Love has many aspects, and in literature it has received a variety of treatment. It ranges from tom-foolery to divine frenzy; but it is the sublime aspect of human love that has ever found its classic expression in literature. Love, in all literatures, has been portrayed as a noble human passion and the universal process of life. "It has been the aim and pinnacle of art through ages and universally it is the final justification and splendour of life."¹ In English literature, love is represented as the romantic passion of man 'par excellence.'

The theme, which called forth the fullness of the powers of Elizabeth Barrett was Love. It was Love in the same cosmic sense as Wordsworth's duty, which 'kept the stars from wrong,' an omnipresent passion for the best in all nature and in all Mankind. To Elizabeth Browning, there was no truth nor substance, save Love. With her love was the essence and wholeness of her being and it expressed itself with unrestrained emotion. The emotion of love pervades the

whole of her poetry. Other poets also wrote on love, it was often surrogated by other themes in their poetry. Elizabeth Barrett is the founder of women's love poetry.

John Stuart Mill in his essay on poetry notes that poets recall emotion; this stirs the imagination to conceive what they could feel or might have been able to feel if outward circumstances had been different. It is perhaps this capability that enabled the rather sheltered but imaginative Miss Barrett to produce so many poems on love before she had experienced her own attachment to Robert Browning. The love poems even in the earliest volume, The Seraphim and Other Poems, show a gift for projection into the romantic situation and a staunch belief in the importance of love. Yet for all the importance given to love, it is often seen to have a disastrous effect upon the life of the central character of a poem, usually a woman.

Earlier in her life, Elizabeth had written hymns, that represented the young woman's love of God and identification with the group of chapelgoers and villagers she lived among. The sonnets and the ballads, contain ideas and elements of religious faith, they treat the love of man: romantic love of man for maid, the love of one family member for another, the love of friendship and the love of truth and justice in the poems that discuss social problems. The hymns, written in the 1830's express the Poet's devotion to God and are songs of praise, petition and fervour. The hymns reflect Elizabeth
Barrett Browning's religious beliefs and express her complete and childlike reliance on God. In a letter to Miss Mitford, the Poet states that religious interest is necessary to perfect the human being; this interest is the crown of humanity.

Romance is a favourite theme of the ballads of the middle period of Mrs. Browning's work. Many romantic ideas help to form the fabric of the 1844 volume of poems. The ballads of Elizabeth Barrett contain much of her best work and characterization. The early ballads have a brooding quality and an atmosphere that lends interest and a sombre tone, though they all treat love in various forms. The young Poet, bedridden for the most part during her twenties, is quite productive, either because of her malady or inspite of it. "The Romaunt of the Page" seems to be a result of Elizabeth's dream of being Byron's Page; A young woman, newly married disguises herself as a Page to accompany her husband into battle in the crusades. The romance contains the element of surprise, misunderstanding and thwarted love. The heroine is loving, loyal and assiduous in her efforts to guard and protect the knight she has married. Fighting by his side in the Holyland, she asks her knight during a lull in the fighting to tell her about his lady at home. The knight obliges, only to reveal a self-pitying story of being married to a lady whose face he scarcely saw. He married her, he states, to protect her because her father died protecting the knight's father's honour.
The lady, as disguised page, has asked a question which opens a Pandora's box, for the knight's responses reveal some unchivalric sentiments. He laments the forced marriage, wishing that he had been able to fight for his father's honour himself:

'I would my hand had fought that fight
And justified my father!
I would mine heart had caught that wound
And slept beside him rather!
I think it were a better thing
Than murdered friend and marriage ring
Forced on my life together.'

