

## FACT SHEET

### How do I Love Thee? Let me Count the Ways. (Victorian Period)

#### A Background to Victorian Period

England in the Victorian Period saw the expansive glory of the British empire as it became the most powerful nation due to its technology, colonial ambitions, and military power. The Industrial Revolution alongside a sense of nationalism refashioned both the political and social life of the people. However, as much as it was a time of great ambition and grandeur, it was also a time of misery, squalor, and urban ugliness (Raiyah, 2013). This 63-year period was a time of contrast.

The ascendancy of Queen Victoria marked the beginning of this period (1837-1901). It is characterized by the following:

- It was a time of contrast--of prosperity and poverty, of morality and depravity, and peace and protest.
- It was characterized by rapid change and development mainly due to the impressive production of industrial materials such as coal, iron, steel, and textiles and the expansive territories gained through colonization and slavery.
- It was considered the Golden Age of English novels.
- It was a fusion of romantic and realistic types of writing.

#### Literature in the Victorian Period

The novel was the most dominant form of literature in this period. Household names that today are considered canonical writers include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Dickens, Mary Ann Evans also known as George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters, among others.



Poetry reached a wider audience due to the advancements in printing. It is known for the following qualities:

- quite realistic in nature
- less idealized
- more focused on urban life
- highly pessimistic
- undeniably skeptic
- full of imagery and sensory elements

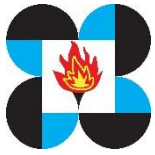
#### Elizabeth Barret-Browning

Elizabeth was born to an affluent family who owned sugar plantations and slaves. Their wealth allowed her to receive the finest resources to study independently and with tutors. Due to chronic sickness, she was unable to enjoy the luxuries of an active social life. Nevertheless, her strong literary

connections allowed her to become one of the most notable women writers in England, even surpassing her husband's fame, Robert Browning, who was a fellow poet.

Robert and Elizabeth exchanged letters and poems before embracing married life. Elizabeth's well-known poem "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*" was her response to Robert's proclamation of love and assurance that he will not find Elizabeth's woes and sickness hindrances to their relationship. Later, this poem became part of a bigger collection called "*Sonnets from the Portuguese.*"

Elizabeth wrote about gender-restrictive norms against women, the slave trade in America, and child labor, among other social injustices.



**Sonnets**

Qualities	Shakespearean Sonnet	Petrarchan Sonnet
Origin	From the Italian “sonetto” which means “little sound or song”	
Other Names	English Sonnet	Italian Sonnet
Lines	14 lines	
Typical Meter	Iambic pentameter	
Stanzas	3 quatrains, 1 couplet	1 octet, 1 sestet
Rhyme Scheme	ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG	ABBA ABBA, CDE CDE/CDC CDC/CDE DCE
Volta or Turn	End of the 12 <sup>th</sup> line or before the final couplet but sometimes anywhere in the quatrains	9 <sup>th</sup> line between the octet and sestet

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

**Form of the poem**

- Iambic pentameter
- Rhyme Scheme of ABBA ABBA CDC DCD
- Speaker identified to be Elizabeth herself
- Addressee identified to be Robert
- Themes include freedom from a secluded and restricted life, free reign in love, all-encompassing love, ordinary but empowering love, maturation and self-restoring love, and love after death

**In summary, the poem talks about:**

- Love that exists both in the material world and will endure until it transcends life on earth
- Love that will fill the void of a secluded life and a life that slowly detached itself from religious life
- Love that one can attempt to rationalize but not fully grasp only through reason
- Love that one the self can decide on with their own will and agency

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**References**

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"Elizabeth Barrett Browning." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-barrett-browning>. Accessed 27 Nov. 2022.

Houghton, Eve. "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways (Sonnets from the Portuguese 43)." *LitCharts*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/elizabeth-barrett-browning/how-do-i-love-thee-let-me-count-the-ways-sonnets-from-the-portuguese-43>.

*Sources not cited here are found in the SLGs.*