SONNET 29: I THINK OF THEE!

Elizabeth Barrett Browning – Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was an English poet of the Victorian era. She was popular in both the UK and the USA in her lifetime. She was pouched from a young age however she also suffered from frail health from a young age, relying on pianolists such as Loudoun. At her peck, she revealed Alfred Tennyson for the position of poet laureate, and influenced many famous poets, including Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson.

Relationship with Robert Browning – Robert Browning's volume Poems in 1849 brought her great attention, including from poet Robert Browning (whom she eventually married). They were in love for a long time (largely because of her family's disapproval, but also because her ill health often confined her to her home). Their marriage eventually caused Elizabeth's family to show her; her family refused to acknowledge her ever again after her and Robert wed.

Sexuality in Victorian Society – Elizabeth Browning lived in the Victorian era. One of the features of Victorian society was the strict code of morality, including sexual restraint. This was especially the case for women, who were expected to be models of innocence and charity, who were instead the passive objects of men's love. Therefore, despite their popularity, Barrett Browning's sonnets were criticised in some quarters for being too passionate and suggestive.

Language/Structural Devices

Metaphor – An extended metaphor runs throughout the whole poem, which compares the speaker to 'wild vines' that 'twine and bud about a tree' (the lover). The extended metaphor initially shows that her thoughts are focused on him like a vine. However, after the volta (turn around), she then describes how she feels physically with him, and at this point the metaphor takes a more sexual turn, as the vines/tree begin to represent their bodies.

Quote: “I think of thee – my thoughts do twine and bud about thee!—’Round well they wind, – ‘round well they wind, everywhere!”

Excitement Language – There are points in the poem at which the speaker's feelings for her lover erupt into her language. For example, in line 5, the speaker exultatively declares ‘O my’ when thinking of her lover. The same is the case in line 7, in which the exclamation mark marks her excitement. She commands him to attend to her.

Quote: “And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee!—And let them twine about thee, twine about thee, everywhere!”

Vocabulary Choices – A number of the vocabulary choices that Barrett Browning employs hold sexual or phallic connotations, for example ‘rustle’, ‘trump’, and ‘twine.’ Under the strict code of Victorian morality, these language choices would be considered risqué, verging on taboo. ‘Straggling’ and ‘shattered’ make reference to her own disabilities.

Quote: “And breathe within thy shadow a new air; I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.”

Form – I think of thee the sonnet form, which is traditionally used for passionate love poems; the poem is made up of 14 lines, with the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDCDC. The variation from traditional form mirrors Browning's irritation with rigid Victorian conventions.

Quote: “And breathe within thy shadow a new air; I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.”

Themes

Romantic Love – The predominant idea across the poem is that the speaker and her lover feel a deep desire and longing for one another. It is likely that this is autobiographical in the sense that Elizabeth and Robert were required to keep their relationship secret for a long time, for fear that Elizabeth would be disowned by her family.

Nature – The ideas of romantic love, union, and inter-connectedness are all beautifully represented through elements of nature. The most prominent method is through the use of the extended metaphor – the speaker and the object of her affection are represented through a tree entwined with tightly-wrapped vines.

Poems for Comparison

Paraphrasis of Lover

Lover

Theo Love

I think of thee can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of Romantic Love and Desire

Love Philosophy

Philosophy

I think of thee can be contrasted with this poem in Nature

Influences on the Poet

Barrett’s letter to Browning on June 4, 1846. You are too perfect, too overcomingly good & tender – dearest you are. I can do no more than this, my dearest... Write me one word more depend on me...