How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43)

**Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806 - 1861**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

For the ends of being and ideal grace.

I love thee to the level of every day’s

Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I love thee freely, as men strive for right.

I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence was written before she married Robert Browning to express her **intense love** for him.Sonnet 43 is the most famous of the 44 sonnets. In it, Browning attempts to define her love. The opening of the poem suggests it arises from a question: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!".

**Structure**

*Sonnet 43* is the length of a traditional sonnet (14 lines) but otherwise does not follow the rules. There is a fairly **regular rhyme scheme**, but this is flexible, and Browning often makes use of *assonance* (for example "Praise" and "Faith"), which is striking because the poem is about defining the perfect love, and yet the poem avoids perfection. Perhaps this is deliberate.

**Language**



The poem makes use of **repetition**: "I love thee" is used eight times and reflects the devotion the poet feels for her lover as well as the persistent nature of that love. Repetition is also used in a list on line 2 "depth and breadth and height" to suggest this poem is comprehensive; it aims to fully define the poet's love. Repetition here also suggests breathlessness and excitement.

Love is compared to weighty, important concepts like "Being and ideal Grace", "Right" and "Praise". Browning's use of **capital letters** emphasises these words.

The opening rhetorical question implies a **conversation between lovers**, and the exclamation mark at the end of the first line makes the poem seem lighthearted and playful. The speaker is responding enthusiastically to the challenge of listing the ways in which she experiences love.

Lines become frequently broken up by **punctuation** by the end of the poem, another suggestion that the speaker is excited. "I love thee with the breath,/ Smiles, tears, of all my life!". She is passionate in her explanation.

**Attitudes, themes and ideas**



*Sonnet 43* presents the idea of **love as powerful** and all-encompassing; her love enables her to reach otherwise impossible extremes:

I love thee to the depth and breadth and heightMy soul can reach, when feeling out of sightFor the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

As well as the use of lists to imply the comprehension of her love, "feeling out of sight" tells us that the speaker sees her love not as something tangible but instinctive or even spiritual.

The poem is *autobiographical*: it refers to "my old griefs". (Browning had strong disagreements with her parents and was eventually disinherited.) The passion she applied to these "griefs" has been applied more positively to her love, demonstrating that **she sees love as a positive, powerful and life-changing force**.

Barrett Browning mentions her loss of religious faith in this sonnet: "I love thee with a love I seemed to lose/With my lost Saints!" Her lover becomes a **spiritual saviour**. She is not totally without faith, however: "if God choose,/I shall but love thee better after death". Here she asserts the idea that if God controls her future then she hopes to be reunited with her lover in the afterlife.