[St. xix. cpw, p. 106]

Then, to test him, the little page tells a story of her sister who dressed as a page to accompany her husband to war. This rather complicated story-within-a-story affords Mrs. Browning one of the earliest situations in her poetry to compare the attitudes of men and women toward love, for the knight in reply to the question says that a woman who would serve as a page is unwomanly. The page passionately replies that clothes, "the golden brooch and glossy vest" of mincing ladies, should count less than the emotion in those hearts. The knight, however, maintains that for a lady to follow her lord into battle would be unwomanly. Such a woman, he declares, he could only love as a servitor. In this dialogue, the Poet's attitudes show the importance she attaches to the qualities of fidelity, love, and courage, rather than the superficial appearance of love on display in the conventional sense. Although, the knight's attitude upsets the Page, we see that she remains loyal and loving toward her husband for when she spots danger
approaching in the form of Saracen horsemen, she sends the knight on ahead on pretext, meets danger alone, and dies protecting him almost joyfully. Here, the Lady, had placed her trust in human love, that is what Elizabeth Browning shows in the ballad, even though the trust is not well founded. Elizabeth Browning makes a point that fidelity and the emotional capacity of a woman are more important than external trappings.

The duchess of the "The Rhyme of Duchess May" is spirited like the Lady of the "The Romaunt of the Page." The duchess has been betrothed to her cousin by her uncle-guardian to keep her wealth in the family. She rebels and marries a man of her own choice when she comes of age. The action in the ballad, begins with Sir Guy's castle under siege; the duchess and her husband, with all their retinue, are about to be captured by the spurned suitor. In a flashback we learn that the duchess, a bride of only three months, and her wrathful relatives are about to capture the castle. The story takes place at the moment when the heroine is about to be captured by her enemies; she chooses death instead. The drama of the ballad mounts to the climax of the scene upon the castle wall when husband and wife struggle with the horse who is to carry his master over the parapet to death.

Not only are there elements of the medieval in this tale of revenge and battle, but there are also suggestions of the comitatus bonds of fealty in Anglo-Saxon tradition.
Sir Guy of Linteged, the bridegroom, wishes to die to spare his remaining followers. The action shows a sense of responsibility toward his men and brings to mind the ancient rules of battle. The heroine is loving, faithful, and ready to sacrifice herself for the ideal of love. There is an element of bravura in the duchess' preparing herself as if for a bridal ceremony while the castle is under siege: "Bring the gold and bring the gem, we will keep bride-state in them,/ While we keep the foe at bay" (St.xxxvii, CPW, p. 143). Thus attired, the duchess leads her husband's horse to the battle-ments and there attempts to persuade him that she should ride the last desperate ride with him. The struggle between the spouses goes on while the noise of battle sounds around them: "the breech yawns into ruin and roars up against her suing" (St. Lxxxiii. CPW, p. 147). Dramatically, it is the husband's cry that he rides to God that gives the bride strength to mount beside him:

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Straight as if the Holy name had up-breathed her like a flame--
Toll Slowly.
She upspring, she rose upright, in his selle
She Sate in sight,
By her love she overcame.
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[St. xc. CPW, p. 147]

All the characters, of the husband, the wife, and the evil cousin are well realized, though the cousin's cries and mutter-ings at the castle wall make him sound like a villain in a melodrama. The ballad stands as a story, well and completely
told, bristling with realistic images of flight and war-like siege.

Another long ballad "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," with many modern images, became a favourite with many readers. It is chiefly interesting for its treatment of the romance between two characters from different classes. Bertram, a struggling poet, falls in love with Lady Geraldine; the two are very much attracted to each other and exchange many ideas. They are separated, Bertram believes, by their social differences. It is Geraldine who treats the poet as equal to or better than the nobleman of her acquaintance. Geraldine sees the poet as ennobled by his artistic calling.

The concluding eleven stanzas show Bertram speaking to a vision of Geraldine who admits she loves him. As the two lovers are reconciled, Geraldine affirms the nobility of her Poet-lover: "Very rich he is in virtues, very noble - noble, certes;/ And I shall not blush in knowing that men call him lowly born" [St. xi. CPW, p. 127]. Geraldine is not concerned with the sham of wealth and external show for social reasons, rather she values character, the individual. The ballad shows Elizabeth Browning's strong feelings on equality; it extols the worth of individual human being; and it stresses above all, the importance of love. It clearly demonstrates the Poet's democratic spirit and her belief that love could conquer all, an idea found in many other poems, such as "Loved Once" and "The Rhyme of the Duchess May," wherein love, both romantic and
spiritual is shown as a powerful force, capable of sweeping all before it.

