If thou must love me, let it be for nought

POEM TEXT

If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say
"I love her for her smile—her look—her way
Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

SUMMARY

If you're going love me, don't love me for any reason other than love's own sake. Don't say, "I love her for her smile, her appearance, her gentle voice; or for the way that her thinking complements mine, and certainly gave me pleasure on a certain day." Because all of these things, my love, may themselves change, or your enjoyment of them may change. And that means that any love that's built on these things can be undone just as easily. Don't love me out of sympathy for my tears, either: a person would stop crying if you comforted them too much, and thus would lose your love too! Instead, love me only for love's sake, so that you can love me forever, because love lasts for eternity.

THEMES

THE TRUE NATURE OF LOVE

"If thou must love me" approaches the overwhelming power of love by thinking about what love *isn't*. The poem's speaker addresses a lover, raising and quickly rejecting the many day-to-day reasons this person might claim to love her: beauty, intellectual connection, and even enjoying each other's company aren't enough, the speaker says. Because people and circumstances can always change, love that can so easily explain itself is ultimately not worth much.

As such, the only love the speaker values is love for love's sake. The speaker's vagueness about what that kind of love actually *is* or means only proves her point: the kind of love she values can't be clearly put into human terms. It is, rather, a mysterious connection that goes beyond human lives and touches eternity.

The speaker's starts by rejecting all the common reasons one might give for being in love. While it's a poetic commonplace to observe that physical beauty doesn't last, the speaker here suggests that *any* kind of reason for loving someone is vulnerable to time. Even being emotionally close or intellectually simpatico won't necessarily last forever; the speaker, the lover, or both may change.

Similarly, it's not enough to be taken care of by a lover; sympathy, too, is subject to change. If the speaker's lover is moved to love by her tears, and comforts her, and she stops crying—what then?

Every possible reason for loving someone is thus shown to be subject to change—because change is a plain fact of life. Even the nicest parts of the person someone loves are subject to the mutability that marks all of human existence. The only real love, the speaker then argues, is a love that connects lovers to eternity—an eternity that seems, in some mysterious way, to *be* love itself.

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker once again insists on loving for "love's sake." She doesn't explain what this means, however, except that love for love's sake is timeless and unchanging. It's precisely in her lack of explanation that the speaker hints at what love is really like: love, she suggests, is something that goes beyond explanation in words. It isn't because of some good quality in the beloved; it just *is*.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only.

Right from the start, this poem looks like a love poem. Even before the reader dives in, they can simply glance at the shape of this poem and know it's a sonnet—a 14-line rhymed poem in iambic pentameter. And while not *every* sonnet is about love (there are sonnets about blindness and books and bridges, just for starters), an awful lot of the most famous ones are!

Shakespeare, Petrarch, Dante: many of the great poets of love

loved a sonnet, and this makes a lot of formal sense. A sonnet's meter sounds a lot like the thump of a heartbeat: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. And its volta—a moment when it turns sharply from one idea to another, answering or contradicting itself—is made for lovers, whose confusion, longing, or declarations all fit right into that shape.

This speaker, then, has chosen to work in a lovestruck tradition. But her love poem starts on an unexpected note. The first line goes:

> If thou must love me, let it be for nought

The speaker is directly addressing a lover (a technique known as apostrophe), but not in a way that seems especially, well, loving—at least not yet. Taken on its own, this first line might even read as cruel: "if you absolutely *have* to love me, let it all come to nothing!"

But wait: something tricky is going on here. This line is enjambed—its thought doesn't stop at the line break, but carries on past it. So the poem's full first sentence runs:

> If thou must love me, let it be for nought
> Except for love's sake only.

The line break, by inserting a little space, adds weight and momentum to the second part of the speaker's thought. She'll be loved "for love's sake only"; the only love that will come to "nought" is love that doesn't meet that high standard.

Right away, then, the reader gets a feeling that this will be a poem about, not just any love, but a serious and idealized kind of love. At the same time, it's a poem that's willing to play tricks on the lover it addresses. Issues of reality and falsehood are going to matter here, and they'll be reflected in the shape the poem takes.

LINES 2-4

> *Do not say*
> *"I love her for her smile—her look—her way*
> *Of speaking gently,*

With a mid-line caesura that hurries her along, the speaker rolls right into her next thought. After all, what does it mean to love "for love's sake only"?

Well, the speaker's not telling—at least, not yet. Instead, she tells her lover what *not* to say if he wants to love her the way she wants to be loved.

The first couple of things her lover shouldn't say are both to do with appearances. If you're talking about your love for me, the speaker basically tells her lover, don't say that you love "her smile—her look." Fair enough: these things are notoriously impermanent. Looks don't last, and any love built on them won't last either.

