I think of thee (Sonnet 29)

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

I think about you! My thoughts wind around you and sprout new thoughts, the way out-of-control vines grow wide leaves as they climb up a tree, until, soon enough, there's nothing to see except the untidy foliage that conceals the tree's bark. Still, you, whom I think of as my palm tree, have to understand that I don't want my thoughts instead of the actual you, who is dearer and sweeter than those thoughts. Instead, right now, come to me and make yourself known; just like a strong tree would do, shake your branches and strip away these vines concealing your trunk. Let these vines that enclose you fall down heavily—breaking apart into little pieces that scatter all around! Because, as it is so joyful just to see and hear you, and, while in your presence, to breathe in a way that didn't feel possible before, I do not think of you—I am too close to you.

THEMES

FANTASY VS. REALITY

"I Think of Thee" focuses on someone who fantasizes intensely about and longs to be physically close to an absent lover. Yet as the poem progresses, the speaker moves thinking about her beloved in his absence to the opposite: *not* thinking about him because he is now right there beside her. This movement from thinking to not thinking of the lover becomes a kind of argument: despite the boundless beauty and possibility of her fantasies, the poem suggests, the speaker prefers the reality of the lover to her idea of him, physically *being* with this person rather than just *thinking* about him. Fantasy, the poem implies, is a poor substitute for reality when it comes to love.

The speaker begins the poem by describing her thoughts rather than describing her lover. These thoughts are imbued with a kind of fertile beauty—they "twine" and "bud" as "wild vines, about a tree," a description that illuminates the speaker's state of mind; she is fantasizing about the lover, in relation to whom she feels a sense of vitality, beauty, and wildness.

In fact, her fantasy is so lush that it ends up obscuring the lover. She imagines him disappearing beneath her runaway thoughts the way a tree trunk may be hidden beneath "straggling green" vines that grow over it. This image suggests that the speaker's thoughts actually get in the way of her seeing her lover clearly; the only direct way to the lover is through the lover himself, not through her thoughts of him, which pale in comparison.

The speaker then shifts gears, saying to the lover, "Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood / I will not have my thoughts instead of thee." In other words, she doesn't want to just fantasize about the lover; she wants to experience the reality of being with him.

By addressing the lover as a palm-tree, the speaker further illustrates her desire to see her lover clearly. Unlike other trees, the palm-tree has no branches, nowhere for vines to grow and flourish. Likewise, the speaker wishes her lover to be so clear, not hidden by absence and the fantasies that such absence provokes. The speaker thus admonishes the lover to "renew" his "presence," indicating that she only fantasizes about him because he is not with her. The speaker longs for the lover to appear and "shatter" her daydreams—to "bare" the reality that fantasy obscures. For the speaker, the lover's physical presence is so much more tangible and desired than anything she can imagine in his place.

Finally, the speaker claims that in the presence of the lover, she is not thinking—she is just existing, fully alive in the moment, and that in this way reality is more beautiful than even the loveliest of fantasies. She describes the simple reality of seeing and hearing and breathing in the presence of the lover as "a deep joy." The stark simplicity of the final lines accentuates her point: in the lover's presence, she is too joyfully caught up in the moment to wax poetic about him. Reality has proved sweeter than fantasy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LOVE, VULNERABILITY, AND FREEDOM

The poem's speaker implores the lover to strip her of her thoughts, and to free himself from "the bands of greenery which insphere" (or contain) him. The speaker recognizes that anything that stands between her and her lover must "drop heavily down" and "shatter." In this way, the poem suggests that to experience love one must be vulnerable and willing to give oneself over entirely to passion—whether that means rejecting societal dictates of decorum and restraint, or simply one's own familiar ways of being. Only through this kind of vulnerability and passion, the poem implies, may the lovers experience the powerful freedom of real love.

The speaker is vulnerable in admitting to the lush and ardent quality of her thoughts concerning the lover; in contrast to the restraint and decorum of Victorian England, the speaker of this poem is not holding back. Instead, her initial proclamation ("I think of thee!") lends the opening a kind of rushed, flushed, and urgent feeling, as though the speaker simply cannot hold back what she's feeling.

The poem then deepens in vulnerability as the speaker admits that the lover is more valuable to her—"dearer, better!"—than even her own thoughts. This is a particularly revealing statement when readers consider that Barrett Browning was one of the foremost poets and intellectuals of her time. By admitting that her lover is more valuable to her even than her thoughts, she is prioritizing her feelings of love and passion over her station and reputation (in fact, Barrett Browning herself knew she would be disinherited by her father if she married).

One might even infer that when the speaker says, "I will not have my thoughts instead of thee," she is saying that if she has to choose between being with the lover and her own intellectualism, she will choose the lover. This speaks to the power of her passion and what she is willing to risk to be with her lover: not only her reputation, but also the safety of her thoughts. In this way she is again committing herself to vulnerability, setting aside her own ego in the name of experiencing real love.

The speaker also implores the lover to "rustle" his "boughs" and "shake" his "trunk all bare." This image is again one of passion and vulnerability. The speaker wishes her lover to come boldly forward, to forcibly cast aside anything getting in the way of their union.

Victorian society prized dignity and restraint, yet the speaker is nearly carried away by her desire and passion. There is innuendo in the image of the greenery dropping "heavily down," as if all the trappings of polite society have been cast aside and the lovers are free to finally "bare" themselves to each other.

This bareness speaks to the honesty and freedom the speaker wishes to experience in love—honesty and freedom that, the poem implies, can only be reached by way of vulnerability, a willingness to be real with each other.

This sense of vulnerability and passion crescendos with the phrase "burst, shattered, everywhere!" There is a sense here of something having been cast aside in order for the lovers to embrace each other. As such, the lovers are characterized now by a sense of having rejected the oppressively polite society to which they belong, or the trappings of their reputations, or the illusions they might have had about themselves or one another. There are many possible interpretations for *what* they're giving up, but it's clear that the speaker feels they are breaking free of *something*.

Finally, the speaker is free to breathe "new air" in simply being with her lover. The "new air" might speak to just how restrictive the customs of Victorian England were, or to how oppressive the speaker's own thoughts had become during her lover's absence; either way, it illustrates how joyful she feels in having rid herself of what was standing in the way of her experiencing real love. The final line reveals just what the speaker has gained in giving herself over to vulnerability and passion, in breaking free of decorum and restraint: she is feeling and savoring the lover's nearness. There is freedom in the simplicity and sweetness of that.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,

The poem packs a lot of information into its first four words. First, the use of apostrophe—the speaker directly addressing someone who isn't there—immediately signals the speaker's *private* longing and desire. The choice to use the word "thee," an informal version of "you," lends an increased intimacy from the very beginning of the poem. It also suggests a lack of convention, since "thee" was already an old-fashioned term in Browning's time. Finally, the clear caesura after "thee"—in the form of an exclamation point followed by an em dash—provides the reader with a sense of the speaker's passion: her admission seems to tumble forth in a burst of emotion.

