

Sonnet 29: I Think of Thee

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

OVERALL SUMMARY

During this poem, Browning declares and reflects upon her love for her partner, fellow poet, Robert Browning. Not only does E. Browning focus on thought herself, but the lyrics of the sonnet prompt deep thought from the reader, as she describes her relationship through metaphor that invites various interpretations.

STANZA SUMMARY

- Lines 1-4 describe the speaker's thoughts as vines and growing greenery encompassing their subject. Upon surface-level reading, this perhaps suggests that the former's thoughts are being consumed by the latter and that the poem's speaker wants to be as involved with their lover as are the vines that **intertwine themselves around a tree**.
- Lines 5-8 then go on to claim that the speaker does not want merely the thought of their lover to accompany them, but the person themselves.
- During lines 9-11, the extended metaphor of the speaker's lover as a tree continues as images of a sexual nature are built, the **physical intimacy** between the two parties becoming more apparent, yet still disguised by metaphor.
- From lines 12-14, the speaker compares their lover to the air they breathe and the natural surroundings they take in, as though this person is a new and original experience, perhaps why they are causing a **plethora of differing sensations**.

CONTEXT

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning was married to poet, Robert Browning, who is likely to be this poem's subject.
- She wrote during the **Romantic era**, during which there was **increasing political unrest** as activists and artists were advocating for freedom and denouncing industrialisation.
- Sonnet 29 is taken from Browning's collection of poems, **"Sonnets from the Portuguese"**, which included 44 poems expressing her love for Robert Browning. Despite its positive receipt, this collection, and Browning's poetry in general, was often criticised as her blatant, passionate approaches to talking about her love was **considered unwomanly**.
- Because of her presence in the Romantic era, Browning was prone to including elements of romantic writing in her poetry. It is likely that this was also influenced by Robert Browning's tendency to do the same, as he often included aspects of **gothic writing** in his poetry.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning was ill for the majority of her life.

SONNET 29: I THINK OF THEE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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 straggling 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.

Key Themes & Analysis

EXPRESSION OF LOVE

- The **exclamatory sentence** that commences the poem, ***"I think of thee!"*** rejects the idea of a soft and thoughtful entrance and is instead abrupt and direct, the speaker clearly **overwhelmed with excitement** at the thought of the person of whom they speak, addressing them in a personal manner.
- The decision to **structure the poem as a sonnet** already expresses an **intense adoration** towards its subject. The sonnet is a **14-line poem typically written as an expression of love**.
- As a sonnet, the poem also consists of regular metre, using **iambic pentameter** (10 syllables per line) throughout.
- Like in many of the poems in this anthology, ***"I Think Of Thee"*** uses **nature as a means of expressing the complex emotions** of the speaker. In this case, this involves the **extended metaphor** of trees and greenery throughout the sonnet's entirety.
- During the first four lines, the speaker describes the way in which their ***"thoughts do twine and bud"*** about their lover, represented by a ***"tree"*** (which rhymes with "thee",) a **subtle yet clear enhancement** of the connection between the two with these natural processes.
- At line 5 the speaker uses an **emphatic 'O'** followed by the **possessive pronoun *"my"***. This indicates a deep longing for the person they are addressing, the inclusion of a **possessive pronoun introducing a personal element to the poem**.
- The metaphor ***"palm-tree"***, describing the speaker's lover, carries religious connotations, as a palm tree would often, in Christianity, symbolise (represent) strong faith, indicating **an unwavering (cannot be influenced) faithfulness to this person**.
- ***"...set thy trunk all bare"*** displays quite **phallic imagery**, perhaps relating to the physically intimate side of the relationship between the two parties. This **passionate image** continues throughout the rest of this **quatrain**.
- At line 11, the speaker orders the subject to allow the ***"bands of greenery which insphere thee/drop heavily down"***. In this way, Browning not only conjures the image of a person undressing, but, **figuratively, is encompasses the concept of one's ability to be vulnerable around a partner**, as though the lover is **allowing the speaker to lower their guard**.
- ***"Burst, shattered, everywhere!"***. This passionate exclamation, emphasised by the use of an exclamation mark, represents a sort of climax – an extreme
- ***"see"***, ***"hear"*** and ***"breathe"*** are all prime examples of **sensory language, vividly depicting** the experiences faced by the speaker and rendering the poem very personal. It also creates a certain **intimacy between the speaker and the reader**, mimicking that between the lovers.