But then the speaker starts rejecting qualities that other poets might see as much more reasonable foundations for love. Not only should the lover not love her for her beauty, he shouldn't love her for her "way of speaking gently"—a description that could equally have to do with the speaker's soft voice or her personal gentleness, her kindness. This begins a pattern of rejections that's only going to get more surprising as the poem goes along.

Consider, too, the *shape* of the sentences the speaker uses to imagine these insufficient reasons for love. In these lines, two devices in particular do a lot of heavy lifting: anaphora, in which clauses or sentences repeat the same beginnings, and asyndeton, in which clauses follow quick on each other's heels without conjunctions. Here's what those two devices look like in the poem:

> "I love her for her smile—her look—her way
> Of speaking gently..."

Together, the repetition and the lack of conjunctions make this list seem, perhaps, a little casual, a little light. These are all perfectly nice things you might say about your beloved, but here, put all in a matching row like boxes on a shelf, they seem weak.

LINES 4-6

> *—for a trick of thought*
> *That falls in well with mine, and certes brought*
> *A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—*

The speaker goes on to reject yet more qualities that other people might feel made a perfectly good basis for a loving relationship. In these lines, she looks down on even intellectual and emotional connection as reasons for love.

Remember that the speaker is still just imagining what she doesn't want her lover to say. But in lines 4-6, she's envisioning this unwanted speech in much more personal terms. She imagines her lover describing the way that she's an intellectual match for him as "a trick of thought / That falls in well with mine" (lines 4-5).

This is, again, a perfectly nice thing to say, and even shows its niceness in the way it sounds. The consonance of the /l/ sounds in "falls in well" does what it describes, making two different words fit pleasantly together—and it links up with the /l/ and /z/ sounds "pleasant ease" of line 6.

These speeches also just sound more personal, less like a catalog than the previous things the lover isn't meant to say; they have a real voice in them. The use of the word "certes," an archaic (that is, old-fashioned) way of saying "certainly," might even have a bit of teasing in it: it's perhaps a little grand for day-to-day use. There's something sweet and flirtatious here among all the rejection.

But again, this intellectual and emotional comfort with each other (and this implied affectionate knowledge of each other's foibles) just isn't enough. The reader knows this not just because the speaker has pre-rejected this entire speech, but because the "pleasant ease" the imagined lover describes comes about on "such a day"—that is, on a particular day. The imagined loved is thinking of good times he and the speaker have had together—and connecting love to *time* is exactly the speaker's problem with this hypothetical love-speech.

LINES 7-9

> *For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may*
> *Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,*
> *May be unwrought so.*

It's only now that the speaker reveals why she so roundly rejects all these different reasons for loving someone. It's precisely *because* they're reasons—and reasons *change*.

The structure of these lines mirrors their meaning, showing the movement of a mind changing and then changing back again. They do this through chiasmus: a kind of repetition in which a phrase repeats itself, but in reverse. Not only does the speaker use chiasmus, she does it twice, like this:

> For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
> Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,
> May be unwrought so.

The words themselves form a picture of doing and undoing, making and unmaking. The full stop caesura after "so," meanwhile, adds a sense of finality to the speaker's point: she is clear and firm, not leaving room for debate. At the same time, by addressing her listener (via more apostrophe) as "Belovèd," the speaker gently softens her tone; she is saying all this, it seems, not to reject his love but ultimately to make it stronger.

The speaker's problem with any reason the lover might give for loving her, then, is that it's changeable—and not in only one way. While plenty of poets have warned that beauty fades, this speaker isn't just considering the way that her *qualities* might change, but the way that her *lover* might change. So he likes her voice now? Not only might her voice change, but her lover might just stop liking it later. So they think in similar ways? There's no guarantee *that* will last: one, the other, or both might start thinking differently. So they had a nice time together? Cool, but that's in the past.

Speaking of change, an important one comes here, between lines 8 and 9. This sonnet is specifically a Petrarchan sonnet, which means it uses a different rhyme scheme from the Shakespearean sonnet the reader is more likely to be familiar with:

- Shakespearean sonnets pretty much always rhyme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.
- Petrarchan sonnets, on the other hand, go ABBA ABBA in their first eight lines (like the "nought/say/ way/thought" rhymes here), and then make any of a variety of patterns with C, D, and E rhymes in the remaining six lines.

This sonnet leaves behind its first ABBA ABBA as soon as the speaker is done explaining that everything changes. And just like that, the rhyme scheme changes, too, moving into a CDCDCD pattern for the last six lines. (See the "Rhyme Scheme" section for more on this.)

