How do I love thee? Let me count the ways

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

How much do I love you? I'll count all the ways I do. I love you to the edges of my soul, when it reaches out for the unseen goals of eternity and oneness with God. I love you as you need to be loved every day, whether during the day or the evening. I love you by my free choice, like those who choose to do the right thing. I love you without self-regard, like those who don't brag about their own accomplishments. I love you with the passion I used to feel for my old sufferings, and for the religion of my childhood. I love you with a love I thought I had lost when I lost faith in my saints. I love you with my every breath, smile, and tear, and I will for the rest of my life. And if God brings us to heaven, I'll love you even more in the afterlife.

THEMES

ROMANTIC VS. SPIRITUAL LOVE

In "How Do I Love Thee?" true love is depicted as long-lasting and even eternal. However, the poem also reveals a tension between love as an attachment to earthly life and the things of this world, and love as something that transcends life on earth.

By evoking her religious faith so often, the speaker likens her romantic love for her beloved to a religious or spiritual feeling. At first it seems as if her love for this person on earth might be as powerful as love for God. But while the speaker acknowledges the strength of her romantic feelings here and now, she also expresses the wish that both she and her lover will eventually transcend their earthly lives and go to heaven together, where their love will be, with God's help, "better after death." Romantic love, for her, is ultimately closely linked to and perhaps even indistinguishable from love for God.

The poem thus argues that true love is eternal, surpassing space, time, and even death. Although the poem is often read biographically, as an address from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her husband, this depiction of eternal and all-powerful love could also apply to any human love, since the speaker and addressee are both unnamed in the poem itself.

From the poem's first lines, the speaker describes her love in terms that sound spiritual or religious. For example, she asserts: "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height / My soul can reach." Crucially, it is her "soul" that is expanding as a result of her love. Love, for her, engages the soul as well as the body. She also explains that her love helps her "feel" "the ends of being and ideal grace." "The ends" here connotes the "goals" of existence—which, for the speaker, is the attainment of "ideal grace." The speaker is clearly evoking the religious meaning of "grace" as a gift from God. If her love gives her grace, then she means that it is bringing her closer to God.

The speaker also writes that she loves her beloved "with [her] childhood's faith" and "with a love [she] seemed to lose / With [her] lost saints." Her "childhood's faith" and her "lost saints" presumably refer to the Christianity in which she was raised. The speaker's description of her "lost saints" suggests that perhaps she has experienced a loss of faith as an adult, but this new romantic love restores her faith in God and gives her back the love she had "seemed to lose."

The speaker's love is undeniably grounded in earthly life; she seems to imagine that she will spend "all [her] life" with this person and devote all her "breath," "smiles," and "tears" to them. At the same time, however, she also imagines that her love will continue even *after* this time. She hopes that, "if God choose," she and her lover will go to heaven and she will be able to love this beloved "better after death." This implies that the speaker sees romantic love as something that, with faith in God, can continue after death and indeed even deepen.

Ultimately, the speaker's romantic love does not compromise her love for God. Rather, she likens her romantic love to a religious experience that helps her recapture her "childhood's faith" and brings her closer to God and "ideal grace." She prays that God's salvation in heaven will perfect her earthly love (making it "better after death") and render it eternal. In this way, the poem argues that romantic love is closely related

to—and indeed perhaps transforms into—love for God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LOVE VS. REASON

In what is arguably one of the most famous opening lines of a poem in English literature—"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways"—the speaker embarks on a project of listing the ways in which she loves her beloved. The poem thus begins as a means of attempting to justify love in rational terms. By expressing her desire to "count the ways," the speaker suggests that her love can be explained on an intellectual level. At the same time, however, she admits that love is actually something more profound, spiritual, and dictated by fate. In this sense, her opening determination to "count the ways" in which she loves slowly succumbs to an understanding that love is often not a rational feeling and can't be explained.

The speaker sets out to "count the ways" in which she loves, and this organizational structure shapes the form of the rest of the poem. Over the course of the poem, the speaker names seven ways in which she loves her partner. This might at first look like a counter-intuitive or overly argumentative format for a love poem, and by framing her declarations in this unusual way, the speaker implies that love can be measured and "counted."

In particular, she suggests that her love for her partner is reasoned and rational because it is grounded in the everyday, mundane actions of life: "I love thee to the level of every day's / Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light." This love isn't necessarily the stuff of legends or dramatic romances; rather, it exists in mutual bonds of day-to-day care. The speaker also explains that she loves her beloved "purely, as [men] turn from praise," implying that her love isn't based on pride or self-aggrandizement. By focusing on these virtues of purity and self-sacrifice, she implies that love can be measured simply in the degree of care one gives the other person.

And yet, even as the speaker declares that her love can be "counted," she frequently uses language that implies her love is something huge, all-encompassing, and resistant to bounds or limits. For instance, she declares: "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height / My soul can reach," which sounds potentially infinite. The idea of infinity continues into the end of the poem, when the speaker expresses the desire that she and her beloved will love after death in the afterlife—which is to say, infinitely, because in Christian theology, salvation leads to eternal life in heaven.