On the other side of that caesura, the speaker describes not her *lover*, of whom she thinks, but rather her own *thoughts* themselves. Her thoughts, she claims using a simile, "twine and bud" around her lover like vines wrapping around a tree.

Here the poet uses consonance (/d/, /b/, and /th/ sounds) and assonance (long /i/ and /ee/ sounds) to create euphony. In other words, the lines are very pleasurable, musical:

> I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud
> About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,

The euphony in these opening lines signals the pleasure that the speaker takes in thinking about her lover, and also imbues the thoughts themselves with a kind of lushness and vitality: the speaker is fantasizing, daydreaming, maybe even obsessing.

The poem's meter also plays a part in the musicality of these opening lines. The first line is in perfect iambic pentameter (meaning there are five feet, each foot comprised of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable):

> I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud

This which might lead the reader to believe they are in for a conventional sonnet. However, the second line already disrupts this assumption, adding stressed beats where they don't belong:

> About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,

Caesura, too, lends to the second line an almost physical sense of the vines coiling around the tree; without the presence of the commas, the line would still make sense but have a much breezier, open feel to it. The pauses created by the commas almost create a sense of restrictiveness, a foreshadowing that perhaps the vines—which are representative of the speaker's thoughts—are not entirely a good thing, despite the pleasure the speaker takes in them.

LINES 3-4

> *Put out broad leaves, and soon there 's nought to see*
> *Except the straggling green which hides the wood.*

It becomes apparent that there is, in fact, a downside to the speaker's lush thoughts regarding her beloved: these thoughts *obscure* the beloved, make this person harder to see. The speaker continues to describe the vines and the tree, which become an extended metaphor for the relationship between the speaker's thoughts and her actual lover. She says that the vines grow "broad leaves" that hide the tree until there's "nought," or nothing, "to see."

The poem continues to use assonance ("broad"/"naught" and "leaves"/"see") and consonance in lines 3-4, but the effect is somewhat let musical than in the opening lines. This might simply be because the loud /g/ sounds of "straggling green" add a slowness and clunkiness to the fourth line, as if the speaker realizes that the unpleasantness of her beloved disappearing from view. The quiet sibilance (in "soon," "see," "Except," and "straggling") lends a whispery quality to the lines, further evoking this sense of disappearance.

Meter is also continuing to do work here. For the most part, these lines are again in iambic pentameter, though the third line gets tricky: "Put out broad leaves" *can* be forced into iambic rhythm ("Put out broad leaves"), but perhaps more naturally is read with a spondee on that second foot ("broad leaves"), or even a trochee in the first ("Put out"). This ambiguity could imply that the forcefulness of the speaker's thoughts as well as her struggles against restrictiveness of the Victorian society to which both lovers belong—which does restrain the beloved in the return to conventional meter in the line's second half:

> and soon there's nought to see

LINES 5-7

> *Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood*
> *I will not have my thoughts instead of thee*
> *Who art dearer, better!*

Sonnets classically contain a "turn," known as a volta, in which the speaker refutes or sheds new light on whatever has come up until that point. In the English (or Elizabethan) sonnet, the volta typically occurs in the final two lines of the poem; in the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet, which is broken into an octave (eight-line stanza) and a sestet (six-line stanza), the volta occurs between those stanzas. Though "I Think of Thee" is, by definition, an Italian sonnet, Browning opts for something a little less expected. The "turn" comes quite early, in lines 5-7 ("Yet, O my palm-tree [...] dearer, better!"), when the speaker exclaims that her lover is "dearer" to her than her own thoughts. The strong caesura here, in the form of an exclamation mark, adds force to the speaker's declaration.

At this point in the poem, Browning also deepens the metaphor of the tree into a symbol: by specifying a palm-tree, the poem draws into it undertones of religious devotion and sacrifice. Browning was very influenced by Christian theology, and the palm-tree is a clear symbol in Christianity of the triumph of spirit over the desires of the flesh. (One might argue Browning toys with this symbol, inverting it, as the speaker is longing for her lover's *physical* presence to overcome her intellectualizing).

Additionally, the palm-tree is a more telling image than that of a generic, unspecified tree: the reader will undoubtedly picture its tall, bare trunk and the spikes of its leaves growing only from the top of the tree. This clear and forceful image contrasts with the earlier image of an unnamed tree laden with vines, buried beneath the "straggling green" of "broad leaves." The speaker is expressing her desire for her lover *himself* rather than her *fantasies* that cloud her ability to see him clearly.

The renewed use of apostrophe also indicates that the speaker is choosing not to get lost in her thoughts, but is rather focusing on the lover himself. The use of "O" when she addresses the

beloved is the most obvious indication of apostrophe, a reminder that her lover is *not* physically present with her. It has the effect of seeming to summon the lover, of calling him forth into clear view. The speaker longs for her lover to appear and in so doing push aside her thoughts, which regardless of whether they are anxious or pleasurable in nature, cannot compare to the lover himself.

LINES 7-9

Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,

After the "turn," or the volta, the poem continues to build on the metaphor of the tree: the speaker beseeches her lover to "renew [his] presence; as a strong tree should." Here the poem again employs consonance (the repetition of /r/, /b/, and /st/ sounds in particular gives the lines a feeling of action and forcefulness) and alliteration:

[...] Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,

Notably, opposed to earlier in the poem, rather than the easy and pleasant presence of euphony in these lines, there is more of a sense of disruption: many of the syllables are stressed and there is no soothing repetition of vowel sounds (assonance) or softer consonance. This echoes the speaker's demand for action and strength on the part of her lover.

All the movement in these lines—the renewing and rustling and baring—point to the speaker's desire to be shaken up, to be pulled vigorously into the present moment. This emphasizes the bold and impassioned state of the speaker, who rejects the restraint and polite veneer of Victorian society. There is a sense of rebelliousness, of a desire for freedom. The speaker wishes the lover to "set [his] trunk all bare"—an image which suggests the importance of vulnerability and honesty. On a more literal level, the speaker is asking the lover to return: she is tired of absence, she is tired of waiting, she wants to be united with the one she loves.

