlotte Bronte wrote under the name Currer Bell. For this reason the “Sonnets from the Portuguese” were published secretly.

Interpretations of Barrett Browning’s work vary depending on contextual audience. Some feminists criticise Barrett Browning as conforming to a patriarchal form, as the poem can be seen as assimilation to the ruling tradition. However, other critics may argue that Barrett Browning is subverting and reclaiming the sonnet form to construct a female narrative.

Sonnet 43

Although often not the case, the speaker and the poet are presented as together in this **petrarchan sonnet**. In this poem, dedicated to her husband Robert Browning. Elizabeth Barrett Browning conveys the **multifaceted** ways in which the speaker loves the addressee, ranging from the physical to the spiritual. Barrett Browning presents her relationship within the field of **various contradictions**, and **paradoxical ideas**, for example the soul being dimensionally measurable. Thus the poet portrays how relationships can exist in a realm where human laws do not apply.

Arguably, the poem itself can also be understood to be very self-fulfilling. Therefore, another interpretation of the poem is that Barrett Browning is being facetious. The relationship portrayed is very one-sided, which shows how love can make individuals self-adorning and self-obsessive. Therefore, Barrett Browning portrays love in both a traditionally spiritual and romantic way, but equally the poem can be read as a satire on the self-indulgent dangers of relationships.



Sonnet 43

Iambic Pentameter of the piece stresses the important words of the poem such as “love”.

Archaic language used to refer to the Narrator’s object. Use of “thee,” conveys a level of informality - the object and the subject are equal.

“My soul”, shows that the speaker is the most important figure in this poem - everything is in relation to the speaker.

The magnitude of love can be measured by various sizes, the “sun”, which fuels all life, which is compared to “candle-light”, which appears marginal.

“old griefs,” and “childhood’s faith”, allude to antithetical periods of a person’s life, however are placed within the same line. This connotes a level of transcendentalism - the narrator’s relationship transcends temporal limits.

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 candle-light** -

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

I love thee **purely**, as they turn from **Praise**;

I love thee with the **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.

Starts with a question, which the main body of the poem attempts to answer - the sonnet takes on the form of a self-fulfilling answer.

Tricolon of half-rhymes “depth...breadth...height...” draws attention to units of measurement - irony, highlighting how love cannot be quantified.

Syntactic patterning of “I love thee...” makes the poem sound like a speech or a declaration. The prominent “I”, indicates a level of agency within the speaker - this an active engagement with love.

Alliterative plosives, “purely,” “Praise,” and “Passion”, draw attention to these words.

At the end of the poem, there is a shift from the present tense, “I love thee...”, to different tenses, such as the past “With my lost saints,” and the future, “I shall but love thee better after death”. Thus, Barrett Browning presents the love in this sonnet as timeless

The modal “I shall...” expresses a definite affirmation of love- this final line means that the speaker’s relationship overcomes death and is immortal.



Perspective

Sonnet 43 is from the **perspective of a woman**, addressing her lover / husband, expressing how much she loves him in so many different ways. This makes the narrative in **second person**. Because the poem is addressed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's husband, Robert, it is implied that the speaker's emotions and feelings are, by extension, Elizabeth's own.

Structure

Petrarchan Sonnet

The Petrarchan Sonnet is characterised by its structure of 14 lines in **iambic Pentameter**, alongside the rhyme scheme: **ABBA, ABBA, CDCDCD**. They often have a **volta**, where the message of the poem undergoes a twist - here it can be considered the line ***"I love thee with the passion put to use"***.



By using a traditional love format of the sonnet, which are typically associated by men - Barrett-Browning is reclaiming the format as a woman. After this volta line, Barrett Browning shifts from the present tense to past and finishes with the future giving the poem a temporal immortality.

Stanza

By structuring the poem as one stanza, the poet conveys that the two parts of the poem, divided by the rhyme scheme, are inextricably linked to one another. It suggests the idea of love joining people together: love completes people. It also alludes to the belief couples become a single unit/organism.

iambic Pentameter

By using the meter of iambic Pentameter - so five pairs of "da-DA" sounding syllables - in the poem, Barrett-Browning is furthering the format as a sonnet. For example:

How **do** I **love** thee? **Let** me **count** the **ways**!

This meter allows for the **stresses to fall on the important words of the poem**, such as **"love"**, in order to create a sense of romantic equilibrium.



Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme scheme used is **ABBA, ABBA, CDCDCD**. This is used to split up the poem into two sections, which is normally achieved through stanza breaks or line breaks. The regular rhyme scheme establishes a sense of **security and perfection** - there is no underlying threat or a suggested apprehension of the picture being drawn. Therefore, readers have no basis to interrogate the validity of this relationship.

Caesura

CAESURA | A pause between words, for example across lines, with the use of a comma or full stop.

Barrett-Browning uses **caesura** to enhance the **contemplative and reflective tone** of her poem. For example, the line:

“My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight.”

Here, caesura splits **“soul”**, and **“sight”**, which highlights the **dichotomy** between the physical **“sight”** and the spiritual **“soul”**. This highlights the different types of love: the physical, tangible love vs. the spiritual, abstract love. The caesura is used to separate the two types of love, suggesting that they are discordant or disconnected, although they share the same line.