"How Do I Love Thee?" begins by declaring that it is possible to "count" the ways in which one loves. But it ends by looking forward to heaven and the afterlife, a time in which it will no longer be possible to measure love, because love will be infinite. In this way, the poem first imagines love as something rational or measurable, but ends by asserting that love sometimes can't be explained by reason or measured, no matter how hard one might try to do so.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 2-4
- Line 5
- Lines 5-6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Lines 13-14

LOVE AS CHOICE AND FREEDOM

Throughout the poem, the speaker frequently describes love as a free choice based on admiration for a lover's qualities. Reading the poem biographically, this is a significant choice for a poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had little choice in her own life: she lived at home until her forties under the power of a controlling and restrictive father. It is thus not surprising that the poem places a high value on choice and freedom as romantic values. For this speaker, love is not just a source of joy or even spiritual fulfillment; it's also a means of achieving freedom within constraining circumstances.

The speaker states: "I love thee freely, as men strive for right." She thus explicitly frames her love as something that is not coerced or influenced by anyone else, but rather as something that comes from her own agency and free choice. By comparing her love to an effort to "strive for right," she also connects romantic love to a broader set of ethical values and goals. That is, her love is something that empowers her and gives her the agency to make her own decisions about her life, rather than relying on someone else.

What's more, the poem is written in a first-person voice that gives the speaker an air of authority and reinforces this theme of agency. For instance, she declares "Let me count the ways," an imperative sentence that puts her firmly in control of the poem's narrative. She makes frequent use of the "I" and "me" pronouns, which further adds to this sense that the speaker is asserting her own voice and feelings in the poem. The list of ways in which the speaker loves her beloved is also structured like a list of arguments or supporting points, from her opening assertion that she will "count the ways." The speaker is thus depicted as articulate and confident in defending her choice of partner.

Additionally, the speaker emphasizes that her love is a free choice in her adulthood, as compared to her lack of agency in childhood, when she was told what and how to worship. For example, she claims that she has transferred her "passion" from her "childhood's faith"—the religion she was taught as a child—and "put [it] to use" in her love for her partner. She admits that she "seemed to lose" her love for her "lost saints," but now this new love has made her faith more powerful because it is a love of free choice.

Ultimately, the poem makes a powerful equation between love, choice, and freedom. The speaker emphasizes that she loves "freely" and that her affection for her partner is a result of her own assessment of his value. It is not a value imposed from external authority like her "childhood's faith," but is rather an expression of her own agency. "How Do I Love Thee?" is a poem that emphasizes the speaker's power and agency in making her own romantic choices. This is a particularly bold claim for a woman of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's time, when women often lacked the opportunity to exercise agency over their own lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 7
- Lines 9-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

The speaker begins with a rhetorical question, or aporia: "How do I love thee?" Her use of the pronoun "thee" (an old-fashioned form of the second-person pronoun "you") immediately positions the poem as an apostrophe, or direct address, from the speaker to her beloved. (Since the poem is often read biographically, as an address from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her husband, we use female pronouns for the speaker and male pronouns for the addressee in this guide. Note, however, that the poem itself does not actually specify their genders.) In the nineteenth century, the word "thee" tended to signal greater intimacy and familiarity with someone. From the first lines of the poem, then, the speaker signals her close and intimate connection to the person she is addressing.

The speaker then answers her own rhetorical question—"How do I love thee?"—by declaring: "Let me count the ways." This is an assertive, declarative sentence that positions the speaker as firmly in charge of the poem's narrative, an impression furthered by her frequent use of "I" and "me" pronouns throughout. By expressing her intention to "count the ways," the speaker seems to be announcing an argument or defense of why she loves her beloved. By stating that she will "count the ways," the speaker shows that she believes that love is something that *can* be measured or counted. She thus sets up the expectation that this poem will take the form of an organized list of the reasons why she loves her beloved—almost like an argument or rational debate rather than a spontaneous expression of feeling.

LINES 2-4

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.

Here the speaker "count[s]" the first way in which she loves her beloved, which is "to the death and breadth and height / [her] soul can reach[.]" This metaphor provides an image of the speaker's soul expanding and growing in height and width to accommodate the greatness and strength of her love. It is striking, too, that the speaker evokes her "soul" here, which stands in, metonymically, for her emotions or feelings. The idea of the soul typically has a religious meaning, an early sign of the poem's concerns with religious themes and the idea of love as something that transcends life on earth.

But the metaphor doesn't end there: the speaker also imagines her soul expanding and then "feeling," rather than seeing, "the ends of being and ideal grace." The metaphor becomes that of someone groping and feeling their way towards something "out of sight." The speaker's soul is striving towards what she calls "the ends," or goals, of "being and ideal grace." This phrase is ambiguous, but it probably has a religious meaning. For a nineteenth-century Christian like the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the goal of "being," or existence, was to reach heaven. Heaven, for many people, was "ideal grace"—the state of perfection associated with God's goodness and generosity. By using this religious language to describe how she feels about her beloved, the speaker implies that her romantic love brings her soul closer to God.