Another ballad "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" shows the unwise love of the heroine, Onora. Onora, like Margret and the Page, values human love above the love of God; she so far misplaces her love as to dabble in the occult by making an unholy vow in an effort to save her life and enjoy earthly love. The vow she makes, however, is a negation of the human need for God's sustaining spirit in life. The heroine i.e. Onora, says to the spirit of an evil nun in a dream: "I vowed to thee on rosary.../ I would not thank God in my weal, nor seek God in my woe" [St. II. CPW, p. 112]. The irony in this ballad is that Onora, seeking to preserve her life to live with her lover, lives only to have her bridegroom die at her feet immediately after the wedding ceremony. After the death of her lover, Onora repents and is prepared to accept death. In this ballad Elizabeth Browning tried to show the importance of earthly love, though Onora repents in the end, but she is ready to evade her fate and enjoy love.

In the ballad "The Romaunt of Margret," the woman Margret is shown as one who believes herself secure in the love of other human beings. As the poem opens, Margret hears the voice of her shadow address her from the dark river water. The shadow states that it will take her life if Margret cannot find someone who loves her truly. The heroine in replying
feels safe in naming brother, sister, father and finally her lover-knight to satisfy the grim shadow, only to be informed at each turn that all her family, love, earthly objects or the family name better than they do Margret. But the love of the Knight was true, but sadly, he is dead. The shadow tells Margret: "He loved but only thee!/ That Love is transient too." [St.xxiv. CPW, p. 23]. Margret loses the verbal battle with the shadow, and her death-cry is heard far at sea. The poem concludes by showing the family members outwardly grieving for Margret, while their thoughts remain centered on themselves. Elizabeth Browning's intention here is to contrast human and divine love. The fragile love of Margret is mocked by the refrain "Margret, Margret," a sound which echoes in each stanza.

From the early to the late ballads contained in Last Poems and published posthumously, Mrs. Browning is consistent in using a clear voice to express some of her most vital ideas such as love, religion, and the role of the Poet. Loving and serving too well are definitely traits of heroines in the ballads. Love, especially romantic love, is all important to the women; generally it may show the spirit of self sacrifice, a trait found in the Duchess May and the Page. But in nearly all the female characters, passion or the impulse of emotional life sweeps the heroine into a situation in which she suffers. Often her suffering ends in death. If she has been involved in a romance, she is frequently deserted by her lover; he breaks
his vow, and she suffers, while seeming to attach no blame to him. Yet the women in the situations that the Poet creates exhibit courage. The love, the woman has for her lover is so important to her, that she is ready to sacrifice her life for him, even knowing that he does not care for her or love her, like in "The Romaunt of the Page." The Duchess May is also willing to die with her husband and struggles with him for the privilege. Passion is demonstrated by most of the characters. In following their emotional bent, their love, many characters step outside the bounds of socially accepted conduct. The love of human, is all important as shown by Elizabeth Browning in her ballads.

Romantic love is placed high on a scale of values, but the poet never forgets that the love of God is higher than all other kinds. Romantic love is also presented along side loss or death. Caterina lies dying as she speaks in "Caterina to Camoens," even as Bianca feels death approaching in "Bianca among the Nightingales." In "The Rhyme of Duchess May," the young married couple, confronted by certain defeat and dishonour choose death together. "The Exile's Return" presents a lament by a returned lover who finds his beloved dead. Romance does not appear as an isolated theme. The poet believes that to love truly is the emotional experience of a lifetime, one can love only once. "The eternities avenge/Affections light of range./There comes no change to justify that change,/Whatever comes" in "Loved Once" [St.vii. CPW, p. 175]. Love is more
important than the desire for fame fortune or any other considerations in life. Aurora Leigh finds that, after pursuing her vocation of Poet, she is not a complete woman without love. Having denied the emotional side of her nature, she has been an incomplete woman without Romney.

