

Poetry
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Lecture 49
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning
(1806-1861)



- Historical and Literary Context
- E B Browning
- Two poems:
 - “The Cry of the Children” – Selected Stanzas
- Analysis
 - “How Do I Love Thee?”
 - Analysis



Now, let us go to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. First, we will examine the historical and literary context, almost the same context but there is a difference in focus we will notice. We will pay some attention to Browning’s life. Then, discuss two poems; one is “The Cry of the Children” and another is “How do I Love Thee?” The second one is one of the most famous sonnets in English.

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Historical Context



- King George III (1760-1820), & King George IV (1820-1830)
- William IV (1830-1837), Queen Victoria (1837-1901)
- 1833: Abolition of Slavery
- 1842: Abolition of Child Labor through the Mines Act
- 1845-47: Irish famine and wars of independence
- Human rights movements: Annie Besant
- Public Health movements: Florence Nightingale
- 1861: Unification of Italy under Victor Emmanuel II with the support of Giuseppe Garibaldi
- Education of women was not widely encouraged



As we saw earlier, the context is similar. King George III, we have king George IV, William IV, and Queen Victoria. We have certain social happenings at this time; in 1833 slavery was abolished; in 1842, child labour was abolished through Mines Act. We also find the famous Irish or notorious Irish famine in 1845 and 47 plus the wars of independence in different parts of the world. We also have human rights movements led by various people in England, particularly Annie Besant who advocated the idea of home rule for Ireland and also for India.

We have many public health movements and the famous leader of this movement is Florence Nightingale. In 1861, Italy was unified under victor Emmanuel II with the support of Giuseppe Garibaldi. We also have to notice the education of women at this time which was negligible; it was not encouraged at all. So, here we have certain special points relating to abolition of slavery, abolition of child labour, Irish famine, human rights, education of women because Elizabeth Barrett Browning was interested in many of these social events, political events of her day. Even this unification of Italy, she was much more interested.

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Literary Context

- The decline of Romanticism and Wordsworth
- Tennyson was emerging as a major voice like Wordsworth and occupied the post of poet laureate after him.
- Elizabeth Barrett was an acclaimed poet by 1850.
- Robert was a struggling poet then.
- The major concern of literature was society.
- Novels, poems, plays, essays, etc., played the role of a secular cleric to the public with their moral guidance in the godless and faithless world.
- Mortality rate of children, young people and mothers was high leading to an obsession with death and melancholy embodied in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850)
- Celebration of death became a national obsession after Prince Albert's death in 1861.



Now, let us come to the literary context. On the one hand romanticism was declining gradually and on the other hand, Victorian poetry was emerging through Tennyson and also Elizabeth Barrett Browning, similarly, Robert Browning. Tennyson, Elizabeth and Robert Browning; they were all growing whereas, the old romantic poets they were disappearing. The major concern of Victorian literature was society, unlike individuals in romantic poetry.

Here, in this context we have novels, poems, plays, essays all these literary forms played the role of a secular cleric to the public with their moral guidance in the godless and faithless

world. Another major point that we have to notice is relating to mortality rate. Mortality rate of children, young people, and mothers was very high leading to an obsession with death and melancholy in this Victorian society which is embodied in Tennyson's poem, 'In Memoriam.' Consequently, we have celebration of death and this became a national obsession after Queen Victoria's husband Prince Charles death, in 1861.

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E B Browning (1806-1861)

- A distinguished and well-known poet before Browning
- Sick and invalid but self-educated
- Eloped with Browning to Italy for a warmer climate
- Wrote *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a feminist verse novel
 - An epic poem on the growth of a woman poet
- Admired and appreciated by feminists, especially Virginia Woolf
- Potential poet laureate but missed it due to her gender
- Social and political activism in poetry
- Revived and restored by feminist scholars today



Elizabeth Barrette Browning was born in 1806 and died in 1861. She was a distinguished and well-known poet before meeting Browning. But she was a sick and invalid woman. She was all along self-educated. When she came into contact with Browning, she eloped with Browning to Italy for a warmer climate to gain health. She wrote this feminist verse novel, 'Aurora Leigh' in 1856. This is an epic poem on the growth of a woman poet. This was admired and appreciated by feminists especially, Virginia Woolf. Elizabeth Barrett was a potential poet laureate in competition with Tennyson at that time. But she missed it because of her gender, she was a woman, though, the monarch of the time was queen Victoria. Social and political activism can be seen in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She is revived and restored by feminist scholars today in various contexts.

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“The Cry of the Children”: Context

- An influential **sentimental** poem of 160 lines in 13 stanzas, each having 12 lines except stanza 4 which has 16 lines.
- Published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1843)
- The thematic focus: the plight of children working in mines and factories stirring the conscience of England
- An epigraph from *Medea*:
 - “Pheu pheu, ti prosderkesthe m ommasin, tekna;”
- The meaning of the epigraph:
 - Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children?
- The Factory Act in 1833 and The Mines Act in 1842 abolished child labor below 9 years of age.