This sense of harmony and grace is mirrored in the rhyme scheme—"height" and sight" form one of the poem's clearest, most precise rhyme. A feeling of harmony also shows up formally in the use of assonance and consonance in these lines. Consonance appears in the phrase "depth and breadth," whereas assonance appears in the repeated vowel sounds of "feeling," "being," and "ideal." The speaker makes these lines sound melodious, as she describes the "grace" of her soul's union with God and her beloved.

LINES 5-6

I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

In the preceding lines, the speaker declared that her love was vast, expanding enormously in all directions. Now, however, she scales down, asserting simply: "I love thee to the level of every

day's / Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light." The enjambment at the end of line 5 makes the sentence flow easily, ending in the next line with an end-stop. Formally, this is thus a much simpler and easier to understand statement than the long and convoluted metaphors of the preceding lines. This straightforward sentence structure mirrors the everyday, peaceful love that the speaker describes here.

Thematically, the effect of this shift is to make the speaker's love seem less grand and earth-shaking, and more modest, restrained, and ordinary. However, it doesn't imply that her love is any less strong and true. Rather, it offers a more human and relatable, rather than cosmic, perspective on the speaker's feelings. This is a love that fits easily into daily life, that continues "by sun" during the day and by "candle-light" in the evening. The speaker thus indicates that this is a love of the here-and-now rather than a love that belongs to the afterlife. This suggestion introduces a tension between the religious-inflected tone of lines 1-4 and the earthier, more modest tone of these lines. The poem positions love as both an attachment to God and the afterlife *and* an attachment to earthly life and the things of this world, and those different kinds of love are both on display in the first half of the poem.

LINES 7-8

I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

As she continues to "count the ways" that she loves her beloved, the speaker emphasizes that she loves him "freely," as an assertion of her own choice and agency. In a biographical reading, this equation of choice and love is significant for the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who spent much of her adult life under the control of her father.

The speaker also compares her love to those who "strive for right," suggesting that she sees her love as empowering and associated with a range of ethical values and priorities. For the speaker, clearly, love is only true love if it is "right" or moral, and if it is entered into with a free will. She also states that she loves "purely," a word with religious significance, and she compares it to "turn[ing] from praise." Purity and humility are both highly valued in a Christian context, so line 8 further illustrates the speaker's association of her romantic love with her religious faith.

These lines are a natural pair, linked by a semi-colon and mirroring each other both through anaphora in the phrase "I love thee" and through parallel structures that use "as" as a conjunction:

I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

The lines also use assonance in the mirrored consonant sounds of "freely" and "purely." In several senses, then, the lines fit harmoniously together, just as the speaker fits in perfect unity with her partner.

LINES 9-12

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.

Here, the speaker draws a contrast between the loves of her past and her present love. She explains that she has now "put to use" the passion she had previously directed towards her "old grief." This implies that she has experienced suffering and pain in her life, which made her feel intense (presumably negative) emotion. Now, however, she feels a more positive kind of passion: not the passion of grief, but the passion of romantic love. Similarly, the speaker refers to her "childhood's faith" as a point of contrast, showing how the love she feels now—the mature, freely-given love of adulthood—is different from the faith of her childhood, which was imposed on her by others.

Although the speaker is still clearly deeply religious, as indicated by her frequent references to God and the afterlife, she admits that her faith during her religious childhood was juvenile compared to what she feels now. Indeed, she implies that this new romantic love has actually *restored* her faith in God. It has given her back the "love [she] seemed to lose / With [her] lost saints." By referring to her "lost saints," the speaker implies that she lost her faith at some point in her life. But this new love, again, has reignited and restored it. By this point, it's starting to become clear that the speaker's love isn't something simple and straightforward enough to be counted and measured, after all; it actually goes beyond the everyday, extending far into the realms of deep emotion and spirituality.

There is yet another appearance of anaphora in the repetition of "I love thee," by this point a familiar phrase as the speaker continues to "count the ways" in which she loves her beloved. These lines also make use of consonance in the repeated /p/ sound in "passion put to use" and /l/ sound in "love I seemed to lose." The sonic connections between these words mirrors the lines' preoccupation with themes of reunion and rediscovery. "Use" and "lose," however, are words that only loosely rhyme, perhaps indicating the distance between the speaker's distant childhood and present adulthood love.

LINES 12-14

I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker draws a parallel between life on earth and the afterlife. She begins by proclaiming: "I love thee with the breath, / Smiles, tears, of all my life." This is a romantic declaration that indicates her passion for and commitment to this person for the rest of her earthly

life. In committing all her "breath," "smiles," and "tears" to her beloved, these lines also perhaps deliberately mirror the Biblical marriage vows that emphasize commitment through the various passages of life: "For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

Shortly afterwards, however, the speaker also raises the possibility of life and love even *after* death. She declares that "if God choose, [she] shall but love [the beloved] better after death," indicating that she hopes that she and her beloved will go to heaven together after they die. (The speaker implies that this is heaven in a Christian framework, as suggested by her stipulation that she will be saved "if God choose.") By claiming that her love will be in fact "better after death," the speaker conveys an idea of true love as something that not only thrives on earth, but also transcends death. Indeed, love might even be deeper and more meaningful after death, because it is eternal and placed in perfect communion with God. Through this conclusion, the speaker makes it clear that the love she once proposed to "count" is ultimately something that *can't* be counted; it's present more or less everywhere, in both earthly realms and spiritual ones.