So firm is the poet's conviction that love is central that she even equates life with love: "Let us love, let us live, for the acts correspond," she states at the conclusion of "A Rhapsody of Life's Progress" [CPW, p. 175]. It is even possible to view Mrs. Browning's preoccupation with love as being so great that she can temporarily renounce her closeness to God for a relationship with Robert Browning:

As brighter ladies do not count it strange,
For love, to give up acres and degree,
I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange
My near sweet view of heaven, for earth with thee!

[II.10-14, CPW, p. 219]

Love expressed itself with unrestrained prodigality in "Sonnets from the Portuguese." Everything in her life that went before, the beauty of her early home among the Malverns, the long lonely years of illness and weakness, the sorrow surrounding the home - is taken up, sanctified and dedicated in these poems; and everything that was to follow was but harvest gleaning and aftermath. These sonnets are equalled only by her life - in Milton's sense, they are her life.
E.C. Stedman compares these sonnets to Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, stating that both works are written from a high and pure atmosphere. Tennyson's work shows sustained grief, and the sonnets ecstatic love.\(^2\) Alethea Hayter also states that the sonnets give her the sensation of being a peeping Tom.\(^3\) Since some of the sonnets reflect the intense letters written by the Brownings during their courtship, there is some justice in her feeling. The sonnets, however, are an integrated sequence, carefully wrought by the poet, and presented to her husband, simply as the overflow of love and joy at her relationship with Robert Browning. What more natural expression for the woman who, as some critics say, lived for poetry, than to express her love as fully and completely as possible in the verse medium she so loved? When one compares one of the other lyric poems expressing the same idea to one of the sonnets, often with similar images, one discovers the Poet's control, her distance from the material and the relative success of the different lyrics, the sonnet inevitably proving to be more compressed, evocative and powerful.

Although the dominant impression of the narrator in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is that she is self-immolating

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throughout, the poems actually chart her growth from a debilitating introspective despair to revitalization through love. Zimmerman concludes her analysis with this observation:

"That love retrieves is the final lesson of Sonnets from the Portuguese. It is a lesson we would not expect from a traditional sonnet sequence, where philosophy is always superior to earthly love and sovereignty to subordination. We must keep in mind that this writer is a woman preparing herself for marriage not a lover suing his mistress for 'pity.' Only if we read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems as we do other epithalamia (notably the Song of Solomon) can we see that earthly love is a proper subject for celebration." Barrett Browning's apparently ambivalent attitude toward her own worth as a poet and a person is expressed in the Sonnets, in part, to be a dramatic device to honour her beloved.

These sonnets are the outpourings of love, which Elizabeth felt after being an invalid for so long with no hope of change in her life. These sonnets display virtuosity, control and ability to present the particular individual expression of a poet so that it represents the universal idea or ideal as well. The sonnets were written by Elizabeth before her marriage. On July 22 of her last summer in London she had said to Browning, "You shall see some day at Pisa what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is

a time to read what is written." Except for that cryptic remark she told him nothing of the sonnets she had been writing on the miracle of her life: her former isolation, ill-health, and sense of deep grief followed by the triumph of love over doubts and fears. Just before she wrote the last sonnet, she wrote in her notebook, "50 Wimpole Street, 1846, Sept." In this sonnet she writes about the flowers Robert Browning had brought from his garden and in exchange she will present her gift of the sheaf of Sonnets. But neither at Pisa nor for next two years at Florence did Elizabeth show her husband the sonnets written for him. It was not until the Summer of 1849 at Bagni di Lucca, that Elizabeth placed "that wreath of sonnets" on Robert "One morning unawares three years after it had been twined." Her reluctance was may be due to a chance remark Robert Browning made "against putting one's love into verse." At Lucca, on getting a positive response, Elizabeth placed the sonnets near him; when Robert saw the manuscript, he was "much touched and pleased." Browning and Elizabeth decided "to slip them in under some sort of veil" and chose the title "Sonnets from the Portuguese" which might seem to mean "from the Portuguese language." But which really referred to "Caterina to Camoens," the poem immediately preceding the "Sonnets." Browning had read this poem before he made Elizabeth's acquaintance and it had affected him to tears. Ever since then he had "in a loving fancy" associated Elizabeth with the Portuguese Caterina. According to the legend she was the girl with whom the Portuguese Poet Camoens fell in love and she is supposed to have died during his
absence abroad and to have left him "the riband from her hair," as Browning said. And so Elizabeth and Robert gave the "Sonnets" their ambiguous name.