LINES 10-11

And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!

The speaker, still beseeching the lover to return and make himself seen, continues the metaphor of the tree shaking itself loose of the vines which cling to it. This metaphor reaches a kind of climax when the speaker implores the beloved to strip himself of all the things which stand in the way of their union—be they the stifling expectations of Victorian society or her own fantasies which cloud her ability to see him clearly.

The speaker visualizes this metaphorical stripping away of societal restraints and individual ego as the tree shaking itself loose of the vines which she once thought beautiful, but now sees as oppressive. The speaker's desire crescendos; the vines "drop heavily down" and "burst, shattered, everywhere!"

The sonic quality of these lines mirror the thematic crescendo: line 10, while longer than 10 syllables, still has the cadence created with the use of iambs, for the most part:

And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee

Line 11, however, is filled to the brim with stressed syllables, and as such, is insistent, forceful, persuasive:

Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!

The tension of the poem shatters alongside the vines and everything they represent: the speaker's fantasies, illusions, ego, the repressive rules and customs of the society that dictates she be cool, restrained, passionless, logical, and practical above all else. Everything that might have stood between her and her lover has been cast aside.

LINES 12-13

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,

Following the climax of the poem, lines 12-13 introduce a kind of "summing-up" of the poem thus far. The metaphor of the tree and the vines, having reached its conclusion, is no longer needed: the speaker turns instead to more literal language, the "deep joy" of seeing and hearing her beloved.

Compared to the intensity of the former lines, lines 12-13 are characterized by simplicity, which is itself a form of vulnerability. She doesn't need to describe her thoughts because her thoughts are not the point. The point is her feeling of finally being able to breathe; in the presence of her lover, in deep vulnerability and honesty, she finds freedom, a "new air." The gentle assonance of the long /ee/ sound, consonance of voiced /th/ sounds, and general presence of /z/ and /j/ sounds all add to the soothing, vulnerable effect:

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,

Line 12 begins with a preposition ("Because"), which means everything in the following clause ("in this deep joy [...] a new air") is dependent on what comes after the comma at the end of line 13. This creates the feeling that the speaker is building up to a final summation or realization which will encapsulate the lesson learned through all this wrestling with her own thoughts.

In a way, the final three lines might even be read as a second volta—one which summarizes the poem rather than refuting

what has come before. The lack of figurative language and sonic devices at play in these lines contributes to a sense of summation: almost as if the lesson of the poem was acted out metaphorically and is now being repeated in layman's terms.

LINE 14

I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

The closing line of the poem is the opposite of the opening line; the speaker has gone from confessing to the beloved "I think of thee!" to the realization: "I do not think of thee—I am too near thee." These opposing sentiments bookend the poem, illustrating a complete change in the speaker's state of mind. She no longer wishes to fantasize about the lover, or bury him beneath obsessive thoughts and worries. Instead, she is simply able to enjoy his presence.

The final line of the poem contains no figurative language, and is bare in its admission—reflecting the vulnerability and honesty the speaker has longed for in the lover. There is freedom in this simplicity; there is no longer any tension or urgency. The speaker, and the poem by extension, has reached a place of peace. She is fully in the moment, alive and in love and not distancing herself with intellectualism or worries about how their love will be perceived. She is not experiencing her thoughts of the lover but the lover himself.

Through the use of parallelism (the kind of mirrored grammatical structure between the clauses on either side of the em dash), the poem also boils its argument down to its most essential terms: one cannot be thinking of something and present with it at the same time. By placing these two statements ("I do not think of thee" and "I am too near thee") on opposite sides of the em dash, Browning encourages the reader to consider *thinking* and *being* as opposing forces: can one *think* about being in love and *be* in love at the same time? The poem argues no: one must commit oneself to the vulnerability of actually being present and fully visible in love in order to experience the freedom that such love provides.

SYMBOLS

THE PALM-TREE

The palm-tree in this poem reflects the speaker's desire to see her lover clearly, and for anything that might stand in the way of her seeing him clearly to be cast aside. The speaker uses the metaphor of a tree covered in vines to describe the way her thoughts obscure her absent lover. In addressing the lover as a palm-tree, she turns the metaphor on its head: the lover is not just any tree, but a tree which is notable for its lack of branches, its clearly visible trunk. The tree here thus represents, in part, the naked truth of the lover himself.

The palm-tree is also associated with the Christian religious tradition. It is linked with Palm Sunday, when Jesus knowingly entered Jerusalem on the eve of what is known in Christianity as his "Passion"—the last week of his life which involved his torture, death by crucifixion, and resurrection. When he arrived in Jerusalem he was met with people waving palm branches, and as such, the palm has come to represent a kind of triumph of the spirit over the flesh, as Jesus knew that he was going to sacrifice his life for the eternal salvation of humankind.

The appearance of the palm-tree in this poem suggests a nearly devotional love on the part of the speaker, who is similarly willing to make great sacrifices on account of being united with her lover. Like Jesus, she feels that whatever sacrifices she must make (her old life, her reputation, the surrendering of ego) is worth the boundless joy she will experience in the arms of her lover.

The religious symbolism also lends the poem some added ambiguity. Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning was undoubtedly inspired by her own courtship with Robert Browning while writing this poem (as well as other intimate sonnets from this time period), she was also a congregationalist Christian and was deeply influenced by both Christian and Hebrew theology, as well as religious literature such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno*. She believed the most important art has a religious aspect to it, and most of her poems can and should be read with that in mind. The beloved in this poem could easily be interpreted as a religious savior.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "palm-tree"

VINES AND GREENERY

The speaker describes her thoughts concerning her beloved as "straggling green" and "wild vines" that ultimately distance her from the beloved. As such, this "greenery" comes to be a symbol of just about anything that stands in the way of her seeing the lover clearly, and/or anything that prevents the lovers from being vulnerable, honest, and present with each other.

Greenery in this poem doesn't evoke the beauty of nature so much as the clingy, suffocating quality of vines wrapping themselves around something until it cannot be seen or touched. The vines are described as "straggling" (i.e., untidy and hiding the trunk of the tree) and they "insphere" (or wrap around) the beloved. It is only through the act of letting this greenery—these distractions or obstacles—fall away ("heavily," almost like chains) that the speaker is free to "breathe [...] a new air." In this way the vines also symbolize the opposite of this freedom: restraint.