Although many of the previous lines featured end-stops, lines 12-14 are one long sentence punctuated with a caesura in line 13—in this case, a semi-colon. The effect of this caesura is to depict a close link between what the speaker calls "all my life" and "after death." With the close connection between these two clauses, the poem formally enacts exactly what the speaker describes: a natural continuity between her love on earth and her eternal love in the afterlife.

SYMBOLS

SUN AND CANDLE-LIGHT

"How do I love thee?" is a poem noticeably lacking in symbols, perhaps because it often relies instead on expressions of feeling or evocations of God and spirituality.

Lines 5-6 thus stand out for their more humble tone, focusing on everyday objects rather than abstract concepts like love and the soul. Specifically, the speaker refers to her love for her beloved "by sun and candle-light":

> I love thee to the level of every day's
> Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

On a literal level, the "sun" refers to daylight, while "candle-light" refers to the use of candles to provide light in the evening in an era when there was no access to electricity and artificial light. "Sun and candle-light" are thus symbols of the speaker's love for her partner at all times, during both the hours of sunlight and the hours of darkness. This pair of symbols emphasizes the poem's idea of true love as constant and unconditional, since it shows that the speaker's love is always present.

More profoundly, however, "sun and candle-light" might also be read as symbols for life and death. This reading is supported by the speaker's claim later in the poem that she will love her beloved "better after death," suggesting that her love will persist into the afterlife. The seemingly banal and everyday image of love by "sun and candle-light" might then also become a symbol for eternal true love that overcomes death itself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "sun and candle-light."

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance several times throughout, usually to reinforce connections between words and highlight the literal meanings of the lines.

The strongest instance appears in lines 3-4, when the speaker makes repeated use of the long /e/ sound:

> My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
> For the ends of being and ideal grace.

The sonic resonances across these two lines give the impression of poetic harmony and unity. This is fitting for a poem that emphasizes the speaker's strong sense of connection with her beloved and with her faith. The lines depict a union between two people as well as a union between the speaker's "soul" and what she calls "ideal grace," a religious term referring to the idea of salvation and oneness with God. The poem's use of assonance thus formally mirrors its concern with themes of spiritual and romantic unity.

Similarly, the repeated use of the word "thee"—itself an example of anaphora in the repetition of the phrase "I love thee"—is also a form of assonance. In lines 6-9, for example, the long /e/ sound appears frequently, often in the repetition of those words:

> 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

The impression is of a repeated chorus of /e/ sounds across these lines. This adds not only to the speaker's sense of unity with her beloved but also to the impression that her addressee—the "thee" commonly thought to be her

husband—is present everywhere, both in the poem and in the real world.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "ee," "e," "ou"
- **Line 2:** "e," "ea"
- **Line 3:** "ea," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "e," "ea"
- **Line 5:** "e," "e"
- **Line 6:** "ee"
- **Line 7:** "ee," "ee," "y," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "ee," "y"
- **Line 9:** "ee," "o," "u"
- **Line 10:** "y," "i"
- **Line 11:** "o," "o"
- **Line 13:** "y," "i"
- **Line 14:** "u," "o"

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs at least once in every line of the poem. The density of all these matching sounds provides a very literal example of the kind of unity that the speaker enjoys with her beloved: just as the two of them match perfectly, so too do many of the consonant sounds connect closely with each other.

In many cases, the poem uses consonance in combination with alliteration for a particularly strong version of this effect. The most prominent example of this combined technique is the repeated appearance of the /th/ sounds, which comes up over and over again throughout. Consider lines 12-14 for example:

> 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 /th/ sound lends the lines a melodious quality, linking together the speaker's choice of words and making the poem flow sonically, almost like a song or lullaby. It is especially fitting that "breath" and death" are closely aligned in both rhyme and consonance, since the speaker hopes that her love will persist after death. The close connection between these words mirrors the speaker's belief that her love will continue for the rest of the time she draws breath—and afterwards.

The /th/ sound is also of course a component of the word "thee," which is repeated throughout the poem. It is no accident that this word persists both through consonance and through assonance with the long /e/ sound. The sound of "thee" quite literally pervades and takes over most lines of the poem, just like the speaker's all-encompassing and eternal love takes over her mind and heart. This is an elegant poetic touch for a poem that sets out to count all the ways in which the speaker loves the "thee" of the title, only to suggest that they're actually so vast as to be uncountable.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "l," "th," "L," "th"
- **Line 2:** "th," "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n"
- **Line 4:** "d," "d"
- **Line 5:** "v," "th," "th," "v"
- **Line 6:** "t," "t," "n," "n," "n," "l," "l"
- **Line 7:** "l," "v," "r," "l," "r," "v," "r," "r"
- **Line 8:** "th," "p," "r," "th," "r," "p," "r"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "th," "p," "p"
- **Line 10:** "th," "th"
- **Line 11:** "l," "l," "s," "l," "s"
- **Line 12:** "th," "l," "s," "s," "l," "th," "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 13:** "S," "l," "s," "s," "ll," "l"
- **Line 14:** "ll," "b," "t," "l," "th," "b," "tt," "t," "th"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in the poem are end-stopped, reflecting the poem's often simple, direct tone and expression of feeling. For example, the line "let me count the ways" finishes with an assertive full stop, effectively announcing the speaker's intention and foreshadowing the structure of the rest of the poem. Indeed, the end-stops are often periods or full stops, giving the poem an almost conversational tone, as in lines 5-6:

