



SONNET 29: I THINK OF THEE! KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



Context – Sonnet 29 was published in 1850 as a part of the collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

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 wrote poetry from a young age however she also suffered from frail health from a young age, relying on painkillers such as laudanum. At her peak, she rivalled Alfred Tennyson for the position of poet laureate, and influenced many famous poets, including Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson.



Sonnets from the Portuguese – The 44 sonnets that made up the collection (including Sonnet 29) were dedicated to her husband: Robert Browning. They may have not been published until 1950, but it is thought that they were written around 1845 and 1846, when the two were discreetly courting one another. She initially thought them too personal to publish, but he eventually convinced her otherwise. The poems were popular in her lifetime, and remain so today.



Relationship with Robert Browning – Barrett Browning's volume *Poems* in 1844 brought her great attention, including from poet Robert Browning (whom she eventually married). They were in love from a distance for a long time (largely because of her family's disapproval, but also because her ill health often confined her to home). Their marriage eventually caused Elizabeth's family to disown 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 chastity, 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 tree representing her lover). The extended metaphor initially shows that her thoughts are focused on him like a vine. However, after the volta (middle of line 7), it appears that her lover is physically with her, and at this point the metaphor takes a more sexual turn, as the vines/tree begin to represent their bodies.

Enjambment/ Caesura – Both of these techniques are used throughout the poem in order to alter the rhythm/ pace, and to emphasise meanings. For example, caesura is used after 'drop heavily down' to slow the pace of the poem significantly, and emphasising the weight and solidity of the leaves. Enjambment is often used to break lines on the word 'thee', demonstrating the speaker's infatuation and dedication towards her lover.

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

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

Excited 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 enthusiastically declares 'O my' when thinking of her lover. The same is the case in line 7, in which the exclamation mark indicates her excitement. She commands him to attend to her.

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

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

Quote: "Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare, And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee."

Form – I think of thee adopts the sonnet form, which is traditionally used for passionate love poems; the poem is made up of 14 lines, with around 10 syllables per line – largely adopting iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme resembles the Petrarchan Sonnet, with rhyme of ABBA, ABBA, CBCBCB. The variation from traditional forms mirrors Browning's irritation with rigid Victorian conventions.

Structure – The narrative is circular in nature; the poet begins and ends with the idea of thinking (or not thinking) about her lover. Unlike regular sonnets, it is most commonly read that the volta (turning point) of the poem takes place after the caesura in line 7 – this is the point at which the lover becomes physical, rather than imagined. Again, the subversion of structure shows the poets rebellious nature.

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

Quote: "Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,"

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

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 predominant 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.



Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
	1	I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud	<p>Lines 1-2 – The opening to the poem introduces the <u>metaphor</u> suggesting her thoughts are like a budding vine, which wraps itself around a tree. The use of the word 'wild' suggests she is untamed and carefree, and its mildly sexual undertones would have shocked Victorian audiences. The vine is dependent on the tree, and this perhaps represents how she felt with Robert; <u>clinging on to him</u> and reliant upon him. 'Twine' suggests their ideas merge.</p> <p>Lines 3-4 – 'soon there's nought to see' suggests that her thoughts about her love <u>obliterate all else</u>. The description 'stragglings green' is perhaps unexpected, and makes reference to her <u>physical ailments</u>, however the reference that she 'hides' her lover creates two ideas: 1. She is dominant over him (she was perhaps the more celebrated poet in their life) 2. She hides him away – a suggestion of jealousy.</p> <p>Lines 5-7 – The opening 'O my' is a deeply emotional reaction. 'Palm tree' may be a religious reference – in Christianity it is a symbol of faith and belief. However it may also be a <u>metaphor</u> for a love growing in a place where all else is barren. She demands to have the real him, and not thoughts of him, making reference to their <u>love of secrecy</u>. The <u>caesura</u> in the middle of line 7 marks the <u>volta</u> (turning point) of the poem, which is highly unusual. Barrett Browning's <u>rebellion</u> against the form reflect her attitudes towards her position of restraint.</p> <p>Lines 8-9 – 'Renew thy presence' suggests that she <u>wants him again</u>, as he was before. She continues the <u>metaphor</u> of him being a 'strong tree' that she clings to. Line 9 has strong <u>sexual connotations</u> – the varied verb 'rustle' implying a sexual embrace, and 'trunk' perhaps being a <u>phallic symbol</u>. Under the strict Victorian moral code, this would have been seen as extremely erotically suggestive.</p> <p>Lines 10-12 – Line 10 is also heavily suggestive – if she is the vine, it portrays her wrapping her limbs around him. 'insphere' appears to be a coined term by the poet, meaning to hold him within. 'Bands' may make reference to marriage – a reference to wedding bands. 'Drop heavily down' signifies a change in pace, due to the heavy stresses and <u>caesura</u>. It is likely that this line symbolises a post-coital experience. The 'deep joy' communicated in line 12 further backs up this idea; the speaker experiences her lover with her senses, not just in her imagination.</p> <p>Lines 13-14 – The speaker refers to her lover as a 'new air', giving the idea that he is refreshing and invigorating. She shows her <u>surrender</u> towards him by communicating that she is within his shadow. The final line offers a resolution to the poem – she contends that she no longer has to think of her lover as she instead has the real man. The <u>repetition</u> of 'thee' signifies her infatuation with him. The <u>circular nature</u> of the narrative is complete – she begins and ends with thinking (or not thinking) about her love.</p>
	2	About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,	
	3	Put out broad leaves, and soon there 's nought to see	
	4	Except the stragglings green which hides the wood.	
	5	Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood	
	6	I will not have my thoughts instead of thee	
	7	Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly	
1	8	Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,	
	9	Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,	
	10	And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee	
	11	Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!	
	12	Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee	
	13	And breathe within thy shadow a new air,	
	14	I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.	

Poems for Comparison

Poems for Comparison	Influences on the Poet
<p>Porphyria's Lover</p> <p>'I think of thee' can be contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>Romantic Love and Desire</u></p>	<p>Barrett's letter to Browning on June 4, 1846: 'You are too perfect, too overcomingly good & tender - dearest you are, & I have no words with which to answer you.' Browning's letter to Barrett, September 18, 1846, shortly before their marriage: 'God bless and strengthen you, my ever dearest dearest ... Write to me one word more-depend on me...'</p> 
<p>Love's Philosophy</p> <p>'I think of thee' can be contrasted with this poem in <u>Nature</u></p>	