In line eleven, the speaker imagines the greenery "bursting"

and "shattering." Note that literal vines cannot burst or shatter, another indication that the vines are symbolic of something more abstract, such as illusions about the other person or societal expectations. In the absence of greenery then comes a "deep joy," again pointing to the oppressive nature of the vines, from which the speaker longs to free the beloved and, by extension, herself.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my thoughts do twine and bud"
- **Line 2:** "wild vines"
- **Line 4:** "the straggling green which hides the wood"
- **Lines 10-11:** "let these bands of greenery which insphere thee / Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

"I Think of Thee" is addressed to an absent lover. The speaker beings by proclaiming that she thinks of an unnamed "thee" and then goes on to describe the intensity of her thoughts. However, the use of apostrophe is most apparent in lines 5-6, when the speaker sets aside her description of her own thoughts to proclaim:

> Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
> I will not have my thoughts instead of thee

In poetry, "O" is used to directly address someone or something; it is clear that the someone in this case is *absent* because the speaker urges him to "renew [his] presence."

The use of apostrophe works in harmony with Browning's choice to use the intimate "thee," a word that was out of fashion even by the time she was writing. "Thee" had once been used in spoken English, but was gradually replaced by the more informal "you"; in written English, it continued to be used in literature and ecclesiastical writings until finally falling into disuse around the time Browning was born.

Browning, being a student of literature as well as Christian and Hebrew religious texts, would have been familiar with the word, and undoubtedly chose it not only for its unconventionality at the time she was writing, but for the way it lent an increased sense of reverence and devotion to the poem. She is addressing not only an absent lover but an absent lover whom she has imbued with such reverence and devotion; the use of apostrophe is thus not only filled with longing and desire, but also a kind of spiritual yearning—as if being in the presence of her lover is not only pleasurable, but transformative.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud / About thee"
- **Line 5:** "O my palm-tree"
- **Line 6:** "I will not have my thoughts instead of thee"
- **Line 8:** "Renew thy presence"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare, / And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears in the poem's first two lines thanks to the repetition of /th/ sounds (both voiced and unvoiced) created by the words "think/thoughts" and "thee." The poem would have had a very different feel to it had Browning chosen the more conventional "you." The effect of so many /th/ sounds throughout the poem is a kind of softness and musicality befitting the speaker's desire for vulnerability.

There are other instances of alliteration as well. In the first three lines, aside from the presence of /th/ sounds, there is also the alliteration of "twine" and "tree" as well as of "soon," "see," and "straggling." This is part of the overall musicality of the poem, which also manifests in moments of consonance and assonance, as well as rhyme, meter, etc.

Starting with line 7, the poem employs alliteration with the letter /r/, which is made even more notable by the fact that the letter is capitalized three lines in a row ("Rather," "Renew," "Rustle"). The repetition of the /r/ sound has a very different effect from the musicality that came before: it is a harsher sound, coming from further back in the mouth. Coupled with the consonance of /r/ sounds that are happening alongside this alliteration (in words like " bare"), there is a roughness to these lines that wasn't present before. This feels apt, as the speaker is asking for action and boldness from her lover. It creates a sense of urgency and passion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "think," "thee," "thoughts," "twine"
- **Line 2:** "thee," "tree"
- **Line 3:** "soon," "see"
- **Line 4:** "straggling"
- **Line 7:** "Rather"
- **Line 8:** "Renew"
- **Line 9:** "Rustle," "boughs," "bare"
- **Line 10:** "bands"
- **Line 11:** "Drop," "down"

IMAGERY

The speaker uses imagery when describing her thoughts as well as her lover. These descriptions ultimately become metaphors for the relationship *between* her thoughts and her lover, or

between *thinking* about love versus being with a beloved.

The movement from literal language to figurative language and imagery creates a kind of back-and-forth motion in the poem; the speaker says something literal (i.e., "I think of thee!") and then follows it up with imagery ("my thoughts do twine and bud / About thee, as wild vines, about a tree," etc.). The imagery provides an expansiveness that isn't present in the literal phrases, and also illustrates how the speaker's thoughts overwhelm the object of her affection: by the end of the fourth line ("Except...the wood") the reader sees nothing *but* an abundance of vines—the tree itself has vanished!

Later in the poem, however, rather than hiding or obscuring the beloved, imagery is used to *free* him. The speaker compares the lover to a "strong tree" and then elaborates on what a strong tree would do: it would "[r]ustle [its] boughs and set [its] trunk all bare." Of course an *actual* tree has no such agency; the tree continues to be a metaphorical device, no matter how clearly the reader can visualize it. It is this visualizing, though, that allows the reader to understand the speaker's point; when the reader pictures "bands of greenery" falling and shattering all around the tree, they are likely to have a visceral reaction to the sense of freedom that follows.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 5
- Line 8
- Lines 9-11

SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile to build a bridge between the literal and the metaphorical. This simile occurs almost immediately. After having admitted to her absent lover that she thinks of him, the speaker compares her thoughts to wild vines, saying:

> [...] my thoughts do twine and bud
> About thee, as wild vines, about a tree

The presence of the word "as" is the reader's first clue that there is a simile here; the speaker is saying her thoughts are *like* wild vines. The imagery of the vines is meant to describe the nature of her thoughts. When she says that her thoughts "twine and bud," she is speaking to the lushness and vitality of her thoughts. Additionally, implicit in this simile is the understanding that the lover is being compared to a tree, meaning that there are actually two similes folded into one here. The speaker isn't just trying to visualize her thoughts; she is trying to visualize the effect her thoughts have on her relationship to the beloved.

When the tree and vine reappear in lines 8-11 ("Renew thy presence [...] shattered, everywhere!"), the simile expands into metaphor. This is no longer a simple comparison between two things; laced throughout the poem, the imagery of the vines and tree has taken on deeper significance.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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."

METAPHOR

Building on the simile used at the beginning of the poem, the speaker elaborates on the relationship between the tree and the vines in order to express her desire for the lover to come forth and sweep aside her thoughts/worries/anything standing in the way of them being together.

Despite the presence of the word "as" in line 8 ("Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should"), the comparison between the beloved and the tree is no longer just a simile. The speaker refers to the beloved as her "palm-tree" in line 5, making it clear by line 9 that when she tells him to "Rustle [his] boughs and set [his] trunk all bare," the speaker is imagining the beloved himself as a tree.