> I love thee to the level of every day's
> Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

It is fitting that this simple assertion of daily commitment and love—love which meets "every day's / Most quiet need," as the speaker puts it—should be followed by an end-stop, as if the speaker has no need for more elaborate punctuation or literary devices. The poem takes on a natural, un-embellished language, close to the language of everyday speech.

Sometimes the speaker does use a semi-colon or comma as an end-stop, but these are usually quickly concluded with a full stop in the following line. One exception is lines 12-14, which is one of the longest sentences in the poem:

> I love thee with the breath,
> Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
> I shall but love thee better after death.

Line 12 can be interpreted as enjambed, as the list of attributes clearly spills over onto the next line despite the comma. The speaker then adds the comma in line 13 because she wants to qualify her assertions. It isn't *just* that she will love her partner "all [her] life"; she also expresses her desire to "love [him] better after death." The sentence then ends with a full stop after "death," which seems natural, because it is the end of the speaker's ability to predict what will happen next. However, she

also heavily implies that this won't be the final end of her love, and using such a long sentence before this concluding punctuation subtly suggests that her love with last a similarly long time.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "."
- **Line 4:** "."
- **Line 6:** "."
- **Line 7:** ";"
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 10:** "."
- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 14:** "."

APORIA

This poem is perhaps one of the most famous examples of aporia in English literary history. This example of aporia takes the form of a rhetorical question, which is a common type of aporia: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."

Aporia is a way in which a speaker can frame a question or a problem to which they might already know the answer. "How do I love thee?" is a good example of this, as it is clear that the speaker *does* in fact know how much she loves her beloved. However, her determination to "count the ways" provides the occasion for the rest of the poem, in which she sets out to list all the ways in which she loves her beloved.

In this way, aporia is essential to the formal structure and functioning of this poem. It begins with the fiction or pretense that there is a need to express "how" one loves. The form of the question immediately draws the reader in. But instead of offering a straightforward answer, the speaker proceeds to offer a series of no less than seven poetic ways in which she loves her beloved, ultimately suggesting that her love for him is essentially limitless. In this sense, pretended uncertainty offers the speaker the opportunity for self-expression and a more elaborate form of conveying her love than might usually be available to her.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "How do I love thee?"

APOSTROPHE

This poem is an extended apostrophe, or direct address, from the speaker to an addressee named only as "thee." However, although the speaker and addressee are never identified within the poem, the speaker of the poem is usually identified with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the addressee with her husband, Robert Browning. (That's why, in this guide, we use female pronouns for the speaker and male pronouns for the addressee, even though the poem itself doesn't specify either gender.)

The use of the term "thee" as an address makes the poem seem more intimate, since "thee" is an obsolete form of "you" that is more informal and personal. By beginning the poem with the line "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," the speaker thus sets up the impression that this poem is directly addressed to her beloved, with whom she is quite comfortable. Her promise to "count the ways" in which she loves would thus seem to be directed towards him alone.

However, this is in fact not the case—because the poem was published in a volume intended for a wider audience, many people other than the beloved ending up reading it. The idea that this is a private address from the speaker to her beloved is thus a fiction disguising the fact that the poem is, to some extent, written in order to convince a wider readership of the speaker's opinions about love. The use of apostrophe sets up this tension between the poem's intimate depiction of a private bond between two people and the reality that it's also a published work intended to be read by others.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."
- **Line 2:** "I love thee"
- **Line 5:** "I love thee "
- **Line 7:** "I love thee"
- **Line 8:** "I love thee"
- **Line 9:** "I love thee"
- **Line 11:** "I love thee"
- **Line 12:** "I love thee"
- **Line 14:** "I shall but love thee better"

METAPHOR

The speaker makes use of a particularly complicated metaphor in lines 2-4, when she describes her love in terms of "depth," "breadth," and "height":

> 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.

The speaker explains her love by describing its metaphorical size, claiming that it extends to the "depth and breadth and height / My soul can reach." Souls do not actually possess physical dimensions, and the speaker describes it this way to help the reader envision just how completely fulfilling her love is. And by comparing her love to her soul, she emphasizes the spiritual or religious dimension of romantic love. (This metaphor might also be considered a form of metonymy, because the speaker has her soul stand in for her love.)

However, the metaphor doesn't stop there. The speaker also

imagines her love expanding and "feeling" outwards for something that is "out of sight." In the metaphor, this goal can't be directly seen but only felt. It is not clear exactly what the speaker is searching for, but she calls it "the ends of being and ideal grace." This "end" is the goal of existence or "being," and it is associated with "ideal grace"—which, in a religious framework, involves union with God's "ideal" perfection and "grace," or generosity towards sinners. In other words, the speaker is using this complex metaphor of the soul expanding and "feeling" towards grace to suggest that her love is bringing her closer to God even as it also brings her closer to her beloved.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "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."