CONTRADICTION/COMPLEXITY OF THOUGHTS

- The poem is **structured as a sonnet**, which inevitably includes a **volta or turn (moment where the perspective of the poem shifts)** at line 8. This imitates the structure of a **Petrarchan sonnet**.
- Whilst the words **"see"** and **"tree"** at the ends of lines two and three rhyme perfectly, the words **"bud"** and **"wood"** ending lines one and four are an **imperfect rhyme**. This is representative of a **slight contradiction** within the attitude displayed by the speaker towards their lover.
- Whilst the poem is written in **iambic pentameter**, the **heavy punctuation throughout alters this metre, rendering it** more original and complex. In this way, the **reader is given a deeper perspective** regarding the thoughts of the speaker.
- There could be various interpretations of the simile comparing the speaker's thoughts to **"wild vines"**. The adjective **"wild"** points to something **uncontrollable and untameable**.
- Later, the reader is given an image of these vines **encompassing the tree**, Browning claiming that she **"hides the wood"**. These ideas present the speaker as a **somewhat dominant force within the relationship, or perhaps quite possessive**.
- The **dominance of the speaker** is then, however, **juxtaposed** with the adjective **"straggling"** describing the **mentioned "vines"**. This could refer to the weakness Browning feels thanks to the illness she faced for most of her life, but also **plays on the idea of power dynamic within a relationship that is subtly explored through the undertones of this extended metaphor**, suggesting that the dependence on the poem's subject weakens the speaker.
- The **conjunction "yet"** following the first **quatrain** (group of 4 lines) emphasises the fact that the speaker is **in two minds** and **reflects a moment of realisation** as they understand that their thoughts may not **manifest themselves (be present)** in the lovers' physical presence.
- The phrase **"I do not think of thee"** beginning the final line of the poem directly contrasts its first phrase, **"I think of thee!"**, solidifying the sonnet's **contradictory nature**, demonstrated by both **language and structure**. The **dash** that follows this phrase – separating it from the second half of the line: **"I am too near thee."**, **enhances the conflict** the speaker faces with their own thoughts.

Form

SONNET

- Traditionally 14 lines long and written as an expression of love.
- It is significant that the poem is structured in this way as Browning intends for the reader to assume is a **profession of love and quite personal**.
- In doing so, the speaker's ultimate love of their partner is shown to be present, **despite small uncertainties** and arguably unhealthy attitudes displayed in its contents.
- Contains a 'volta' or 'turn' – a point at which the perspective of the poem's speaker changes.

IAMBIC PENTAMETER

- 10 syllables per line – this continues regularly throughout the poem.
- This emulates her complete, unwavering devotion to her lover

AMBIGUOUS RHYME SCHEME

- Although the syllables at the end of each line all rhyme with others throughout the sonnet, the sounds including **"ee", "ood" and "air/ere"**, there is no clear pattern dictating the way in which they rhyme.
- This develops the idea that the speaker, whilst feeling in sync with their lover and celebrating their strong feelings for them, **experiences conflicting thoughts** towards the relationship's **power dynamic and the compatibility between the two**.

Structure

CAESURA

- This involves the use of punctuation to cause a pause in the middle of a line
- This is done at line 7, when the phrase ***"Who art dearer, better!"*** ends with an exclamation mark before the rest of the line continues.
- This exclamatory tone along with the sudden presence of punctuation in the middle of a sentence suggests that the speaker is **overwhelmed by their thoughts and emotions** towards their lover. Reflecting the imagery of the vines, it displays the way in which the thoughts of the speaker, and perhaps the speaker themselves, **consume their partner**.

END STOPPING

- This involves the use of punctuation to create a pause at the end of the line.
- This is demonstrated at the end of line 4, when a full-stop follows the word ***"wood"***.
- The sudden interruption of the sonnet's flow here after the presence of enjambement is abrupt and suggests that the **supposed harmonious nature of the relationship may be diluted with uncertainties and conflict**.

ENJAMBEMENT

- This occurs when there is no punctuation at the end of a line, so it flows into the next line.
- For example, at line 3, the phrase ***"nought to see"*** flows into the phrase ***"except the straggling green"***.
- beginning the next line in this way, this section **imitates natural speech** as opposed to sticking to a rigid rhythm, adding quite a personal element to the sonnet.
- Additionally, it suggests that there are elements of the relationship that are harmonious.