Two poems we have chosen for discussion; one is “The Cry of the Children” another is “How do I love thee.” So, first poem is The Cry of the Children. Here we have some background information about this poem. This is an influential sentimental poem of 160 lines in 13 stanzas, each having 12 lines except stanza 4 which has 16 lines. It was first published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, in 1843. The thematic focus of this poem is on the plight of children working in mines and factories stirring the conscience of England. Browning has an epigraph from the Greek drama ‘Medea.’

We have the English translation of the epigraph here. “Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children?” The Factory Act in 1833 and The Mines Act in 1842 abolished child labour below the age of 9 leading to their welfare.

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“The Cry of the Children,” Stanza 1

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, —
And that cannot stop their tears.
The **young lambs** are bleating in the meadows; 5
The **young birds** are chirping in the nest;
The **young fawns** are playing with the shadows;
The **young flowers** are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly! 10
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free. 12



Here, we have some stanzas, let us have now stanza 1.

“Do you hear the children weeping, O my brothers,

Ere the sorrow comes with years?

They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,-

And that cannot stop their tears.

The **young lambs** are bleating in the meadows;

The young birds are chirping in the nest;

The **young fawns** are playing with the shadows;

The **young flowers** are blowing toward the west.

But the young, young children, O my brothers,

They are weeping bitterly!

They are weeping in the play time of the others,

In the country of the free.”

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“The Cry of the Children,” Stanza 7

“For all day, the wheels are droning, **turning**, —
Their wind comes in our faces, —
Till our hearts **turn**, — our heads, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places 80
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling —
Turns the long light that droppeth down the wall, —
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling —
All are turning, all the day, and we with all! —
And all day, the iron wheels are droning ; 85
And sometimes we could pray,
‘O ye wheels,’ (breaking out in a mad moaning)
‘Stop! be silent for to-day!’” 88



Stanza 7 is here.

“For all day, the wheels are droning, **turning**, -

Their wind comes in our faces, -

Till our hearts **turn**, - our heads, with pulses burning,

And the walls turn in their places.

Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling, -

Turns the long light that droppeth down the wall, -

Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling -

All are turning, all the day, and we with all! -

And all day, the iron wheels are droning;

And sometimes he could pray,

‘O ye wheels,’ (breaking out in a mad moaning)

‘Stop! be silent for to-day!’”

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“The Cry of the Children,” Stanza 13



They **look** up, with their pale and sunken faces,
And their **look** is dread to **see**, 150
For they think you **see** their angels in their places,
With **eyes** meant for Deity;—
“How long,” they say, “**how long, O cruel nation,**
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, —
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation, 155
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,
And your purple shews your path;
But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath!” 160



Stanza 13.

“They **look** up, with their pale and sunken faces,

And their **look** is dread to **see**.

For they think you **see** their angels in their places,

With **eyes** meant for Deity.

“How long,” they say, “**how long, O cruel nation,**

Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart.

Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,

And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?

Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,

And your purple shews your path;

But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence

Than the strong man in his wrath!”

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Thematic Contrast

- Children and Adults
- Weeping and Playing
- Sorrow and Joy
- Man and Nature
- Slavery and Freedom
- Machine (Wheels) and Children
- Devils and Angels
- Cruelty and Compassion
- Curse and Blessing; Child and Strong Adult
- Art and Life
- Legal Act and Social Practice



As you could have seen from these three stanzas, these feelings recorded by Browning in these stanzas are very powerful. We have the thematic contrast of children with adults, weeping with playing, sorrow with joy, man with nature, slavery with freedom, machine represented by wheels with children, devils and angels, cruelty and compassion, curse and blessing that is child and adult, art and life, legal act and social practice. She asked the question directly to the people of her times; how do you people live happily when your children are working in factories like this?

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Poetic Devices

- **Juxtaposition:** Nature and Children (line 5-9)
- **Apostrophe:** Oh my brothers (9)
- Repetition of a word: **young**, six times in stanza 1
- **Metaphor:** turning wheels/ winds/ walls/ sky/ flies/ children (stanza 7)
- Repetition of a word: **turn**, six times in stanza 7
- **Deification/ Irony:** Wheels (87)
- Repetition of an idea: **look**, six times in stanza 13
(look, see, eye, our blood splashes)