SIMILE

The speaker uses similes in lines 7-8, when she likens her love to those who "strive for right" and "turn from praise":

> I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
> I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

At first, it isn't exactly clear how these comparisons relate to the speaker's love for her beloved. However, there are some clues in her use of the adverbs "freely" and "purely." When she states that "I love thee freely, as men strive for right," for instance, she forges an association between freedom, love, and righteousness. Which is to say: she describes her love as "free," just as the decision of those who "strive for right" is also a free choice. In this sense, she likens the freedom and choice of her love to other positive moral values on a larger scale.

Similarly, she describes her love as "pure," like the purity of those who "turn from praise." Particularly in a Christian religious context, purity and humility (or "turning from praise," a phrase with Biblical resonances) are highly valued. The speaker thus uses simile to link together her romantic love and her commitment to religious and ethical values. Simile offers a formal tool for her to assert that her love is also a force for good in the world, rather than simply a personal, self-directed emotion.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "I love thee freely, as men strive for right; / I love thee purely, as they turn from praise."

ALLITERATION

The speaker makes use of alliteration throughout the poem, and particularly in the repeated /p/ sounds in lines 8-9:

> I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
> I love thee with the passion put to use...

Another striking appearance of alliteration occurs in the repeated /l/ sounds in lines 11-12:

> I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
> With my lost saints.

The /p/ and /l/ sounds echo across the first letters in the words of these lines, creating a sense of sonic and melodic unity. Another persistent alliteration occurs in the repetition of the /th/ sound in "thee," a word that recurs many times over the course of the poem due to the anaphora in the repetition of the phrase "I love thee." The effect of this alliteration is to give the impression that the sound of "thee" pervades the poem, which is fitting, since that the poem is dedicated to celebrating the speaker's love for her beloved. Similarly, the alliteration of the /l/ sound in love makes the sound an appropriately dominant motif in a poem designed to celebrate love.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "L"
- **Line 2:** "th," "th"
- **Line 5:** "I," "th," "th," "I"
- **Line 8:** "p," "p"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "p," "p"
- **Line 11:** "I," "I," "I"
- **Line 12:** "I," "I," "th," "th"

ANAPHORA

"How do I love thee?" features consistent use of anaphora throughout the poem. The anaphora takes the form of a response to that opening question, to which the speaker responds "let me count the ways" and proceeds to enumerate all the ways in which she loves her beloved. She thus repeats the phrase "I love thee" no less than eight times, each time in a different context as she explains the ways in which she loves.

This persistent anaphora lends the poem the tone of a list or argument, as the speaker attempts to systematically describe or explain her feelings. On the formal level, it involves the repetition of the phrase "I love thee," which is fitting for a poem that takes love as its subject and, as it were, its thesis. It also provides a way of structuring the lines of the poem, which flow easily into another when read aloud.

At the same time, however, the point is not simply for the speaker to repeat herself. Rather, she repeats herself each time with a difference: each "I love thee" involves another way in which she loves. In the final appearance of the anaphora, the phrase is tweaked slightly, from "I love thee" to "I shall but love thee better after death." This lends the poem a sense of

progress, as the speaker proceeds from loving in the present to imagining loving in the afterlife.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I love thee"
- **Line 5:** "I love thee"
- **Line 7:** "I love thee"
- **Line 8:** "I love thee"
- **Line 9:** "I love thee"
- **Line 11:** "I love thee"
- **Line 12:** " I love thee "
- **Line 14:** "I," " shall but love thee"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in the poem are end-stopped, so it is striking when the speaker makes use of enjambment. In lines 2-3, the enjambment makes the speaker's feelings exuberantly run over from one line to the next:

> I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight...

The image of love extending to the furthest breadth and height that her "soul" can "reach" is one of expansion, so it makes sense that this verse sentence physically expands beyond the boundaries of the line break. In this way, the use of enjambment mirrors the metaphor and imagery the speaker is employing at this moment.

At other moments, enjambment bridges the gap between past and present, as when the speaker describes how she loves "with the passion put to use / In my old griefs" (lines 9-10) and "with a love I seemed to lose / With my lost saints" (11-12). Perhaps she doesn't end-stop these lines because they mark the way her love carries over from her "old griefs" or "lost saints" to the present moment, making her current love feel all the more vibrant and true.

Note that we've marked line 12 as enjambed despite the final comma, given that the list of attributes extends onto the next line—as though one line simply is not enough to contain all the things with which the speaker loves her beloved.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "height / My"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sight / For"
- **Lines 5-6:** "day's / Most"
- **Lines 9-10:** "use / In"
- **Lines 11-12:** "lose / With"
- **Lines 12-13:** "breath, / Smiles,"

CAESURA

The speaker of "How do I love thee?" often uses caesura to create a pause in the flow of the line. Indeed, the title and very first line of the poem—"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."—is marked by a caesura. Here the question mark serves to set up the aporia, or rhetorical question, that provides the occasion for the poem. The caesura turns the line into a question and a response, "let me count the ways," that guides the structure and format of the rest of the sonnet.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses a caesura to introduce more complicated metaphors, as in the example "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 line 10, it adds more complexity and nuance, as the speaker adds the provision that she loves her beloved, not only with the passion of her "old griefs" but *also* "with my childhood's faith."