These emotion laden sonnets show the change of a person from an emotional state of calm acceptance and tranquil resignation of death to one of the joyous love and full acceptance of the possibility of a rich life on earth. Though other subjects are also treated by the Poet like grief, thoughts of God and eternal life, the principal subject of the sonnets is love. The sonnets are on the whole a carefully-wrought gift. Their images and ideas reflect the author's philosophy and emotions. The poems elevate love to a level that is almost rhapsodic at times. Mrs. Browning, by creating poems that reflect intense emotion, reveals both a particular individual in love and at the same time captures the sentiment of romantic love in lyrics that are universal. The sonnets were written during a transitional period. Marriage for her meant a great change in life, for until she met Browning she felt she had lived as full a life as was possible for one with her illness. The sonnets were written as meditations on her new life and necessarily include a look... not always complimentary... at her old life. Thus, apparently, contradictory images of the loving self arise from the fact that Barrett Browning is looking both backward and forward over her life. Unfortunately, only the self-effacing half of the loving self which she describes in the poems has struck most succeeding generations of commentators on her
poetry, and the other self, the one ennobled and strengthened by discovering the depths of her own capacity to love, is rarely remembered. Yet one need only look at the first sonnet for a hint that these poems will describe change.

The Sonnets I to Sonnets VII denote a change in her life, which her love for her lover brings about. The change in her life is clearly and succinctly stated in the opening sonnet depicting the struggle between her love and death. Here she describes the process by which she abandons her self-pitying melancholy for the new experience love:

I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me.

[II, 6-9]

Then follows a startling, violent image of the change, love brings:

...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 held thee?".

[II, 10-13]

The persona is scared of accepting love from her lover.

Death and darkness prevail in the first two sonnets.
Sonnet III also shows the speaker renouncing her new found
love. But the awareness of death is never far away. Though, the two lovers are amazed at finding one another and both have spiritual affinity, the gloom of death does not leave the persona.

In sonnet V, love is still in the shadows and has not yet been able to overcome the cloud of death surrounding the persona. In this sonnet, the Poet renounces the lover, but also warns him of the danger of the passion he has aroused in her. The Poet says that she is burned out and exhausted from grief and life's trials. The lover is advised to scorn her to "tread them (the sparks) out to darkness utterly" [1.7. CPW, p. 215]. In line 9 "But if" brings a transition. If the lover has the courage to stay, the wind of passion he brings with him may cause the speaker to become enflamed:

...Those laurels on thine head,  
O my Beloved, will not shield thee so,  
That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred  
The hair beneath.

[11.11-13, CPW,p.215]

The Poet probably intends a unified image of a danger to her lover from the past griefs of her life but she wrote using imagination, dealing with images that are open to interpretation. It seems that the fire of passion suits the mood of the sonnet as well as that of grief that might destroy or consume. This sonnet which is one concentrated image of the Poet's heart and its contents, concludes with a command to
the lover to depart: "Stand farther off then! Go."

Sonnets V and VI, also are a command to her lover
to depart: "Go from me," followed by the immediate qualifi-
cation that she is forever touched and changed, thereby
showing the power of love: "Yet I feel that I shall stand/
Henceforth in thy shadow." Although the initial statement of
the sonnet is a reiteration that the lovers should part, the
remainder of the poem is given over to expressing the close
union of the two. The 'love' seems to overshadow the feeling
of death which persisted in the earlier sonnets. By acknowled-
ging the feeling of closeness, the speaker shows the change
wrought in her because of love. The first suggestion of
closeness is in lines 1 and 2, with shadow and body touching.
Others are the 'wine-grape' image, the 'heart-pulse' image of
lines 9 and 10, and the closing thought of the "tears of two"
in the eyes of the persona. There is also a religious allusion
emphasizing unity: "When I sue/God for myself, he hears that
name of thine" [II. 12-13]. Even if the speaker appears to be
renouncing her lover, she admits that her life is permanently
changed because of him.