The reader needs to be invested in the imagery of the tree all wrapped up in vines in order to connect to what the speaker is trying to convey. It is only when the tree wrestles free of the vines and the vines "burst, shattered, everywhere" that the metaphor has served its purpose and the speaker is able to return to plain, literal language. The metaphor allows something that is difficult to talk about in ordinary language—the way attachment to one's thoughts/perceptions/beliefs can get in the way of truly seeing or being present with another person—play out in a way that the reader will understand *viscerally* rather than just *intellectually*. The reader can *think* about the speaker's predicament without the metaphor; but with the metaphor of the tree struggling free of the vines, the reader can *feel* the "deep joy" of the speaker when she and the beloved are reunited.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "O my palm-tree"
- **Lines 8-11:** "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!"

ASSONANCE

Throughout the poem, assonance helps to create a sense of rhythm and music. In the beginning of the poem, the repetition of long /i/ sounds with the words "twine," "wild," and "vines"

break up the otherwise heavy presence of long /ee/ sounds found throughout much of the poem, such as in the words "thee," "tree", "leaves," "see,"and "green." These sonic repetitions help to create the sense of lush, dense foliage the speaker is describing, foliage which completely overwhelms the tree, hiding it from view.

Throughout the rest of the poem, assonance is largely present as an effect of the rhyme scheme, which goes: ABBAABBACBCBCB (more on this in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide). That "B" rhyme is a long /ee/ sound, and because this rhyme is repeated so much throughout the poem, there is a strong emphasis on /ee/ sounds throughout: "tree," "see," "thee," "deep," "breathe," etc.

A particularly strong moment of assonance using this sound appears toward the end of the poem:

> Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
> And breathe within thy shadow a new air,

The gentle sense of melody created by the assonance here reflects the speaker's growing calm and vulnerability now that her beloved is nearby.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my," "twine"
- **Line 2:** "thee," "wild vines," "tree"
- **Line 3:** "leaves," "see"
- **Line 4:** "green"
- **Line 5:** "tree," "be"
- **Line 10:** "these," "greenery," "thee"
- **Line 12:** "deep," "see," "hear thee"
- **Line 13:** "breathe"

CAESURA

This poem is full of caesura. Browning uses punctuation to pace and enliven the poem, never allowing its rhythm to become too predictable. In lines such as the first one, which adheres to perfect iambic pentameter, the presence of caesura (created by the use of an exclamation point and em dash) interrupts the flow of the line, causing emphasis to fall heavily on the beloved (that "thee"):

> I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud

In the second line, the caesura created by the appearance of commas helps to create a kind of winding sensation that helps evoke the sense of vines coiling around a tree.

When a line *doesn't* have any caesuras, such as line 4 ("Except [...] the wood") or lines 9-10 ("Rustle [...] insphere thee"), it makes the next caesura all the more noticeable and therefore effective. So in line 5, when the speaker invokes the lover by saying "Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood," the comma on either side of the apostrophe ("O my palm-tree") focuses the reader's attention on this direct address, a reminder of what is important to the speaker in this poem: the beloved.

Likewise, when caesuras surround a line where no caesura is present, such as in line 6 ("I will not have my thoughts instead of thee"), this can help create the feeling that the line without caesura is particularly firm and focused. Lines like this one have a directness to them that may be absent elsewhere.

In line 11 ("Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!"), the use of caesura mimics the action being described. The greenery/things standing in between the speaker and the beloved fall down and break into pieces: the pieces are almost visually represented by individual words sectioned off by punctuation. This allows the reader to experience the shattering of the speaker's thoughts/ego/illusions/concerns/etc. in a more visceral way than if the action were simply described but not embodied in the movement of the poem. (A great way to think about caesura and the punctuation which creates it is as a reminder of when and where to breathe when reading the poem aloud—a reminder that the poem is meant to be *felt* and not just understood, much like love.)

Finally, the caesura created by the use of an em dash in the last line of the poem does a great deal of work. Not only does it separate the two statements ("I do not think of thee" and "I am too near thee"), showing that thinking and being in this case are at odds, but it also mirrors the use of the em dash in the first line of the poem, showing how far the speaker has come over the course of the poem—from thinking about the lover to simply being in his presence, from fantasizing and obsessing to seeing and hearing and breathing.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thee!—my"
- **Line 2:** "thee, as," "vines, about"
- **Line 3:** "leaves, and"
- **Line 5:** "Yet, O," "tree, be"
- **Line 7:** "dearer, better! Rather, instantly"
- **Line 8:** "presence; as"
- **Line 11:** "down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!"
- **Line 12:** "Because, in"
- **Line 14:** "thee—I"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "I Think of Thee" are enjambed, carrying the reader continuously forward through the poem. For example, the first three lines of the poem are enjambed, with everything from "My thoughts do twine and bud" to "hides the wood" spoken in one breath. This sets up an expectation of forward momentum; the speaker, it seems, is being carried away by her

thoughts.

As the poem progresses, however, and the speaker becomes clearer about her desire for her lover over even her own thoughts, there tends to be more of a push and pull between enjambed lines and end-stopped lines. This seems suggestive of how a relationship requires balance between two people, rather than one person overwhelming the other with their thoughts, desires, expectations, etc.

It is also reflective of the speaker's journey from fantasizing or obsessing about her lover to simply breathing easy in his presence. The heavy use of enjambment in the early lines of the poem discourages catching one's breath, whereas later in the poem there is a greater sense of ease, of the speaker taking her time. Breathing, after all, is made up of equal parts inhaling and exhaling.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "bud / About"
- **Lines 2-3:** "tree, / Put"
- **Lines 3-4:** "see / Except"
- **Lines 5-6:** "understood / I "
- **Lines 6-7:** "thee / Who"
- **Lines 7-8:** "instantly / Renew"
- **Lines 8-9:** "should, / Rustle"
- **Lines 10-11:** "thee / Drop"
- **Lines 12-13:** "thee / And"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines are not as prominent in this poem as enjambed lines are, but when they do show up, they are impactful. They tend to add emphasis to a line, encouraging the reader to take a beat to stop and metabolize what has come before.

The first end-stopped line is line 4:

> Except the straggling green which hides the wood.

This line completes the thought that the speaker began in line 1, describing her thoughts regarding her lover. It isn't until the completion of the thought here that it becomes apparent that the speaker's thoughts are not entirely *beneficial* in nature; it is only in this fourth line that the reader becomes aware of the *effect* of the speaker's fantasizing. By end-stopping line 4, Browning gives the reader a chance to catch up with the speaker, to realize what she has realized: that all her fantasizing and obsessing has hidden the beloved from view.