Elizabeth Browning has used a number of poetic devices in this poem. We start with juxtaposition, nature and children are contrasted. We have apostrophe in, ‘oh my brothers.’ Repetition of a word like, young, then turn, then look; these are repeated 6 times. Then we have this metaphor turning wheels, winds, walls, sky, flies, children in stanza 7. We also have this irony in ‘wheels’ they are considered to be something like God, the children have to pray to the wheels stop let us have some peace.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** AB alternating rhymes indicating Benjamin Disraeli's two nations of rich and poor in England
 - **Metrical Patterns:** ranging from 6 syllables to 12 syllables suggesting tri and hexa meter
 - The excess syllables perhaps reveal the excess of cruelty in a free and enterprising individualistic country.
 - **Primary patterns:** Iambic tri and pentameter
- “For oh,” | say the | children, | “we are | weary, (5)
 And we | cannot | run or | leap — (3)
 If we | cared for | any | meadows, | it were | merely (6)
 To drop | down in | them and | sleep. (3)



We have rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. Rhyme is simple AB that is alternating rhymes indicating Benjamin Disraeli's two nations of rich and poor England at that time. Benjamin Disraeli's became the prime minister and he was also a novelist, he talked about this divide between rich and poor. We have these metrical patterns ranging from 6 syllables to 12 syllables suggesting tri and hexameter.

The excess syllables perhaps reveal the excess of cruelty in a free and enterprising individualistic country like England. The primary patterns are Iambic trimeter and Iambic pentameter. Here we have some examples,

“For oh,” say the children, “we are weary,

And we cannot run or leap-

If we cared for any meadows, it were merely

To drop down in them and sleep.”

We have five feet, three feet, six feet, one, two, three, four, five, six, yes, we have six feet, then we have three feet.

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Overall Impression

- “The Cry of the Children” is a heart rending poem about the condition and suffering of working children in factories.
- The speaker addresses the public directly and opens their eyes to the children’s pathetic condition.
- The juxtaposition of children with lambs, birds, fawns and flowers stirs the mind immediately to action.
- The alternating AB rhymes point to the movement of the wheels tearing the hearts of children and the readers away.
- The irregular rhyme pattern from 6 syllables to 12 syllables reveals the layers of life among the rich and the poor in England.



On the whole, the cry of the children is a poem; it is a heart-rending poem about the condition and suffering of working children in factories. The speaker addresses the public directly and opens their eyes to the children's pathetic condition. The juxtaposition of children with lambs, birds, fawns and flowers stirs the mind immediately to action. The alternating AB rhymes point to the movement of the wheels tearing the hearts of children and the readers away. The irregular rhyme pattern from 6 syllables to 12 syllables reveals the layers of life among the rich and the poor in England at this time.

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“How Do I Love Thee?": Context



- Sonnet 43 in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850)
- Expression of a woman's love for a man
- A Petrarchan sonnet divided into octave and sestet
- The sonnets are autobiographical, that is, Barrett's love for Robert.
- The title conceals the background to make it appear as if the poems were translations from Portuguese literature.
- Several critics have recognized them as superior to Shakespeare's sonnets and Petrarchan love sonnets.



Now, we are moving to the next poem “How Do I love Thee?” Here we have some background information. This is a Sonnet from ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ sonnet sequence published in 1850, the sonnet number is 43. This gives expression to a woman's love for a man. It is a Petrarchan sonnet divided into octave and sestet. All the sonnets included in this collection are autobiographical, that is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own love for her lover Robert Browning before her marriage, many of them were written before her marriage.

The title conceals the background to make it appear as if the poems were translations from Portuguese literature. But it has nothing to do with Portuguese. Several critics have recognized them as superior to Shakespeare sonnets and Petrarchan love sonnets. If you read more of them, we can understand the superior quality of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets.

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How do I love thee?

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 5
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. 10
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.



Let us read the sonnet now.

“How do I love thee?

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. 5

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. 10

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.

This is considered to be one of the most famous sonnets in English literature, particularly dealing with the theme of love.

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How Do I Love Thee?

How do I <u>love thee</u> ? Let me count the ways.	A
<u>I love thee</u> to the depth and breadth and height	B
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight	B
For the ends of being and ideal grace.	A
<u>I love thee</u> to the level of every day's	5 A
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.	B
<u>I love thee</u> freely, as men strive for right;	B
<u>I love thee</u> purely, as they turn from praise.	A
<u>I love thee</u> with the passion put to use	C
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.	10 D
<u>I love thee</u> with a <u>love</u> I seemed to lose	C
With my lost saints. <u>I love thee</u> with the breath,	D
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,	C
I shall but <u>love</u> thee better after death.	D



We have underlined the repetitive words, specifically love. How do I love thee? I love thee, I love thee; this is repeated throughout the poem. Here we have 14 lines but love is repeated 10 times in this poem. We have this rhyme scheme A B B A A B B A C D C D C D.

