



GCSE

English Literature

Sonnet 29 (Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

The poet (contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem) (AO3)

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) was a successful poet of the nineteenth century.
- She suffered with an undiagnosed illness which meant that she had long periods of confinement and severe bouts of ill health.
- Her father's wealth came from plantations powered by slave labour. He was a very strict and controlling with Elizabeth and all his children.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an advocate of gender equality and the abolishment of slavery.
- She met and fell in love with fellow poet, Robert Browning. They courted in secret and they eloped to be married. When he found out, her father disowned her and she never saw him again.
- *Sonnet 29* is one of 44 sonnets contained in 'From the Portuguese' and were written as private love letters between her and her husband to be.
- They moved to Italy, where her health improved and she gave birth to one son.
- She died in Robert Browning's arms in 1861.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning is considered one of the Romantic poets.

Structure and form (AO2)

- The poem is a sonnet: a traditional form of expressing feelings and emotions connected with love.
- It consists of fourteen lines and is made up of an octave and a sestet.
- The rhyme scheme is ABBA, ABBA, CBCBCB.
- Mainly iambic pentameter: five iambs (unstressed-stressed syllables) per line create a strong beat, echoing the passion she feels.
- Contains a volta in line 5. This is the turning point in the poem.
- The sonnet rules are not applied consistently: this may reflect a desire to rebel and break the strict rules of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's society.

The poem (content and context)

What is the poem about? (AO1)

The speaker writes directly to her love, expressing how she longs for them to be together. She uses an extended metaphor of wild vines to represent her thoughts, wrapping around the tree to symbolise how they love each other.

The speaker acknowledges that her thoughts of them being together are nothing compared to the reality of being physically in each other's company. She commands him to return to her as once they are together, her thoughts and longing surrounding them will fall away and the longing will be satisfied.

It ends with an image of them being united and joyous together.

Deeper meaning (AO1)

The poem explores the power of love and the yearning of desire. It presents nature as representing wild desire, passion and freedom. Barrett Browning emphasises the emotional and spiritual joy that true love can provide. There is a sense of renewal and new beginnings.

Context of the poem (AO3)

The poem would have been seen as risqué in the strict moral code of Victorian society. In discussing a woman's passions and by using sensual, almost sexual imagery, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was pushing the boundaries of women in a patriarchal society.

The poem shares imagery with that found in the biblical old testament book, *Song of Solomon*.

The poem reflects the poet's connection with the Romantic poets, given that it emphasises emotions, imagination and personal experiences.

Key quotations (AO1)

1. 'I think of thee!'
2. 'my thoughts do twine and bud / About thee, as wild vines, about a tree'
3. 'soon there's nought to see / Except the straggling green which hides the wood'
4. 'O my palm-tree'
5. 'I will not have my thoughts instead of thee / Who art dearer, better!'
6. 'Renew thy presence'
7. 'set thy trunk all bare'
8. 'And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee / Drop heavily down'

“ ”

Language and imagery (AO2)

- Extended metaphor of 'wild vines' and 'a tree' represents how the speaker shows her thoughts are focused on her love like a vine wrapping around a tree.
- Later, the metaphor starts to take on a more physical idea, as the images start to symbolise their bodies.
- Sensual imagery such as 'bare thy trunk', 'burst' and 'heavily' create a feeling of urgency.
- Exclamatory language, such as 'I will not have my thoughts instead of thee / Who art dearer, better!', indicates the persona's excitement.
- Imperatives are used to show the speaker's impatience for them to be together such as '*renew thy presence*', '*rustle thy boughs*', '*set thy trunk*'.
- Sensory imagery such as 'shattering' creates a focus on the senses.
- Assonance, such as 'I do not think of thee – I am too near thee', is used to create euphony and a sense of longing.



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Connections and Contrasts (AO3).

This is not an exhaustive list and other comparisons may be valid.

- **'The Schoolboy' by William Blake:** Both poems use nature in central images to express strong emotions.
- **'Cousin Kate' by Christina Rossetti:** Both poems use a strong female voice to express longing and desire in a patriarchal society.
- **'I wandered lonely as a cloud' by William Wordsworth:** Both poems explore emotions through nature. They both also talk about solitude. However, Wordsworth finds comfort in solitude, while Barrett Browning wants to be reunited with her love.
- **'Blackberry Picking' by Seamus Heaney:** Both poems celebrate nature's beauty. However, Barrett Browning finds lasting joy and a timelessness in nature and her relationship, while Heaney reflects on nature's fleeting pleasures.
- **'I Shall Return' by Claude McKay:** Both poems use the sonnet form. McKay longs for the solace of nature while Barrett Browning wants to be reunited with her love.
- **'Dusting the Phone' by Jackie Kay:** Both poems detail a love relationship, narrated from a female speaker's point of view. In both cases, the speakers are yearning to be reunited with their love.

10 Key Questions to ask about the poem

1. Who is the speaker in the poem, and what is their emotional state? (AO1)
2. How does Barrett Browning use natural imagery to describe her longing? (AO1)
3. What is the significance of the "vine" and "tree" extended metaphor in the poem? (AO2)
4. How does the poet convey longing and desire in the poem? (AO1)
5. How does the poem develop into a more physical yearning of love? (AO1)
6. How does the use of sonnet form contribute to the meaning of the poem? (AO2)
7. Do you think the poem depicts a strong female speaker? Justify your answer. (AO1/AO2)
8. How does the poet use sensory language in the poem? (AO2)
9. Why does Barrett Browning use a strong exclamatory tone? (AO2)
10. How might the poem subvert Victorian ideals? (AO3)

Key Questions to Ask (10 Key Questions)

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2. How does Barrett Browning use nature imagery to describe her longing?
3. What is the significance of the "vine" and "tree" extended metaphor in the poem?
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8. How does the poet use sensory language in the poem?
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10. How might the poem subvert Victorian ideals?

Links for Further Research

- [Elizabeth Barrett Browning Further info](#)
- [Elizabeth Barrett elopes with Matthew Browning](#)
- [Poetry Foundation - Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#)