When the speaker describes the kind of love that's based on changeable reasons as "love, so wrought," she suggests that this kind of love is *made*, not born: it's a constructed love rather than an eternal love. This is going to be important in the second part of the poem.

LINES 9-12

> *Neither love me for*
> *Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—*
> *A creature might forget to weep, who bore*
> *Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!*

There's one more way the speaker *doesn't* want to be loved, and it's a complicated one. Having rejected beauty, intellectual connection, and shared good times as motivations, she now rejects *pity*.

Pity isn't condescending here; it means something more like sympathy, feeling moved by someone else's pain. But even this can't last, the speaker observes: "A creature might forget to weep, who bore / Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!" That is: if my crying makes you love me and comfort me, and then I stop crying because you comforted me, where's your love for me going to come from then?

This passage is notably dense with sound patterns. Take a look at how it all fits together:

> [...] Neither love me for
> Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—
> A creature might forget to weep, who bore
> Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!

Notice the dense assonance on long /i/ and /ee/ sounds, the alliteration on initial /l/ sound, and the frequent consonance of /n/, voiced /th/, /k/, and /ch/ sounds? These help this passage to feel especially artful—that is, more carefully and melodiously shaped than everyday speech.

This works, in a subtle way, a bit like that tricky enjambment at the beginning of the poem, reminding the reader that what they're looking at here is itself something "wrought," a crafted poem rejecting a crafted love. It also matches with the witty argument the speaker makes here: her "trick of thought" is a

sharp one.

But she's not all sharpness. There's also great sweetness here. A couple of lines before, she's referred to her lover with the mighty title "Belovèd," and here she thinks of his imagined kindness to her as "thine own dear pity." This is not a frustrated or a withholding poem. Though it's been describing an impermanent, mortal kind of love, a better kind of love is growing in the negative space around that description. It's only in the poem's final lines that the speaker will turn to it.

LINES 13-14

But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

This poem, like most sonnets, has a volta: a swift change of ideas, perhaps an answer to a problem or a rejection of a previous setup. The word "volta" means "turn" in Italian, and here, the speaker only makes this turn in the poem's last two lines.

Curiously, it's a turning-away that seems to take her right back to the beginning. Here, the speaker repeats the very words she used in line 2: "But love me for **love's sake**". Love for love's sake, she proclaims, is the kind that allows lovers to "love on, through love's eternity."

There's a lot packed into these lines. Firstly, the reader might note a hint of personification here: to have a "sake," love must also be at least some sort of person. But this "love" also has an eternity—or *is* an eternity; the last words could work either way.

In returning at its end to the place it began, the poem itself creates an eternal loop: the end is the beginning is the end is the beginning. This, in conjunction with the way the speaker talks about love in these final lines, suggests that she's thinking of love in deeply spiritual terms.

The qualities of true love she's expressing here fit into a Christian tradition that goes back to Dante (and further): coming in contact with God through your love for another person. (For more on this surprising and complex idea, see pretty much all of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but especially *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.)

Love, in the fervently Christian Browning's conception, literally *was God*. Therefore, to truly love someone is to come in contact with Heaven itself, and not in a "did it hurt when you fell from Heaven?" way.

The kind of love the speaker values, therefore, is something that connects lovers through each other to something greater, something that's completely good and beyond change. All the trickiness, flirtatious teasing, and genuine affection of the first part of this poem create a negative space into which this difficult-to-express idea can flow. The kind of gigantic spiritual love that the speaker values can't really be described directly. This much she can tell readers: in her conception, it's a power that exists without reasons, and that can outlast death. In approaching this love in verse, she writes a curiously backhanded, but deeply-felt, declaration of love to the lover she seems to have spent most of this poem bossing around. For she who can conceive of true love can also feel it.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration has a way of weaving a poem together, working with its cousins assonance, consonance, and sibilance to create pleasant patterns. These devices are often a big part of what makes a poem sound *poetic*, different from everyday speech: part of the delight of poetry is that it draws the reader's attention to the *sound* of language, not just the meaning.

But alliteration can also turn the reader toward a poem's themes, and that certainly happens in "If thou must love me," where the alliteration mostly comes from the repetition of whole words, not just sounds. There are plenty of initial /l/ sounds here, but most of them come from the same word: "love." (See the Devices entry on repetition for more on this.)

The gentle, quiet /l/ sound that starts "love" often meets up with itself here, reflecting the poem's idea of "love's eternity": love reflecting love, forever and ever. But "love" also meets with "look" and "let" and "lose," bringing the speaker's interest in love into contact with her list of insufficient reasons for loving.