Later, in line 9, Browning uses an end-stopped line to emphasize the speaker's tone as she implores her lover to take action. There is a firmness and confidence to this imperative due to the fact that the whole clause is delivered at once: the reader knows exactly what the speaker is calling for in this line:

> Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,

Likewise, in line 11, the shattering of the metaphorical vines is followed by an exclamation point, which creates a very dramatic end-stop; the reader is aware that the poem has reached a kind of climax. The things that were keeping the lovers apart no longer are.

Finally, the last line is end-stopped as the speaker reaches a conclusion. There is a sense of finality and resolution as the speaker imparts that she no longer thinks of the lover because of her proximity to him—she is free to simply love him.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "wood."
- **Line 9:** "bare,"
- **Line 11:** " everywhere!"
- **Line 13:** "air,"
- **Line 14:** "thee."

REPETITION

The most obvious repetition in the poem is simply the repetition of the words "thee" and "thy." That these words appear so many times makes sense, given that the poem is directly addressed to the speaker's lover (through apostrophe); by continually referencing "thee" and "thy," the lover feels present throughout the entire poem.

Additionally, the words "think" and "thought" both repeat in the poem. In line 1, this is specifically an example of polyptoton:

> I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud

The repeated references to thinking and thoughts reflects the speaker's obsessiveness; she can't stop thinking about her beloved, and words related to "thought" wind themselves throughout the poem just as the speaker's thoughts metaphorically wind themselves around her beloved.

Finally, one of the most striking moments of repetition comes in the last line of the poem, with the anaphora of "I" and the epistrophe of "thee":

> I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

This moment plays an important part in the reader's understanding of what the poem conveys. This repetition helps create the sense of two opposite things being weighed against each other: thinking of the lover versus being with the lover.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "think," "thee," "thoughts"
- **Line 2:** "thee"

- **Line 6:** "thoughts," "thee"
- **Line 8:** "thy"
- **Line 9:** "thy," "thy"
- **Line 10:** "thee"
- **Line 12:** "thee"
- **Line 13:** "thy"
- **Line 14:** "I," "think," "thee," "I," "thee"

EUPHONY

While one might argue that there are elements of euphony (that is, a combination of words that sound pleasant together and are easy to pronounce) throughout the poem as a whole (which makes sense, seeing as it's a love poem!), it is most noticeable in the first three lines. The alliteration of /th/ sounds adds a kind of hushed musicality to these early lines. There are also more subtle repetitions here too, such as the consonance created by the /n/, /b/, /d/, /d/, and /t/ sounds, and the assonance created by the long /ee/ and /i/ sounds.

> 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

Meter, too, plays a part in the presence of euphony—especially in the first line, which adheres to perfect iambic pentameter:

> I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud

Line 4 is then notable because it is the first line in the poem where euphony is *absent*. Although there is still alliteration and consonance here, the repetition focuses on less pleasant sounds, particularly the hard, back-of-throat /g/ sounds that pile up in "straggling green"—slowing the line down and making the reader use the back of their mouth when reading it aloud. This supports the tonal shift in the poem as the speaker realizes that her thoughts, which she has likened to vines, are not entirely pleasant things, since they have obstructed her view of the beloved.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "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"

ASYNDETON

In this poem, Browning uses asyndeton to add to a sense of momentum and drama. In line 7, for example, the speaker proclaims that her lover is "dearer, better!" than her own thoughts. The comma between "dearer" and "better" acts differently than a coordinating conjunction ("and") would; the speaker *could* essentially be saying that the lover is dearer *and* better, but there is also a sense that "dearer" wasn't quite what she was trying to say, that after she said it, she followed it up with an even more appropriate word—"better."

Later, in line 11, the speaker describes the vines (a metaphor for her thoughts) falling from around her lover; they "burst, shattered, everywhere!" The commas between these words echo the description of the vines having broken into pieces, with each word sectioned off from the next. The reader might be tempted to infer a chronological relationship between the words—first the vines burst, then they shattered, then the pieces fell everywhere. But the three words might only be different ways of saying the same thing: the vines have burst, the vines have shattered, the vines are in pieces. What's most notable is the effect this asyndeton has on the breath when reading the poem aloud; it creates more of a sense of drama, of the poem having reached some sort of climax.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "dearer, better"
- **Line 11:** "burst, shattered, everywhere"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is present throughout the entirety of the poem, and overlaps with other sonic devices (such as alliteration, assonance, and sibilance) to create moments of intense musicality and even euphony (when the poem is at its most musical and pleasant to the ear). For example, lines 1-3, as noted in this guide's discussion of euphony, rely on the consonance of /th/ and /n/ sounds for a sense of gentleness.

At the end of the poem, in line 13, consonance on the breathy /w/ and the gentle /th/ sounds evokes the speaker's sense of calm and peace now that her lover is nearby:

> And breathe within thy shadow a new air,

By contrast, the repetition of /g/ sounds in the fourth line ("straggling green") is a great example of how consonance can be used to slow down a line and make it *less* pleasant to the ear.

Consonance (as well as assonance) also overlaps with the use of rhyme throughout the poem. In fact, though there is a rhyme scheme of ABBAABBACBCBCB, the first "A" rhyme ("bud" and "wood") isn't a true rhyme at all but rather a slant rhyme created through consonance of the /d/ sound. This softens the rhyme scheme a bit, making it feel less rigid and strict, more windy and vine-like.

Often there are several different consonant sounds happening at once too. For instance, in lines 7-11, there is consonance (in the form of alliteration) happening from the repetition of /b/ sounds throughout all five lines, as well as the /d/ sounds in "Drop" and "down" in line 11. Furthermore, there are /r/ sounds occurring all over the place, as in "Rather" and "strong

tree" (which also has come consonance of the /t/ sound!) There is also the continued consonance of /th/ sounds (both voiced and unvoiced, i.e., "thee" vs. "think").

This abundance of consonance echoes the action of the poem. In these lines, the speaker is asking for a show of strength and presence from her lover. The reader can almost *hear* the tree "rustling" and the vines "bursting."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "think," "thee," "thoughts," " do twine and bud"
- **Line 2:** "About thee," "wild vines, about," "tree"
- **Line 3:** "Put out broad," "and soon there 's nought to see"
- **Line 4:** "Except," "straggling green," " which hides," "wood"
- **Line 5:** "tree," "understood"
- **Line 6:** "thoughts instead," "thee"
- **Line 7:** "art dearer, better," "Rather," ", instantly"
- **Line 8:** "Renew," "strong tree"
- **Line 9:** "Rustle," "boughs," "set," "trunk," "bare"
- **Line 10:** "bands"
- **Line 11:** "Drop," "down," "burst," ", shattered"
- **Line 12:** "Because"
- **Line 13:** "breathe," " within," " thy ," "shadow," "new"
- **Line 14:** "think," "thee," "thee"

VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 1, Line 2, Line 6, Line 10, Line 12, Line 14) - An old-fashioned form of "you."

twine (Line 1) - To wind or spiral around something.