One of caesura's most important roles in the poem is also to allow the speaker to use parallelism, linking two lines together in their syntactical structure:

> I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
> I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

Here the two lines perfectly mirror one another grammatically in their use of a comma and an "as." This in turn links the phrase "I love thee" to a simile ("as men strive for right" and "as they turn from praise," respectively). This literary technique makes the poem flow melodically, while also underscoring the connection the speaker wants to make between her love and the freedom and purity that she values.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "?"
- **Line 3:** ","
- **Line 6:** ","
- **Line 7:** ","
- **Line 8:** ","
- **Line 10:** ","
- **Line 12:** "."
- **Line 13:** ";," ","

VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 1, Line 2, Line 5, Line 7, Line 8, Line 9, Line 11, Line 12, Line 14) - "Thee" is an old-fashioned word meaning "you." In the nineteenth century, calling someone "thee" often indicated familiarity or intimacy, so it is fitting that the speaker refers to her beloved using this term.

Breadth (Line 2) - "Breadth" refers to the width of an object, or the distance from one side of an object to the other side.

Grace (Line 4) - The word "grace" often means courtesy, generosity, or elegance. In a broader framework, however, "grace" is a theological term referring to God's unfailing generosity and presence in human life. By referring to "ideal grace," the speaker is thus alluding to the Christian notion of grace as something that brings one closer to God.

Strive (Line 7) - To "strive" means to work hard to achieve something.

Lost Saints (Line 12) - Here the speaker's "lost saints" refers to the saints, or exemplary figures of Christian worship, that she was taught to revere as a child. Her depiction of the saints as "lost" suggests that she lost her faith in them as she grew older.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"How do I love thee?" is a sonnet—which is no surprise, since it first appeared in a collection titled *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850). Because it is a sonnet, the poem has 14 lines. So far, so conventional.

However, "How do I love thee?" isn't a traditional English sonnet, which typically has three sections of four lines called quatrains, followed by a final, two-line couplet. Instead, "How do I love thee?" is an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. (This form of sonnet is called "Petrarchan" after the great medieval Italian lyric poet Petrarch, but he didn't invent the form.)

In contrast to the English sonnet, the Italian sonnet is divided into two sections: a section of eight lines, called an octave; and a section of six lines, called a sestet. The English sonnet typically has a "turn," or change of subject, in the final two lines, whereas the Italian sonnet will not necessarily have a turn.

In this poem, the second section—the sestet—does introduce a new subject: the speaker's sense of the division between the love she feels now and the juvenile loves of her "childhood's faith" and "old saints." She then ends the poem looking forward to yet another transformation over time, from the love of her life to the hope of love in the afterlife. In this sense, the form of the Italian sonnet allows the speaker to introduce new themes and subjects, while maintaining a greater sense of flow and continuity between the lines than an English sonnet might allow her.

The choice of the Italian sonnet form is also significant given that Barrett Browning titled her poetry collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. This title gave the impression that perhaps the poet had translated the work from a lost original, allowing her a way of avoiding the scandal or stigma of authorship that could sometimes attach to women poets. By using a "continental" rather than English sonnet form, the poet may have been trying to give the impression that the poem is of an exotic or foreign origin.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, the traditional meter of both the English and Petrarchan sonnet forms. Each line of the poem consists of 10 syllables, broken up into five two-beat metrical feet. In turn, each metrical foot in iambic pentameter consists of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, as in lines 2-3:

> I love | thee to | the depth | and breadth | and height
> My soul | can reach, | when feel- | ing out | of sight

Here the stress falls evenly, over every other syllable. This is typical, as "How do I love thee?" generally follows a very regular meter. However, there are some moments in which even this highly metrically regulated poem breaks the iambic meter. One example occurs in the very first line of the poem:

> How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

Although it would be possible to read this line as "How do I love thee?" this iambic stress of syllables sounds a bit odd, as if the speaker is questioning whether or not she really *does* love the speaker. Instead, it seems more likely that the first metrical foot should be read as a trochee, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: "How do I love thee?" The emphasis on "how" the speaker loves seems a more natural fit with a poem that is concerned with the "how" of loving and endeavors to "count the ways" in which the speaker loves. This departure from the meter might also fit with the speaker's understanding of love as eternal and all-powerful, and thus capable of occasionally breaking through the metrical structure that guides the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

Because "How do I love thee?" is a Petrarchan rather than an English sonnet, it follows a different rhyme scheme than, say, a sonnet by Shakespeare. An English sonnet typically follows the rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, in which four rhyming quatrains are followed by a rhymed couplet. However, the Petrarchan sonnet consists of a rhyming octave followed by a rhyming sestet, for the rhyme scheme of:

> ABBA ABBA CDC DCD

At the beginning of the sonnet, the rhymes are fairly regular and predictable. "Height" (line 2) and "sight" (line 3), as well as "day's" (line 5) and "praise" (line 8) are elegantly matching rhyme sounds that offer a sense of sonic regularity and symmetry in the poem's first eight lines.