One of most pronounced alliteration in the poem appears in lines 11-12:

> A creature might forget to weep, who bore
> Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!

Here, gentle /th/ and /l/ sounds weave in and out of each other, contrasting with the crisp /c/ sounds of "creature" and "comfort." These lines, coming right before the poem's volta (that is, the moment in line 13 when the poem turns away from its description of frail conditional love and toward eternal love), feels cumulative: this especially dense sound-pattern wraps up the speaker's argument, so that in the last couple of lines, she can focus exclusively on matching love with love again.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love," "let"
- **Line 2:** "love's," "sake," "say"
- **Line 3:** "love," "smile," "look"
- **Line 4:** "speaking"
- **Line 5:** "well with," "certes"
- **Line 6:** "sense," "such"
- **Line 7:** "these ," "things," "themselves"
- **Line 11:** "creature"

- **Line 12:** “Thy,” “comfort,” “long,” “lose,” “thy,” “love,” “thereby”
- **Line 13:** “love,” “love's”
- **Line 14:** “love,” “love's”

APOSTROPHE

Like a lot of love poems, "If thou must love me" is one big apostrophe—that is, an address to a particular person. In this sonnet, the speaker is reaching out to a nameless "Belovèd," admonishing him not to love her for changeable mortal reasons, but with that kind of undying love that touches eternity.

The speaker's repeated direct address to her beloved gives the poem a feeling of special intimacy. And in fact, when she first wrote the sequence of sonnets that this poem belongs to, Elizabeth Barrett Browning never intended it to be seen by anyone but her husband Robert Browning, also a great poet. She only published her sonnets after a lot of encouragement from him, and their title, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, is a way of disguising their personal nature, giving the impression that they're mere translations of someone else's work.

Apostrophe makes this poem feel like this is a private matter between the speaker, her lover, and eternity. Even the lover's anonymity contributes to this effect; no need to say his name when he's the only person who'll see this poem, right?

But the very privacy and intensity of the poem is also what makes it universal. A feeling that you and your lover are the only two people in the world is, after all, one of the things that makes love feel like love. Apostrophe thus makes this poem simultaneously intimate and shared.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “thou”
- **Line 7:** “Belovèd”
- **Line 8:** “thee”
- **Line 10:** “Thine,” “wiping,” “my,” “dry”
- **Line 11:** “might”
- **Line 12:** “Thy,” “thy”
- **Line 14:** “Thou”

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like its cousins alliteration, consonance, and sibilance, turns up all the time in poetry, and often serves the purely poetic purpose of making lines sound good. Assonance's way of matching vowel sounds within words is a subtler effect than the initial-sound matching of alliteration or sibilance, and it thus often provides a more gentle emphasis. For instance, take a look at the assonance in lines 3-6:

> [...] her way
> Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
> That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
> A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—

The repeated short /eh/ sound here is so understated it's easy to miss at first. But it helps these lines to feel connected to each other, binding this passage of insufficient reasons for love with sound as well as with sense.

Similarly, the assonance in lines 7-8 helps to subtly underscore a point:

> For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
> Be changed, or change for thee

Here, a strong /ee/ sound and the repetition of the /ay/ sound in "change" draws attention to the line "Be changed, or change for thee," which points to the different dimensions of uncertainty and inconstancy in human life. The beloved person's qualities may change, *or* the lover may change, *or* the lover's taste for the beloved's qualities may change! Assonance makes this moment feel insistent and important.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “must love,” “let”
- **Line 2:** “Except”
- **Line 4:** “gently”
- **Line 5:** “well,” “certes”
- **Line 6:** “sense,” “pleasant”
- **Line 7:** “these,” “may”
- **Line 8:** “Be,” “changed,” “change,” “thee”
- **Line 9:** “Neither”
- **Line 10:** “Thine,” “wiping,” “cheeks”
- **Line 11:** “creature,” “weep”
- **Line 12:** “Thy,” “thy,” “thereby”
- **Line 13:** “sake”
- **Line 14:** “may'st”

CONSONANCE

Consonance works much like assonance and alliteration in the poem, providing sound-links that subtly draw the reader's attention to notable moments—or just helping a poem to sound good. In "If thou must love me," consonance also traces meaning, helping to suggest the ways in which the pleasures of *explainable* love might draw a lover away from the eternal love the speaker desires.

For example, take a look at lines 3-6:

> [...] her way
> Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
> That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
> A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—

Here, consonance on /k/, /l/, and /t/ sounds makes all the insufficient reasons a lover might give for his love sound pretty appealing. The words "falls in well with mine," with those matching /l/ sounds, fall in well with each other, and even connect pleasantly to "pleasant" in the next line. All of these reasons for loving, the speaker suggests, do have their pleasures; it's as nice to say them as to feel them. But on their own, they simply aren't enough.