Bud (Line 1) - To sprout new flowers or leaves.

Nought (Line 3) - Nothing.

Straggling (Line 4) - To grow, spread, or be laid out in an irregular, untidy way.

Palm-tree (Line 5) - A tropical tree which has a markedly straight trunk which is visible due to its lack of branches; all its leaves grow at the top of the trunk, leaving the rest bare.

Art (Line 7) - Archaic word for "are."

Thy (Line 8, Line 9, Line 13) - An old-fashioned word for "your"; the possessive case of "thou."

Boughs (Line 9) - Tree branches, particularly the larger, main branches connected to the trunk.

Insphere (Line 10) - To enclose or contain in a sphere; encircle.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I Think of Thee" is an Italian sonnet. This means it has 14 lines made up of an octave (an 8-line stanza) and a sestet (a 6-line stanza). The octave here can further be broken into two quatrains (each with a rhyme scheme of ABBA), and the sestet can be broken into two tercets (with the rhyme scheme CBC BCB).

Browning's sonnet is rather unconventional, however, —particularly in the placement of the volta, or "turn." Traditionally, the octave introduces and muses on some sort of problem or situation that the speaker feels invested in, while the sestet is then used to offer a solution to or comment on what was introduced in the octave. Together, then, the octave and the sestet usually form a kind of argument.

While it's true that Browning's sonnet makes an argument (namely that the reality of love surpasses the fantasy of it, and that real love requires vulnerability and passion, and as offers freedom to those who experience it), the arrival of the "turn" comes quite early in the poem: the speaker presents the problem within the first quatrain, and the shift in tone occurs in lines 5-6, when the speaker exclaims, "Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood / I will not have my thoughts instead of thee."

The next five lines then expand on this declaration, while the final three lines of the poem are a kind of summation of the speaker's point: that in being present with the beloved, she finds freedom. Rather than having *one* tonal shift in the poem, there are really two.

METER

Broadly speaking, "I Think of Thee" uses iambic pentameter—as is traditionally the case for sonnets. This means each line has five iambs, poetic feet comprised of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (for a total of 10 syllables per line—five da-DUMs). Take line 1:

I think | of thee!—| my thoughts | do twine | and bud

Browning is not strict in her use of meter, however, and few lines of the poem adhere to *perfect* iambic pentameter. Instead, Browning varies the meter in order to keep things interesting, both rhythmically and in terms of not letting the reader get too comfortable.

Sometimes this variation means adding an extra syllable to a line, and other times it means using different kinds of feet other than iambs (and sometimes a combination of extra syllables *and* different kinds of feet!).

For example, in lines 8, 9, and 11, Browning uses a combination of different kinds of feet to create a sense of the speaker's boldness as she passionately swipes away convention in favor of honesty and vulnerability. These lines can be scanned a few different ways, but it's clear that this is not perfect iambic pentameter:

Renew | thy pres- | ence; as | a strong | tree should,
Rustle | thy boughs | and set | thy trunk | all bare,
[...]
Drop hea- | vily | down,—burst, | shattered, |
everywhere!

Line 8 closes with a spondee (stressed-stressed), a strong, insistent foot that appropriately creates an emphatic cluster of stresses as the speaker describes a "strong tree." Line 9 then opens with a trochee (stressed-unstressed), again adding a sense of emphasis as she demands that her beloved reveal himself. Similarly, line 11 is overwhelmingly comprised of stressed syllables; the result is a forceful line in which the sound of the poem crescendos alongside the emotional climax. The speaker, it seems, is heating up—becoming more passionate as she brushes aside anything that stands in the way of her and her lover being reunited.

Notably, the poem does not return to perfect iambic pentameter after the climax in line 11. The last three lines of the poem may not be as bold or forceful as the ones prior, but there is still variation in the meter. In other words, something has shifted for the speaker. Not only is the speaker's frame of mind changed from the first line of the poem; so too has the meter—having gone from perfect iambic pentameter in the beginning to imperfect in the last line, almost suggesting that imperfect reality wins over perfect fantasy, or expectations of perfection, every time.

RHYME SCHEME

"I Think of Thee" roughly follows a traditional rhyme scheme for an Italian sonnet:

ABBAABBACBCBCB

While the rhyme scheme for the octave (the first eight lines of the poem) in an Italian sonnet is always the same (following that ABBAABBA pattern), the sestet (the last six lines) is more flexible; most commonly it will use CDECDE or CDCDCD. In this case, Browning's choice to use CBCBCB, and therefore carrying the "B" rhyme throughout the poem, allows for the repetition of the word "thee"—emphasizing the speaker's devotion to her lover, and increasing the lover's presence in the poem.

Additionally, because the "B" rhyme is present throughout the entirety of the poem, there is a somewhat softer division between the octave and the sestet. This makes sense, given that the volta, or "turn," in this poem comes quite early, and therefore the traditional division between octave and sestet is not as necessary to the movement of the poem (see "Form" for more on this).

The first "A" rhyme—"bud" and "wood"—is not a perfect rhyme, but instead is a slant rhyme and the result of consonance. The /d/ sounds at the end of each word echo each other enough to be felt as part of the overall rhyme scheme. The effect of this imperfect rhyme is that it softens the overall effect of the rhyme scheme, again allowing a kind of "imperfection" into the poem that mirrors the imperfect use of iambic pentameter (see "Meter" for more on this).

This imperfection is a reminder of the speaker's search for vulnerability and honesty in love, rather than the illusion or fantasy she has built in her mind. It also speaks to the rigidity of convention and how one must make room for variation, difference, and other markers of reality if one is going to experience real love.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "I Think of Thee" is someone who desires a deep, vulnerable, passionate love—a love that involves both parties "baring" their true selves. Although the poem need not be read as strictly autobiographical, there is undoubtedly an overlap between the speaker of the poem and the poet (which is why this guide uses female pronouns for the speaker and male pronouns for the speaker's beloved; it's entirely possibly to read differently!).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote this sonnet, along with many other love poems, following her courtship and marriage to Robert Browning, of whom her strict, controlling father disapproved. Barrett Browning ultimately had to run away from home and get married in secret; she knew she would be disinherited for this act, and was—in fact, she never spoke to her father again.