In the following sestet, however, the rhymes are not always as predictable. "Use" (line 9) and "lose" (line 11), for example, is more of a slant rhyme, with sounds that don't entirely match with one another. This impression of possible misalignment is appropriate, because the speaker is describing the sense of

temporal distance and discontinuity she feels between the love she "seemed to lose / With my lost saints" and the passion she has "put to use" now for her beloved.

Otherwise, however, the poem's very regular rhyme scheme mirrors the poem's preoccupation with themes of unity and wholeness, providing a sonic match for the sonnet's ideal of true love as perfect understanding and harmony.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "How do I love thee" is often identified with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the author of the poem. The addressee of the love poem is then usually assumed to be Robert Browning, her husband.

This biographical reading certainly lends depth and interest to readers' understanding of the poem. Barrett Browning suffered from illness and spent much of her adult life in her childhood home, under the control of her father. She dramatically escaped in order to elope with Browning when she was in her 40s, an unusually late age for marriage in the 19th century. This understanding of Barrett Browning's history makes it significant that she places so much emphasis on freedom and choice in love, given the restricted life that she led when she lived for so long in her father's house. It also lends new context to the poem's reference to the speaker's "old griefs" and loss of faith in the religion of her childhood.

At the same time, however, this is not the only way to read the poem, since the speaker and addressee are never identified by name. The poem's themes of unconditional, unselfish, and eternal love remain applicable to many other contexts outside Barrett Browning's life, which perhaps accounts for the poem's enduring popularity over the centuries.

SETTING

"How do I love thee?" is not set in a specific physical environment or historical context. Biographically, it might be read as a love poem from the 19th-century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her husband Robert Browning. In this case, it's possible to regard the poem as set in the mid-19th century, around the date that the poem was published (1850), a reading lent strength by some period details like the reference to "candle-light." However, the poem does not necessarily need to be read that way. In fact, the speaker frequently makes reference to eternity, suggesting that she sees the poem as depicting a love that continues outside the bounds of a particular time or place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was a poet of the Victorian era, or the period of the 19th century in which the United Kingdom was ruled by Queen Victoria. Her poems were very popular at the time, and attracted the attention of Robert Browning, a prominent poet in his own right. He wrote to her, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," and they secretly married years after their first meeting. During the years of their marriage, Browning and Barrett Browning greatly influenced one another's poetry. For instance, one of Browning's volumes of poetry, *Men and Women* (1861) had a title taken from a line in Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850).

Other famous writers of the Victorian era who admired Barrett Browning's work include the poets William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson, author of famous poems like "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854), and the novelist William Makepeace Thackery, author of *Vanity Fair* (1848).

Barrett Browning also had particularly important relationships with other women writers. As a young woman, she had read and greatly admired Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1790). While living in Europe, she met George Sand, the pioneering French woman novelist who wrote under a male name. In turn, Barrett Browning's work—especially her long poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), which tells the semi-autobiographical story of a woman writer—was a source of inspiration for later women poets and activists like Emily Dickinson and Susan B. Anthony.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in the mid-19th century, during the Victorian period of British history. Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain from 1837 to 1901. That period witnessed profound transformations in British society, economic organization, and culture. It was the era in which Great Britain arguably peaked in its international prominence and influence, as the British Empire extended across much of the known world. The British economy, meanwhile, benefited significantly from the Industrial Revolution, as inventions like the train, the telegraph, and the telephone transformed people's ability to travel and communicate with one another.

In some ways, the Victorian period was an era of greater democracy that granted more political power to ordinary people. The 19th century saw the growth of the labor movement, more working-class people gaining the right to vote, and higher incomes and standards of living. At the same time, however, industrialization led to new social ills, like widespread urban poverty and slum living, overcrowding due to the

massive growth of the British population, and disease epidemics.

A similar paradox attended the role of Victorian women like Barrett Browning. Increasingly, women could gain respect and prestige as authors of novels, poetry, and prose in their own right. At the same time, Victorian women were still very constrained in their ability to work and lead independent lives in a society that regarded them as the property of their husbands and fathers. Barrett Browning's increasing interest in women's rights was marked by her reading of feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, her notably egalitarian marriage with Robert Browning, and her more liberated life on the European continent, where she socialized with other women authors and spent much of her life in middle age.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Another Take on "How Do I Love Thee?" — A solid, line-by-line analysis of the poem from Owlcation. (https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-How-Do-I-Love-Thee-by-Elizabeth-Barrett-Browning)
- The Original Manuscript — Read the poem in Barrett Browning's handwriting, courtesy of the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126803.html)
- The Scandal of 1846 — An informative article about the marriage and scandalous elopement of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning. (https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elizabeth-barrett-and-robert-browning-elope)
- The Peanuts Version — Listen to a charming version of the poem read aloud on "Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLkcR9UR9us)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning 's Life Story — A great introduction to the poem and biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Barrett-Browning)

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