Comparisons

Love's Philosophy	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Nature to portray intense feelings of love</p> <p>Both poems focus on an expression of love for another person through the comparison of human emotion to the behaviour of nature. Although they place focus on different aspects of the natural world, they both appear to highlight a certain interconnectivity between the elements of nature that is reflected in human relationships.</p>	<p>The form of both poems is regular relative to their genres. In 'I Think Of Thee', this constitutes a 14-line poem written in iambic tetrameter, typical of a sonnet that would be used as an expression of affection, whilst, in Love's Philosophy, a constant ABAB rhyme scheme alludes to the unwavering continuation of nature's processes as well as the interconnection of all its elements that work together</p>	<p>Both poems use a range of punctuation for dramatic effect, including a mixture of enjambement and end-stopping. In 'Love's Philosophy', this is likely representative of an overwhelming of the senses as the speaker expresses profound levels of affection, as well as the variety of nature's features coming together to create a balanced and functional universe. In 'I Think of Thee', this, again, could point to an overwhelming of the senses, as the speaker professes intense feelings of desire and longing towards their partner.</p>	<p>Both Browning and Shelley were born around the start of the Romantic era, using poetic devices that were typical of the period.</p>
Different	<p>Religious connotations that exist within 'Love's Philosophy' are not present during Browning's poem. Additionally, the intention of Shelley's work is to persuade a potential partner that the speaker is worthy of their love, whereas Browning's speaker simply comments on their feelings for their pre-existing romantic partner.</p>	<p>Whilst Love's Philosophy follows a consistent metre and a regular, ABAB rhyme scheme, 'I Think Of Thee' follows the typical structure of a sonnet, consisting of 14 lines in iambic pentameter with a slightly irregular rhyme scheme.</p>	<p>There is no use of the interrogative tone in Browning's sonnet like there is in Shelley's poem, but she does make use of the exclamatory tone to place emphasis on her personal relationship with the subject. There is an example of caesura within Browning's sonnet that does not make an appearance in 'Love's Philosophy'.</p>	<p>It could be argued that Shelley's writing, particularly during this poem, includes more underlying controversy than that of Browning. Additionally, Shelley's poem is a lot less personal, as the speaker addresses a fictional figure, whereas Browning is likely commenting on her relationship with the poet, Robert Browning.</p>

Neutral Tones	THEME	FORM	STRUCTURE	CONTEXT
Similar	<p>Reflection upon feelings for a lover via nature</p> <p>In both cases, nature acts as a metaphor for the speaker's attitude towards their lover. In 'Neutral Tones', the drab, grey, winter surroundings of the speaker reflect their newfound pessimistic view of life since the loss of their love, as well as the bitter undertones of their attitude towards this person. In 'I Think of Thee', the speaker uses nature to develop the idea of a sort of co-dependence between them and their partner. For example, the 'vines' around the tree are suggestive of one party encompassing the other, whilst also relying on them as a source of life.</p>	Both poets use rhyme for certain effect.	Both poems use a range of punctuation to express the content of their poem in a certain way. For example, in 'Neutral Tones', end-stopping in particular is used to create quite a disjointed effect, interrupting the poem's flow. This demonstrates the tension between the speaker and their past love. In 'I Think of Thee', it is arguable that punctuation creating caesura and end-stopping induces the same effect. The slight interruption of the flow suggests an underlying tension or uncertainty within the relationship presented to readers.	Both poems are subject to heavy romantic influence, including nature as a means of expression of emotion.
Different	<p>Differing attitudes towards the speakers' respective lovers. In 'Neutral Tones', the speaker reflects upon their past love with a tone of resentment and distaste, making note of their previous folly with a melancholy (or, perhaps, neutral) tone.</p> <p>In contrast, Browning presents a view of her lover that, whilst not completely positive due to contradictions in her thought process, is extremely passionate and completely contradicts the mood of Hardy's poem.</p>	<p>The rhyme scheme of Hardy's poem is extremely regular, used to reflect the regularity and repetitive behaviour of nature. Its metre is not regular, presenting the incompatibility between the speaker and their lost love.</p> <p>In contrast, Browning, whilst using rhyme, provides readers with an ambiguous rhyme scheme, suggesting that, despite being compatible with their lover, the speaker has conflicting thoughts regarding their relationship. In this sonnet, the metre is regular, presenting a great sense of togetherness.</p>	<p>Hardy uses quite a regular distribution of punctuation throughout his poem to reiterate the idea of the regular passing of seasons and the mundane routine of life.</p> <p>Browning, however, scatters her range of punctuation throughout her sonnet in an irregular fashion, representing a confusing set of thoughts.</p>	<p>It was unusual for Hardy to include so many romantic features in his poetry as he would often place a lot of focus on Victorian Realism. This is still shown here, however, as he places emphasis on the harsh reality of life instead of romanticising the mundane.</p> <p>It is arguable that Browning's poem is more noticeably personal than Hardy's as she was famously married to another well-known romantic.</p> <p>Both poets wrote during a time of great political unrest, but this idea does not obviously transfer to these poems, as the writers speak of more intimate experiences that are personal to the speakers.</p>