Consonance underlines this point again in lines 11-12, where the internal /t/ sounds of "might," "forget," and "comfort" remind the reader that a lover might forget an awful lot of things—and probably will—if his love is founded entirely on changeable qualities.

The poem is also filled with sibilance, a particular type of consonance, that adds a gentleness to its lines. Take lines 4-6 from above:

> That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
> A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—

The soft /s/ and /z/ sounds here evoke the "pleasant ease" being described. Because sibilance also can sound like a whisper, its use in the poem adds to the sense of intimacy here—of the speaker talking closely with her beloved.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love," "let"
- **Line 2:** "Except," "love's," "sake," "only," "say"
- **Line 3:** "love," "smile," "look"
- **Line 4:** "speaking," "gently," "trick," "thought"
- **Line 5:** "falls," "well," " with," "certes," " brought"
- **Line 6:** "sense," "pleasant," " ease," "such"
- **Line 7:** "these things," "themselves," "Belovèd"
- **Line 8:** "Be changed," "change"
- **Line 9:** "Neither"
- **Line 10:** "Thine own," "cheeks"
- **Line 11:** "creature," "might," "forget"
- **Line 12:** "comfort," "long," "lose," "thy," "love," "thereby"
- **Line 13:** "love," "love's," "evermore"
- **Line 14:** "may'st," "love," "love's"

CAESURA

It's a rare line in "If thou must love me" that *doesn't* use a caesura. These mid-line breaks often contribute to the poem's sense of surprise, and to its momentum. While the speaker of this poem is philosophical and high-minded, she also seems to feel some urgency around the message she's trying to send to her lover. When her lines break in the middle, it suggests that her thoughts are running on quickly; alongside the poem's enjambments, caesura can help the poem to sound energetic and forceful.

For instance, consider the quick breaks in line 3, which suggest a quick-thinking accumulation of justifications:

> "I love her for her smile—her look—her way

But caesura can also have quite a different effect here, introducing a naturalistic swinging tempo. Take a look at how this works in the poem's last two lines:

> But love me for love's sake, that evermore
> Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

These are balanced, natural breaks, coming just where one would pause in everyday speech. At this climactic point of the poem, there might also be a very subtle hint of deeper meaning here. These caesuras divide up *one* sentence of *three* clauses over *two* lines. This rhythm might almost bring to mind the idea of lovers as being a *single* entity made of *two* people who make up *three* parts: in a romance, there's the you, the me, and the us.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me, let"
- **Line 2:** "only. Do"
- **Line 3:** "smile—her," "look—her"
- **Line 4:** "gently,—for"
- **Line 5:** "mine, and"
- **Line 7:** "themselves, Belovèd, may"
- **Line 8:** "thee,—and"
- **Line 9:** "so. Neither"
- **Line 11:** "weep, who"
- **Line 12:** "long, and"
- **Line 13:** "sake, that"
- **Line 14:** "on, through"

REPETITION

There's a whole family reunion of repetitions here: diacope, anaphora, and chiasmus all put in appearances.

Diacope is perhaps the easiest type of repetition to spot in this poem, because it's what happens when the speaker just won't let go of the word "love." This insistence on that one repeated word makes a lot of thematic sense. Not only is the speaker insisting that only real love will do for her, she's not about to use any kind of synonym for it. The love she wants can go by no name other than "love." But the repetition also underscores one of her big points: plenty of emotions that get called "love" aren't the real deal, and the word is often attached to mere likings and affinities and affections—which, in her book, just won't do.

The anaphora in line 3 only strengthens that point. The asyndetonic accumulation of qualities in "her smile—her look—her way" makes these things seem almost dreary. This isn't a massive outpouring of passion about a lover's glorious

charms. But, in a funny underhanded way, it *suggests* such an outpouring of passion. Plenty of poets who wrote starry-eyed paeans to their lady-love's smiles didn't prove especially constant lovers in the end. Even rapturous affection, the anaphora here suggests, just comes down to a catalog of changeable parts in the end.

The chiasmus in lines 8-9 drives the point home. Here, a person's good qualities may

> Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,
> May be unwrought so.

What goes up, the chiasmus suggests, must come down; any love that's *made* by a person's changeable qualities may equally be *unmade*.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love"
- **Line 2:** "love's," " sake"
- **Line 3:** "love," "her for her smile—her look—her way"
- **Line 8:** "Be changed, or change for thee,," "love"
- **Lines 8-9:** "so wrought, / May be unwrought so"
- **Line 9:** "love"
- **Line 12:** "love"
- **Line 13:** "love," "love's," " sake"
- **Line 14:** "love," "love's"

END-STOPPED LINE

In a poem full of onrushing enjambments, the few end-stopped lines pack a particular punch. Each marks a strong division, a transition between one kind of thought and another.