Caesura is also used in the line:

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

With the poet trying to convey how time affects relationships. The caesura is used to separate the two different periods of the speaker's life. Also the line:

“With my lost saints, - I love thee with the breath,”

Where the caesura draws attention to the **repeated syntax** **“I love thee...”** which has been used in the middle of the sentence for the first time in the poem. Barrett Browning also uses the caesura to **accentuate the volta** of the poem, because it allows readers to take a breath as the line continues. This suggests that relationships are varied and unpredictable, like the syntax there is a false regularity that can always be disturbed. A final line which utilises caesura for effect is:

“Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,”

The physical **“Smiles, tears”** are attributes of human corporeal life, connoting a love devoted to the speaker's vitality. The caesura introduces the external force that is out of human control - an



entity that is indomitable and superior. The caesura enacts how death and transience interjects may interrupt a relationship. Therefore, the poet makes a point that relationships are affected by external factors beyond one's control.

DICHOTOMY | Contrast of two beings that are opposed or distinctly different.

Syntactic Patterning

The phrase ***"I love thee"*** is **syntactically repeated**, which attempts to answer the initial question. This **repetition** shows how the love is reiterated and reinforced, connoting that love is constant and perpetual. It strengthens the active love expressed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning - thus presenting her a proto-feminist, who does not cater to her husband.



Broken syntax

Broken syntax is used in the two lines:

***"In my old griefs, ... and with my childhood's faith:
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose"***

The **broken syntax** breaks up the rhythm of the piece. It disrupts the iambic and enables a different reading. In this quote the broken syntax separates the two antithetical ideas, the ***"old griefs"*** and the ***"childhood faith"***. The broken syntax draws attention to the shift in the poem.

Anaphora

ANAPHORA | A word which refers to a previously used word in the text.

Lines begin with the same phrasing of ***"I love thee"***. Their positioning in the lines establish ***"love"*** is at the front of their relationship. This phrasing emphasises the prominent ***"I"***, which begin most of the lines of the sonnet. However, the anaphoras are inconsistent, which opens up an investigation of the validity of this relationship. This allows a reading that the poem is trying to be more humorous, due to the inconsistencies of Barrett Browning's writing.



Lexical Cohesion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning introduces the sonnet by referring to her “**soul**” and the poem finishes with her love transcending transience and death. Thus, the poet presents a spiritual and religious relationship. With the allusions to the soul, an immortal and ineffable essence, Barrett Browning suggests that the speaker’s **love is eternal**. The power of this poem is that it immortalises Barrett Browning’s relationship with Robert Browning - the sonnet functions to preserve their love.

Language

Abstract/Concrete Nouns

Abstract nouns such as “**grace**”, “**passion**” and “**Right**”, express an intangible love, based on the romantic notion of “**love**”. This is antithetical to the **concrete nouns** such as “**depth**”, “**breadth**”, and “**candle-light**”, which suggests a more naturalistic real love. Therefore, Barrett Browning constructs a **dichotomy** between the notional and real. Thus, the poet explores the spiritual relationship in relation to the physical in this sonnet.

Religious Semantic Field

Barrett-Browning makes several references to religion, including the explicit reference to “**God**”, “**faith**”, “**lost saints**” but also the connotation of heaven/hell through the phrase “**love thee better after death**”. This reflects the **intensely religious period** that the poet was writing in, and could also imply the speaker feels her relationship is blessed by God. It also emphasises the **spiritual nature** of this relationship and further alludes to the traditional idea of how women were expected to be religiously devoted to their husband. The words being thematically linked to one another compliments the poem’s regularity seen in the rhyme scheme and the poetic meter.

Active Verbs

Active verbs are used by Barrett Browning to indicate the different ways she loves her husband. This is seen in the **repeated** phrasing “**I love thee...**”, which highlights the speaker’s agency. Unlike traditional sonnets, where women are **passive objects**, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the subject of the Sonnet; she is the one actively taking charge of the action, rather than being the passive recipient. This is revolutionary for the time she was writing in, when women were meant to be **subservient**.

Archaic Language

Victorian literature was commonly **neo-classical**, and Barrett Browning has adopted this style. This is an antiquated style that makes their love seem more **noble and traditional**, which is in contrast to the arguably modern and revolutionary content. She uses the **informal second person form of address** “**thee**” to refer to Robert Browning, and this means that their relationship is on an equal footing. Contrary to Victorian ideals, Robert Browning (as a man) does not possess the dominant role in this relationship.



First Person Pronoun

The **first person “I”** has a prominent place within the poem. It highlights the **assertive** voice that prevails over the poem. Thus, Barrett Browning emphasises the self-importance of the speaker. This connotes how this poem deliberately possesses a singular perspective.

Barrett Browning constructs the poetic **“I”** as a sense of self not bothered by the **patriarchal oppression**. It can also be read as a political **“I”**: the poet’s right to a voice, and to exist, which has been enabled by this poetic exploration of her relationship.

Comparisons

She Walks In Beauty & Sonnet 43

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems use religious language - “if God chose” for Sonnet 43 & “tender light which Heaven to gaudy day denies”. Both poets were writing during the romantic period - published during the nineteenth century - so share a similar contextual background. They both use a very similar theme of love and beauty and both are addressed to someone.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The poets’ usage of structure is very different - whilst Browning uses a sonnet, Bryon choses to use iambic tetrameter. They also have differing rhyme schemes - whilst them both have a regular rhyme scheme, Sonnet 43 also uses some half rhyme.

Sonnet 43 & Valentine

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems are addressed to a partner Both poets use repetition to emphasise the amount of love they have for the addressee of the poem - “I give you an onion” for Valentine and “I love” for Sonnet 43.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are set and written in very different times and contexts - whereas Sonnet 43 is written during the Victorian period, Valentine is a modern poem. Sonnet 43 has a much more narrow focus solely on love, whereas Valentine also incorporates the themes of passion, danger and potential pain.

