



Elizabeth Barrett Browning As A Poet of Love

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Abstract

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a popular and prestigious poetess of love. Her poems, chiefly the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are remarkable for an artistic impression of her intensity of passion and rapture of love. She produced the best part of her poetry under the influence of this powerful emotion of love. No finer and fuller statement of a woman's passion of love from the feminist point of view exists in English literature. Her love letters and love sonnets serve as the monuments and memoirs of love as well as a rare literary treasure. They played a significant role not only in her personal life but also in her poetic career. The *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, published in 1850, were written during the period of her love affair with Robert Browning (1845-46). The love letters were also written during the same period.

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an English poet of the Victorian era, popular in Britain and the United States during her lifetime. Elizabeth had published some sonnets in 1844 volume. These sonnets were an expression of sorrow and despair. Although they reflected her efforts to control her grief, a shadow of death brooded over them. Thus, most of these sonnets, such as *Tears, Grief, Irreparableness, Discontent, Perplexed Music*, and *Thought for a Lonely Death-Bed*, embodied a personal note. They were marked by a fear of death. Althea Hayter aptly pointed out, "In this 1844 group of sonnets, which are among the best works she ever did, her grief had been controlled and transfigured. But all through the 1844 poems death was still very close to her thoughts. If she looked at a child sleep, it made her think of herself in the sleep of death; if she wrote of Queen Victoria's wedding in the Abbey, it was to remember the dead lying below the pavements; if she drank wine sent to her by Boyd, the paleness of her drinking lips reminded her of sickness and tombs; if she recalled the secret hiding-place of her childhood which she never could find again, it was an image of the lost Eden which she would recover after death."¹

When we pass from these sonnets of 1844 to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, we mark a definite change in the outlook of the poetess. Here, she dispenses with her grief and fear of death in full favour of youthful love. In sonnet I, which was originally entitled *Death and Love*, she says :

I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straitway I was ware.
So weeping, how a mystic shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,
And a voice said in mastery while I strove
'Guess now who holds thee?' 'Death' I said. But, thee,
The silver answer range, Not Death, but love.

These sonnets constantly speak of 'a miracle' caused in her life by the victory of love over death. Mark how love has changed her life :

The face of all the world had changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole



Bewixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,
Was caught up into love and thought the whole
Of life in a new rhythm.²

But she could not accustom herself so easily to this new pattern of life as her heart was still heavy with 'a great heap of grief, as she tells us in *Sonnet V*:

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,
As once Electra her sepulchral urn,
And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see
What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn
Through the ashen greyness.

... yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forbore ...
Thy touch upon the palm.³

It would be very interesting to study one of her very popular sonnets of 1844 in relation to her later sonnets to illustrate the contrast between them. *Past and Future* is one of her previous sonnets. Browning was very much impressed with this sonnet. He loved and liked it as her 'true utterance'. In this sonnet, she says that her cup has been emptied on its wine and she hopes this Christ's new vintage will fill her cup once again :

My wine has run
Indeed out of my cup, and there is none
To gather up the bread of my repast
Scattered and trampled ...
Dear Christ! When Thy new vintage fills my cup,
This hand shall shake no more, nor that wine spill.⁴

But in *Sonnets from Portuguese*, she is surprised to see that the cup has been filled instead with the wine of love :

... why, thus I drink
Of life's great cup of wonder!⁵

Earlier, future had no hope for her, hence her eyes were fixed on the throne of God. In the Sonnet, *Past and Future*, she says :

My future will not copy fair my past
One any leaf but Heaven's

But now Browning's love had made and moulded her future and given her a new hope. She therefore calls him her 'ministering life-angel', her 'New angel' who has completely changed her life.

This is thus clear that the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are in sharp contrast to the sonnets of 1844. In spite of her heavy heart, she now enjoys a new joy, a new life and a new experience in the selfless love of Browning.

It would be equally interesting to compare these sonnets of love with another love poem of Elizabeth's, which suggested the title of these sonnets. *Catarina to Camoens* was published in the 1844 volume. In this poem, the heroine is Catarina, a Portuguese girl. She is in love with the poet Camoens. Catarina while dying in the absence of her lover who is abroad, leaves him a ribbon from her hair :

Keep my ribbon, take and keep it
(I have loosed it from my hair)⁶

On the door you will not enter,
I have gazed too long – adieu!
Hope withdraws her per adventure –



Death is near me – and not you.

The poem is thus characterized by the same feeling of sorrow and despair as the sonnets of 1844. But in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, this despair has been dispelled, as seen above, by a new hope. She is wonderstruck to see that love has freed her from the grief of death. These sonnets thus stand for a class by themselves.