The poem's first end-stop comes in line 6, at the end of the speaker's catalog of her lover's insufficient reasons for loving her. There, the line closes with a dash, which at once cuts off the imagined lover and provides a transition into the next lines, where the speaker gives her excellent reasons for believing her lover's explanations to be insufficient. The end stop marks the transition point between two ways of seeing the world.

A stronger end-stop comes in line 12, and it's doing something similar. Here, the speaker has just finished imagining her lover's love emerging from *sympathy* for her—sympathy that that love will in itself cut off. The exclamation point here emphasizes the self-defeating nature of any such love.

The poem closes with a final and perhaps paradoxical end-stop: the period at the end of line 14. A period is about the most final piece of punctuation available. But here, it comes after the word "eternity." Eternity, being outside of time, can't ever come to a "full stop" itself: but it's the end-all and be-all for the speaker's vision of true love.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "day"—"
- **Line 10:** "dry,—"
- **Line 12:** "thereby!"
- **Line 14:** "eternity."

ENJAMBMENT

There's lots and lots of enjambment in "If thou must love me," and it helps the speaker's train of thought to feel quick and flowing. There are only a few lines that *aren't* enjambed, in fact, and these end-stopped lines typically mark a conclusion to a thought or the climax of an argument. The enjambments, by contrast, produce a feeling of building-up, like a roller-coaster climbing steadily to the top of a hill.

But enjambment sometimes also plays other tricks. For a good example, take a look at lines 1-6 (but especially at lines 1-2):

> If thou must love me, let it be for nought
> Except for love's sake only. Do not say
> "I love her for her smile—her look—her way
> Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
> That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
> A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—

Every single line here is enjambed as the speaker builds up her lover's imagined catalog of reasons for loving her. But that first enjambment does something special. "If thou must love me, let it be for nought" means something very different than "If thou must love me, let it be for nought / Except for love's sake only."

Readers may have heard people saying that a failed effort was "all for nought": that is, all for nothing. Read on its own, that first line might seem pretty harsh: "If you absolutely *have* to love me, let it come to nothing." There's a sense of real potential rejection here: half-hearted, conditional love holds absolutely no interest to this serious-minded speaker. But that serious-mindedness comes along with a playfulness: that first line is a heck of a trick to play on someone who loves you. It might even come across as flirty or teasing—a hint of lightness in an earnest matter.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "nought / Except"
- **Lines 2-3:** "say / "I"
- **Lines 3-4:** "way / Of"
- **Lines 4-5:** "thought / That"
- **Lines 5-6:** "brought / A"
- **Lines 7-8:** "may / Be"
- **Lines 9-10:** "for / Thine"
- **Lines 11-12:** "bore / Thy"
- **Lines 13-14:** "evermore / Thou"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton comes along for the ride with anaphora in lines 3-4. Anaphora is the quick repetition of a few words at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences, and in this poem it hints at how unsatisfactory the speaker finds her imagined list of her lover's reasons for loving her. (More on this in the Devices entry on repetition.) Asyndeton drives that point home.

Think about how different this line would sound with conjunctions in place: "I love her for her smile, and her look, and her way of speaking gently." In this imagined version of the poem, the feeling is a little softer; those "ands" would contribute to a feeling of accumulation, as if the lover were piling up a heap of treasures.

But as the poem actually *is*, asyndeton means that each of the qualities the imagined lover lists feels a little more thrown off. Combined with the casual smallness of many of the examples this line introduces—how the beloved speaks quietly, or made the lover happy on one afternoon in particular—asyndeton makes it clear how little the speaker thinks of these reasons. They're as easily dropped as pebbles.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "her smile—her look—her way / Of speaking gently,"

PERSONIFICATION

The so-subtle-you-might-miss it personification in "If thou must love me" nevertheless serves an important purpose. Love is this poem's whole ball of wax, its big theme, its most crucial concept. It's also made out, very delicately, to be a *person*.

To say that love can happen for "love's sake" suggests that Love has its own identity and a kind of selfhood. This hint of a personified love might join with the poem's concern about that love's eternity to point the reader toward the poet's own religious beliefs. To the fervently Christian Browning, to speak of an eternal, deathless, timeless, and personified love would also be to speak of God. The kind of devotion she wants for her lover and herself is therefore not just immortal, but spiritualized. In this reading, the lovers' connection would be literally heavenly.