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Thematic Contrast

- Love and Death
- Soul and Body
- Purity and Impurity
- Grief and Joy
- Loss and Gain
- Finite and Infinite Love
- Measurable and Immeasurable Love



Let us pay attention to the thematic contrast. “How do I love thee?” is the title of the poem. It deals with the theme of love. But at the end, we saw how Barrett Browning was saying she would love more after her death. So, love and death are brought into this poem. On the one hand we have love between soul and soul and body and body, purity and impurity, grief and joy, loss and gain, finite love and infinite love, measurable love and immeasurable love. Love is immeasurable but she has attempted to show the immeasurability of love by measuring how much she can love and giving expression to that measure of love.

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Poetic Devices

- **Blazon:** listing of many ways of love
- **Anaphora:** I love thee
- **Metaphor:** spatial – depth, breath, and height
- **Simile:** as men strive for right, as they turn for praise
- **Paradox:** I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
- **Repetition of the word:** love
- **Diction:** common words
- **Syntax:** one question; many declaratives; a declaration of love
- **Tone:** conversational and intimate



Elizabeth has used many poetic devices starting from Blazon, that is catalog. Listing of many ways of love right from beginning to end she has done it. She uses this Anaphora ‘I love thee’ repeatedly. Then, we have this Metaphor, spatial referring to depth, breadth and height. We have Simile as men strive for right, as a turn for praise. We have paradox in, I love thee with a love I seemed to lose. If she loses her love then how will she love? that is a paradox.

Repetition of the word love is there. Then we have Diction; these are common words; every ordinary human being can understand these words. Syntax is relating to the one question from the beginning to the end. We have one question many declaratives and the whole poem can be called a declaration of love. The tone is conversational, very intimate.

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Rhyme and Rhythm



Rhyme: ABBA ABBA CDC DCD

Rhyming words: ways, height, sight, grace,
day's, light, right, praise
use, faith, lose, breath, choose, death

Internal rhyme: strive - right

Assonance: depth - breadth; reach - feeling, smiles-life

Alliteration: soul - sight, purely - praise, passion - put,
love - lose, lost-love



We have this rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDC DCD. The words rhyme here like this, ways, height, sight, grace, day's, light, right, praise, use, faith, lose, breath, choose, death. Then we have internal rhyme in strive and right. We have assonance in depth-breath; reach-feeling, smiles-life. We also have alliteration in soul-sight, purely-praise, passion-put, love-lose, lost-love.

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Overall Impression



- "How Do I Love Thee?" is one of the most popular love poems in English, which has sustained Barrett Browning's reputation.
- It appears to be a simple exercise in counting the ways in which one loves another in a universal context.
- The speaking voice may be young or old, male or female and the you is equally indefinite.
- The joy of a new found love is unmistakable, which is contrasted with a painful past with a genuinely curious love.
- The human love is couched in terms of spiritual divinity and grace, perhaps to fit into the Victorian fashion of social propriety.
- The emphatic resonant "I love thee" is remarkable for the skeptical Victorian mind that did not have any solace.



On the whole to summarize, "How do I love the thee?" is a poem, a very popular poem in English. It has sustained Barrett Browning's reputation for a long time. She has been known for this only but now recently feminist scholars have uncovered all the writings of Barrett

Browning and they have brought her writings to the world. It appears to be a simple exercise in counting the ways in which one loves another in a universal context. The speaking voice may be young or old, male or female and the you is, equally indefinite.

The joy of a new found love is unmistakable which is contrasted with a painful past with a genuinely curious love. The human love is couched in terms of spiritual divinity and grace perhaps to fit into the Victorian fashion of social propriety. The emphatic resonant “I love thee” is remarkable for the skeptical Victorian mind that did not have any solace. We have to remember that, Victorian society is characterized by this phenomenon of faith and doubt. Here, we have more of faith in both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her husband Robert Browning.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)
- Two Poems
- “The Cry of the Children” – Three Stanzas
- Analysis
- “How Do I Love Thee?”
- Analysis



To summarize, we have seen the historical and literary context in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning was writing her poems, in competition with Tennyson and also in competition with Robert Browning. After her marriage, she was writing more and more but somehow her reputation was eclipsed because she was a woman, both Tennyson and Browning they were becoming more and more popular.

But feminist scholars have today, found out that she was much more than what she was as represented in criticism so far. Now she is considered to be one of the greatest poets in English, feminist to poets in English. We saw the cry of the children. It is a heart-rending poem. How she was praying for the children, their freedom, their welfare. She was a socially conscious poet, politically active poet although, she could write only about those issues in her

poems. She could not go to the field as Annie Besant did, but she did write about her expressions, her feelings of her times.

And, on the one hand we have social expression in *The Cry of the Children*, on the other hand we have her own personal love for her husband in “How do I love thee?” which represents the love between human beings both male and female throughout the world today. Hope you enjoyed this; hope you will remember this poet and continue to think about her and read many of her poems, particularly from the sonnet sequence; *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

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Some references are here for you. Thank you.