These sonnets embrace and enshrine the poetic history of Elizabeth's love for Robert Browning – her would be husband. They trace the origin, growth and progress of their love and point out the ennobling and elevating effect of this powerful emotion of love on the lover and the beloved. Althea Hayter, therefore, rightly observes : "The abiding attraction of these sonnets is the psychological interest of tracing the evolution in love of a thirty nine year old invalid woman who at first cannot believe that a brilliant poet, six years younger than herself, can really love her and want to marry her ... and at last looks forward to a life – time, an eternity, of enduring love."⁷ This sums up the entire history of love between Elizabeth and Robert Browning. Let illustrate these various stages in their love from these sonnets themselves. Sonnet XXVIII, to begin with, tells us that their love developed not so much through letters as through personal contact :

My letters! all dead papers ... mute and white!
And yet they seem alive and quivering
Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
And let them drop down on my knee tonight

Said, Dear, *I love thee*; and I sank and quailed
As if God's future thundered on my past.

Sonnet XXXII is a record of their first promise to love :
The first time that the sun rose on thine oath
To love me, I looked forward to the moon
To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
And quickly tied to make a lasting truth.

In Sonnet XXXVI, she point out the fears and hesitations of their first love :

When we met first and loved, I did not build
Upon the event with marble. Could it mean
To last, a love set pendulous between
Sorrow and Sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled
Distrusting every light that seemed to gold.

Sonnet XVIII tells us about the exchange of locks between the lover and the beloved as a sign of their 'truth' :

I never gave a lock of hair away
To a man, dearest, expect this to thee
Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully
I ring out to the full brown length and say
"Take it".

In Sonnet XXIX, she voices her growing love for him :
O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather instantly
Renew my presence.

She has forgotten the heaviness of her heart in the depth of Browning's love :

A Heavy heart, Beloved, have I borne
From year to year until I saw thy face,
And sorrow after sorrow took the place
Of all these natural joys as lightly worn
As the stringed pearls.⁸

With her rich flight of fancy, the poetess has given us an insight into the growth of her love. At times, she becomes too informal, as in the following lines :

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write ;



... The second passed in height
The fist sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair.

The third upon my lips was folded down
In perfect, purple state; since when indeed
I have been proud and said, "My love, my own?"⁹

Sometimes, she becomes sentimental too. In Sonnet XXI, for example, she asks her lover to go on repeating that he loves her just as a cuckoo goes on repeating her song :

Say over again, and yet once over again,
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
Should seem a cuckoo-song ...
Say, thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll
The silver iterance!

Sonnet II shows her steadfastness in love and also her firm determination to win over all obstacles that may stand in the way of their true love :

O my friend !
Men could not part us with their worldly jars,
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend,
Our hands would touch for all the maintain – bars,-
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,
We should but vow the faster for the stars.

The generous and selfless love of Browning was met by her self-sacrifice and deep sense of gratitude. She found that he was a princely giver and nothing could be offered by her who was grief-worn, completely broken and had met with utter frustration in life. expressions like these are quite common in her letters written at this time : "You are too good and too high for me." "You see from above and I from below." Sonnet VIII expresses the idea that she has little to offer in return for the princely gifts of her beloved :

What can I give thee back, O liberal
And princely giver, who hast brought the Gold
And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,
And laid them on the outside of the wall
For such as I to take or leave withal
In unexpected largesse? am I cold
Ungrateful, that for these most manifold
High gifts, I render nothing back at all?
Not so; not cold, but very poor instead.

Love is the only thing that she can offer in exchange for the precious gifts of her beloved :

I will not spoil thy purple with my dust,
Nor breathe my passion on thy Venice glass,
Nor give thee any love ... which were unjust.
Beloved, I only love thee! Let it pass.¹⁰

Love is very powerful. In ennobles and elevates both the lover and the beloved :

Yet love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptance ...
And love is fire, and when I say at need
I love thee .. mark! ... I love thee ... in thy sight
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
With conscience of the new rays that proceed
Out of my face toward thine.¹¹

Physical love is a nine days wonder. Physical beauty is perishable and love based on pity or sympathy is also changeable. Only pure love – love for the sake of love – can be everlasting. Hence, the poetess implores her beloved to love her for nothing else but love alone :

"If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only"¹²



This Sonnet beautifully sums up the poetess' idea of true married love. It speaks about the intense and true affection of the poetess for her husband. It defined the true nature of love and marriage. In Sonnet XVI, the image of a wounded soldier raised by his gallant enemy is made to describe the poet herself, whose fears and hesitations were conquered by a generous lover :

Because thou art more noble and like a king,
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
Thy purple round me ... why, conquering
May prove as lordly and complete a thing
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth.

Almost the similar idea is conveyed through Sonnet XXVII :

My own Beloved, who hast lifted me
From this dearer flat of earth where I was thrown –
... my own, my own,
Who comest to me when the world was gone
And I who looked for only God, found thee!
I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.

Sonnet XXXIX which expresses her gratefulness most emphatically, ends with the request :

“... dearest, teach me so
To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good.