This concept isn't unique to Browning. The medieval poet Dante Alighieri, also a sonnet fan, popularized the idea of a lover as an image of one's eternal heavenly connection to God in his own love-sonnet sequence, *Vita Nuova*, and his great *Divine Comedy*. To Dante, the person one loved on earth could be their most direct connection to Heaven. Browning knew Dante's work well, and the reader can spot both his philosophical and his formal influence here.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "love's sake"
- **Line 13:** "love's sake"

VOCABULARY

Thou, thee, thine, thy (Line 1, Line 8, Line 10, Line 12, Line 14) - These are all simply old-fashioned pronouns. "Thou" and "thee" are ways of saying "you." "Thou" is the subject form, like "I," and "thee" is the object form, like "me." "Thine" and "thy" are both ways of saying "yours"; the spelling changes depending on whether the next word starts with a vowel or not, the way you'd choose "a" or "an". All of these forms could be compared to the informal "tu" in French or Italian—an intimate way of addressing someone.

Nought (Line 1) - Nothing.

Trick of thought (Line 4) - Way of thinking—maybe connoting an especially witty or idiosyncratic way of thinking.

Certes (Line 5) - An old-fashioned word meaning "certainly."

Wrought (Line 8) - Made or crafted.

Bore (Line 11) - Experienced; metaphorically, "carried."

Thereby (Line 12) - By that means.

Evermore (Line 13) - Forever.

May'st (Line 14) - An old-fashioned way of saying "may."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"If thou must love me" is a Petrarchan sonnet, a form with a long history. Sonnets of all kinds have a pretty strict shape, using 14 lines of iambic pentameter and a prescribed rhyme scheme. Based on this rhyme scheme, the poem can be further broken into an octave (an eight-line stanza) followed by a seset (a six line stanza); or two four-line quatrains followed by two three-line tercets.

Sonnets have always been a popular shape for love poems; in choosing to write a sequence of sonnets to her beloved, Browning is following in Shakespeare's footsteps (though Shakespearean sonnets follow a different rhyme scheme than Petrarchan). Sonnets' da-DUM, da-DUM iambic meter evokes the steady beating of a lover's heart, and their shortness makes them into compact little presents, ready to fold up in a love note.

But they also have a subtler feature that suits them for love poetry: the volta, the moment in the second half of a sonnet where something changes. ("Volta" is Italian for "turn.") At the volta, the speaker might introduce a new idea, or reject a

previous idea, or offer an answer to the problem they despaired over in the first part of the poem, finding their way into a new understanding of their love. Here, the speaker does all of these things.

In Italian sonnets, the volta usually appears between the aforementioned octave and sestet. In English or Shakespearean sonnets, it comes in the final two lines of the poem. Despite following the general form of an Italian sonnet, this poem's volta actually comes in the final two lines.

Here, the speaker turns away from the changeable reasons one might have for loving someone, and looks toward the eternal power of love for love's own sake.

METER

The iambic pentameter of "If thou must love me" is all part of the old sonnet tradition. Iambic pentameter uses five iambs (the metrical feet that go da-DUM) per line, and it's likely to feel familiar to any reader who's studied Shakespeare.

Here's line 6 as an example of perfect iambic pentameter:

> A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—

Iambic pentameter (and sonnets in general) have often been used for love poetry: that repeating, rhythmical da-DUM sounds a lot like a steady heartbeat. Many poems play around within a basically iambic line, inserting a few different kinds of feet here or there. But in this particular sonnet, Browning's meter stays relatively constant.

There are some variations now and then—moments where the poem doesn't stick to this pattern *exactly*—but more for most part the poem stays within its meter. This gives it a beat that matches the poem's themes: the metrical pulse is as changeless as the love the speaker wishes for.

RHYME SCHEME

"If thou must love me" follow a rhyme scheme typical of a Petrarchan sonnet:

> ABBA ABBA CDCDCD

As in all sonnets, an even and balanced rhyme scheme like this contributes to a feeling of harmony and control. But the sharp-eared reader might notice there's a tiny irregularity here. The last D rhyme, in line 14, is actually a slant rhyme—that is, an almost-rhyme. The previous D rhymes have all used a flat /i/ vowel sound; this one uses a long /ee/. This little difference points to the poem's big theme: as eternity is different from mortal life, so is eternal love different from the kind of earthly love that's based on a person's changeable qualities.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a woman talking to her beloved. She isn't carried gushingly away by her love for the person she addresses, or by the thought of his love for her. Rather, she's as thoughtful as she's impassioned. In speaking to her lover, she seems to be speaking to herself at the same time, reminding them both that real love isn't just thinking that someone is beautiful and smart and fun and sweet. This speaker has her eyes firmly fixed on everlasting love, and nothing else will do. Love seems to be, to her, not merely a pleasure and a comfort, but a matter of the greatest spiritual importance.