Barrett Browning's biography certainly lends a richness to the poem. It speaks to the oppressiveness of her upbringing, and in fact much of her adult life was spent under her father's thumb, as she didn't elope with Robert Browning until she was in her forties. Consequently, the poem is invested in love as a form of freedom—the speaker finds herself able to breathe "a new air" in her lover's presence. Furthermore, she prizes her lover's presence even above her own thoughts. This is particularly telling when considering Barrett Browning's reputation as a poet and an intellectual, and the risk she was taking in marrying someone who was considered "beneath" her by her wealthy family.

Of course this poem has much to offer beyond its author's biography; there are many ways to interpret *what* exactly the speaker is willing to sacrifice on account of love—be it fantasy, or obsessive, burdensome thoughts, or her intellectualism, or the rigid expectations of Victorian society—and it has not lost its resonance with contemporary audiences. The speaker of this poem easily stands in for anyone willing to take a risk in making themselves vulnerable with someone else—and the passion such a risk requires.

SETTING

This poem contains no real *physical* setting. Everything that happens here happens internally, within the speaker's thoughts. Even when the speaker *does* mention the physical world—things like vines and trees—it only appears metaphorically: the vines are meant to signify her thoughts, the tree her lover.

All the action of the poem is metaphorical and therefore it exists only in the speaker's imagination. When she urges the lover to "let these bands of greenery which insphere thee / Drop heavily down," she is again speaking of the unseen things which stand between her and the lover: her own thoughts, the oppressiveness of the society to which they belong. When she describes the vines as "wild" or "straggling," she is describing her own state of mind.

The poem only enters the physical, external world—the world *outside* the speaker's mind—in the last three lines. Here, readers know that the speaker is breathing in proximity to her lover, close enough to see him and hear him. The speaker goes from existing completely in her head to being embodied; she is a breathing, seeing, hearing, feeling human being.

This, the poem suggests, is what love can do: free the speaker from her thoughts, bring her into the present moment. The setting of this poem thus goes from an imaginative realm to a physical one, but just as it becomes physical, the poem ends—as if to say that poetry is the province of the imagination, but being alive and in love, well, that happens somewhere else altogether.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning lived and wrote in England during Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), a historic and literary era that followed the Romantics (1770s-1830s). This poem is from her collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which was published in 1850 and would go on to become her most well-loved and enduring work. Poetry was widely read in Victorian England, and Barrett Browning received much praise and recognition for her work during her lifetime—and was in fact much more famous than her husband, fellow poet Robert Browning, at the time.

Romantic poetry was a response to industrialization and characterized by an intense, almost spiritual love of nature and spontaneous, individual expression. It was idealistic in nature, featuring heroes who might spur in its readers a sense of responsibility and action. The Victorian era, on the other hand, as a result of industrialization, saw an enormous increase in wealth discrepancy between classes and was therefore largely concerned with exposing and commenting on the horrors of poverty. Additionally, due to advances in scientific inquiry and the continued move away from religion, writers in the Victorian era were less inclined to see nature or people in the idealistic light of the Romantics. As such, literature during Barrett Browning's time shifted from the idealistic to the realistic. There was less emphasis on feelings and emotions; Victorian writers, like Victorian society, valued restraint.

In the midst of all this, Barrett Browning's work is notable for its contradictions: it contains deep currents of emotion while still being concerned with the material conditions and oppressiveness of Victorian society. She was clearly influenced by the Romantics and many of her choices are in direct opposition to what was in style at the time. She wrote some of the most famous love poems in the history of the English language during a time when marriage was being treated with more and more pragmatism. She was known for at times being critical of the women's movement, yet her work is also full of thoughtful criticisms of the domestic roles women were being forced to occupy. She was able to study and write prolifically from a young age because of her privilege as a wealthy white woman whose family profited off of slave labor, yet she very publicly decried the injustices of slavery and supported the American movement for abolition. She identified in herself a kind of fervent religiosity which courses through much of her poetry, yet her poetry was popular with a readership that was largely nonreligious.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Barrett Browning was born into an affluent English family in 1806; her family had made its fortune from Jamaican sugar plantations and slave labor. She began battling an undiagnosed illness at a young age, for which she took opiates (which are thought to have contributed to her frail health in later life). Barrett Browning was also a prolific reader and writer from a young age and was already well-known in literary circles by the time she met poet Robert Browning, who was an admirer of her work.

The poems in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were written following her courtship and elopement with Robert Browning, whom she married knowing it would mean being disinherited by her father. The poems from this collection chronicle the trajectory of their romance. Barrett Browning initially did not want to marry Browning due to their age difference and her poor health; she believed she would become a burden for him. Eventually she came to accept that his love for her was real and that she herself did not have to be defined by illness and the oppressive rules of her father's household. She accepted his offer, and they eloped, and by all accounts had a happy marriage until her death in 1861.

In addition to her own personal circumstances, Barrett Browning's poetry also gave voice to many of the pressing

concerns of Victorian society: she wrote in support of women's rights, child labor rights (her work impacted legislation in England, helping to reform child labor laws), and the abolition of slavery in the United States. The English empire was at the pinnacle of its reach, and while many writers were still invested in imperialism and colonialism, many others were critical of the material conditions of the working class and the enslaved, of the predicament of women who were expected to be morally pure yet had very little autonomy, and of the dangers and pitfalls of a more mechanized world. Browning fell into this latter camp, while also remaining true to her influences—running through her work always was a fierce spirituality, a devotion to art as a means of expressing the divine.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning — An article detailing the courtship and marriage of two of the most influential poets in English literature. (https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/elizabeth-barrett-and-robert-browning-elope)
- The Role of Women — An article about the traditional role of middle-class white women in Victorian society, and the ways in which Barrett Browning's poetry confronted and challenged these expectations. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/elizabeth-barrett-browning-and-the-woman-question)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to "I Think of Thee" read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oibgGS17XHA)
- The Victorian Era — An introduction to the important social and literary changes that were taking place during Browning's lifetime. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- Barrett Browning's Biography — Learn more about the poet's life and work courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-barrett-browning)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING POEMS

- How do I love thee? Let me count the ways (Sonnets from the Portugese 43)
- The Cry of the Children

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