This sense of gratitude finds expression in several other sonnets also. She considered Browning to be a great poet and that such a great poet should fall in love with her was hardly believable. At last when it became almost impossible to disbelieve this feeling on his part as he remained constant in his love, she found herself unworthy of his elevating love. No, she was overwhelmed by a selflessness in Browning's love. Even her father could not stand in comparison to Browning in regard to the spirit of self-denial. She realized it well that Browning's love was perfectly reliable and she could always depend on it. That was why she remained grateful to this 'princely giver' and she has expressed this gratefulness against and again in her sonnets, as we have seen above, and also in her love letter.

Sonnets are surcharged with the romantic exuberance of love and youthful gaiety evoked by her passionate attachment to her lover. In the forty-fourth sonnet, for instance, she emotionally calls these sonnets a return for the gift of flowers that Browning brought from his garden and which brought a sunshine into her room :

So, in the like name of that love of ours,
Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too,
And which on warm and cold days I withdraw
From my heart's ground.

What a spontaneous and impassioned utterance of intense and selfless love! In fact, these sonnets are permeated with a sincere emotion and thus form a wonderful piece of 'the literature of the heart' or the literature of the heart] or the literature of love. Their special charm is that they are the record of a woman's heart by a woman who had the real experience of it, and herein lies their originality. These are "in verse the true record of a true love story." These sonnets being autobiographical in tone and expression, are different from the conventional sonnets of Shakespeare or Donne, which are characterized by exaggerations in sentiments of love and artificial diction, and are marked by a note of realism. Grief, uncertainty, absence, exaltation of the lover and intensity of the poet's love – these form the special voice of these sonnets. She has very successfully poured forth the innermost feelings of her heart in them. Osbert Burdett, therefore, justly praises them for their realistic tone and texture : "All poets who write of love know the possibilities which beckon, but Elizabeth Barrett knew also its fruits, and for her its promises were performed. Consequently, with the evidence of her letters and the experience of her married life before us, we can say that she tasted the reality. Therefore among the wealth of English love poetry, her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* have not only



beauty of form but the authority of a fact. If we want to know what human love can be and do, and what poetry this experience contains, we have her verses. They come from the heart and return to the heart, without embroidery or make believe. If they are rare, it is as much because the fullness of her experience is exceptional as because she brought exceptional art or skill to making it known.”¹³

Though autobiographical in tone, these sonnets have a universal appeal. The sonnets, while tracing the glory of Elizabeth’s personal love for Browning, transcend it like all pure art and make it part of universal experience, so that there is no lover who does not hear his living heart beat in these lyrical sonnets. Psychologically, as a woman’s analysis of states of love, they are absorbing to all lovers.

These sonnets have immortalized Mrs. Browning as a poet of love. As there is an unmistakable stamp of the poet’s personality on these sonnets, these are generally compared with Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*.¹⁴ (1591), though there is a lot of difference between the two personalities. After her death, the late Victorian critics ranked them with Shakespeare’s sonnets and hailed and heralded them as the greatest poems of their type in the English language. Browning himself gave these sonnets a place of honour beside Shakespeare’s sonnets and held that only *The House of Life*¹⁵, a sonnet-sequence by D.G. Rossetti, published partly in 1880, could stand in comparison to them. But as a woman-writer or a feminist poet, she stands alone in her own sphere in writing such a series. The twentieth century critics also have been generous in their estimates of her sonnets. William Andrews Clark, Jr., for instance, remarked that the ‘Sonnets’ had secured Mrs. Browning’s name and fame for all time and entitled her “to a high seat on Mount Parnassus beside Shelley, Keats, Byron, Browning and other great gods of poesy.” On the sound foundation of these sonnets, he held, “rests her renown as a poet – a foundation as eternal as the hills of Rome.”¹⁶ “No poems were ever called into being by a love more true and sincere.”¹⁷ In fact, these sonnets stand as a single matchless monument of married and domestic love in English poetry

Reference

1. Althea Hayter, *Mrs. Browning ; A Poet’s Work and its setting*, pp. 71-72.
2. *Sonnet VII*
3. *Sonnet VI*
4. *Works*, p. 329.
5. *Sonnet XX*
6. *Sonnet XVI*
7. Althea Hayter, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [London : Longmans, 1965] p. 15.
8. *Sonnet XXV*
9. *Ibid XXXVIII*
10. *Sonnet IX*
11. *Ibid X*
12. *Sonnet XIV*
13. Osbert Burdett, *The Brownings* (London : OUP, 1928). Pp. 222-23.
14. In this series of sonnets, Sir Philip Sidney voiced his love for Penelope Devereux. As he could not marry her, his disappointment and passion found poignant expression in them.
15. These sonnets, which were inspired by love of the poet’s wife and sorrow for her death, are records of his spiritual experience.
16. *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, printed for W.A. Clark, Jr, by J.H. Nash, 1927, pp. XIIIXIV.
17. G.B. Taplin, *Life of EBB*, London; 1950, p. 236.