Her fondness for old-fashioned language like "certes" also suggests that she's rooted in tradition and history: her love reaches back into the past as well as outside time into the eternal.

SETTING

The lack of a concrete setting in this poem makes a strange kind of thematic sense. The poem is written like a conversation or a letter, an address to a specific person, and it lives in the realm of thought and feeling, not in the physical world. The kind of love the speaker is reaching toward here is eternal, and it's therefore detached from her surroundings; this kind of love doesn't have anything to do with where she is in space or time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was a major and popular poet in her own lifetime. (Her husband, the poet Robert Browning, only rose to a comparable reputation considerably after their deaths.) Her beloved 1850 collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*—from which "If thou must love me" comes—was so well-known that one of its lines has become almost proverbial: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Browning was even tipped as a possible successor to Wordsworth in the role of England's poet laureate, though this never came to pass.

Browning, like her contemporary Keats, had an early life filled with trials and griefs. Sickly and anxious, mourning the death of her young brother and terrified of her tyrannical father, Browning found an outlet in verse. Still living at home, she began publishing poetry in 1838, and met her husband Robert when he wrote her a fan letter; the two married in secret to avoid her father's wrath. They would become each other's greatest influences.

Robert Browning was both Elizabeth Browning's greatest supporter and her muse. Much of her most famous and popular poetry was both championed and inspired by her husband. She was very shy, and reluctant to publish the intimate *Sonnets from the Portuguese* until Robert convinced her the world needed to

see it. Even then, she at first disguised her involvement, pretending that these were the translated verses of some unknown Portuguese poet.

Regardless of her diffidence, Browning became an important figure in the Victorian literary world, and was a huge influence on another shy, brilliant, passionate poet: the young Emily Dickinson, who worshiped the elder Browning so much that she kept a portrait of her in her bedroom.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Born during the reign of George the IV, Elizabeth Barrett Browning died during the reign of Queen Victoria. As such, she lived through a major transition in English history.

Wealth, in the England that Browning lived in, was slowly moving out of the countryside and into the city. The Industrial Revolution meant that a largely rural country was quickly becoming urban, and this transition brought with it both opportunity and nostalgia. It also produced a lot of class anxiety for the old families who had been used to sitting at the top of the social order; wealth was reshaping traditional English class boundaries.

Browning herself was a member of a wealthy family who made their living through colonial plantations. An abolitionist, Browning was deeply troubled by her family's reliance on slavery for their wealth, and when the plantations collapsed and they lost a great deal of their money, it came more as a relief to her than a burden.

During Browning's life, women were slowly beginning to rebel against repressive societal misogyny; with a Queen on the throne, women's options expanded (though plenty also continued to hold them back). Browning's position as a major public writer was a far cry from the anonymous, discreet, and not-particularly-lucrative successes of Jane Austen, only 30 years her senior.

A wealthy country girl from a traditional family who married a middle-class writer and became better-known than her husband, Browning was part of the current of new possibilities that the early part of the 19th century offered.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Life, Work, and Letters — Watch a short talk on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life and work—as well as on the extraordinarily romantic correspondence between the poet and her eventual husband. (https://youtu.be/hkSWGqMDBEY)
- Browning's Biography — A short biography and links to more of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-barrett-browning)
- Browning's Artistic Philosophy — Learn more about how the poet approached her art in this essay from Brain Pickings. (https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/03/06/elizabeth-barrett-browning-prometheus-bound-elfriede-abbe/)
- Sonnets from the Portuguese — The British Library's overview of the sequence of which this poem is part. (https://www.bl.uk/works/sonnets-from-the-portuguese)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem (with dramatic accompanying music). (https://youtu.be/Ct_dfX74V2k)
- The Poem Illustrated — See an illuminated version of the poem from an 1897 manuscript. (https://digital.nls.uk/traquair/sonnets/sonnet_14.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING POEMS

- How do I love thee? Let me count the ways (Sonnets from the Portugese 43)
- I think of thee (Sonnet 29)
- The Cry of the Children

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*If thou must love me, let it be for nought (Sonnets from the Portuguese 14)*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Aug 2020. Web. 4 Sep 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*If thou must love me, let it be for nought (Sonnets from the Portuguese 14)*." LitCharts LLC, August 12, 2020. Retrieved September 4, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/elizabeth-barrett-browning/if-thou-must-love-me-let-it-be-for-nought-sonnets-from-the-portuguese-14.