

Sonnet 43 by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The one with all the ways of loving someone

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence was written before she married Robert Browning to express her intense love for him. Sonnet 43 is the most famous of the 44 sonnets. In it, Browning attempts to define her love. The opening of the poem suggests it arises from a question: 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!'

Key Quotes:

- The opening line 'How do I love thee?' suggests an intimate conversation between lovers.
- 'Depth', 'breadth' and 'height' are weighty concepts which suggest her love is comprehensive and allows her to reach impossible extremes.
- Poem of comparisons - 'Most quiet need' and 'men strive for Right' are two very different ideas. One is simple and one is complex showing the intensity of her feelings.
- Replaced her faith in God with her love for her husband - 'lost saints'.
- Final words - 'I love thee better after death' suggests even death will not part them. Their love is eternal.

Context:

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning's brother drowned at a young age and as a result her father was very over-protective. She eloped against his wishes with the poet, Robert Browning, showing how important love was to her.
- Elizabeth's Barrett Browning's father disinherited her after she married Robert Browning.

Structure:

- Browning uses repetition of 'I love thee'. This sounds similar to a prayer so therefore she could be praying/hoping that someday they will be able to be together.
- At the beginning of the poem she makes references to her love being limitless and she also reinforces this at the end in the last line 'I shall but love thee more after death.'

Possible Themes and Links:

- Relationships and love - *Cozy Apologia*, *Valentine* and *She Walks in Beauty*.

It was number 43 out of 44 sonnets that Browning wrote as part of her collection. Sonnets are generally love poems and this poem is one of the most famous sonnets ever written.

By asking this question, Browning could be questioning how she can prove/express how much she loves Robert Browning.

This could imply that her love is immeasurable and infinite.

This could suggest that she loves every part of every day and her love does not falter. By using the image of the 'Sun' could suggest that he is her life source and that she cannot live without him. By using the image of 'candlelight' this could suggest that he lights up her dark thoughts.

This could imply that she has turned the bitterness and anger she had previously into something positive because she loves him so much. He has transformed her sadness into happiness.

This could suggest that she loves everything about Robert Browning. She loves him with every emotion. Even with every 'breath' she takes she thinks about him.

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 candlelight -
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 the 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.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

By using the verb 'count' this could suggest that there are many ways that she loves him and there are too many to mention.

Browning could be referring to God in this part and comparing her love for Robert Browning as the way she loves God.

Browning is explaining that even though she loves him passionately she also loves him on a regular day to day basis.

By using the adverb 'freely' this could suggest that no one is influencing the way she feels about him and could relate to how her father disapproved of their relationship. The phrase 'Strive for Right' could imply that she is willing to 'fight' for their love.

This could suggest that her love is eternal and that it is a level of commitment she is willing to promise.