The change noted in sonnet VI is amplified in sonnet
VII as the persona admits to the great change in her: "The
face of all the world is changed," since he i.e. the lover
entered her life. As in sonnet I the love is personified,
the soul of her lover assumes the physical character of his
footsteps. "Move still, Oh, Still" to interpose between his
beloved and death. There is an intermingling of the spiritual and the physical throughout this sonnet as the persona begins to accept "Life in a new rhythm." The cup of sorrow [1.7], is changed to sweetness by the presence of her lover. Now, with a new life dawning upon the Poet, the names of the country, heaven, or any other place are exchanged for the place where they can be together. Even music, "this lute and song," are dear because they too sing the name of the beloved. This sonnet is filled with images relating to auditory imagery, from the sound of the lover's foot-steps [1.2] to the sound of words and the lute and music of the Poet. The sonnets I to VII show the persona still involved with the feeling of death. She is unable to overcome her fear and again and again tells her lover to leave her alone, as she is not worthy of him. Though the presence of her lover has wrought a change in her life still the Poet deprecates herself. These seven sonnets show the affect of the love and change it has brought in her life.

From sonnet VIII to sonnet XIX, the doubt, the hesitancy prevails. After admitting the change that love has brought in her, the Poet is now assailed with doubts. The Poet feels that she has nothing in return to give her lover who has given her so much. Sonnet VIII begins with a question: "What can I give thee back, O liberal/ And princely giver?" For the gifts that have brought change and warmth
into her life, the speaker can find no return. She is overwhelmed by his giving. Lines 6-7, suggest that the speaker is not cold but ill-equipped to exchange such noble gifts. The Poet says she is made of faded fabric, so "Pale a stuff," which is not fit for the lover to use as a pillow. In an image of courtly self-deprecation, the speaker again urges her lover to depart: "Go farther: Let (the fabric) serve to trample on." She is too pale and lifeless in comparison with his vitality [II.2-3].

The questions posed in the first six lines of sonnet VIII, relating to the ideas of gifts or offerings, are answered in the next five sonnets, and the gift she returns is love. Yet even in giving love the speaker has doubts, as we see in the opening line of sonnet IX: "Can it be right to give what I can give?" In this sonnet, the poet disparages her own gifts which can only be tears, sighs, and feeble smiles; the sonnet states the fear that they are not equals:

...We are not peers,
so to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,
That givers of such gifts as mine are, must
Be counted with the ungenerous.

[II.7-10,CPW, p.216]

The Poet fears that she will poison her loved one. The image used is the shattering of the Venetian-glass, a vial for poison. The only gift she can offer is the gift of love, and she minimizes this in the last line: "Beloved, I only love thee! Let
it pass." In structure this sonnet uses a command to conclude. In tone it is a cry of helpless love, still suggesting the rejection and renunciation of her lover.

In sonnet X, the persona moves a step closer to her lover by extolling, "Love, mere love." Love can be bright and strike an equal fire from "cedar-plank or weed, temple or flax." Contrast is used to show the disparity between fragrant wood and the common weed or a great edifice and a bit of thread. By its fire, love can illuminate and transform. The repetition of "I love thee... mark! ... I love thee..." [1-6] is almost rhapsodic in tone, showing that the speaker experiences a kind of metamorphosis. She is transformed and glorified. The redeeming, almost magical, qualities of love make even the meanest creatures worthy. Therefore, the persona too is redeemed and transformed by her emotion:

And what I feel, across the inferior features
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show
How that great work of love enhances Nature's.

[II.12-14, CPW, p.216]

Sonnet XI, restates the idea that love has made even the unworthy speaker a fit recipient for the lover's affections. Yet because of the weight of grief, "the burden of a heavy heart" [1.4] and her feeling of proximity to death, "This weary minstrel-life that once was girt/ To climb Aornus" [II. 5-6], she feels she loves in vain. The suggestion of the minstrel's song with its melancholy music played on a pipe is too feeble to
compete with the valley nightingale. The allusion is once more to the Poet as singer, and the song of this sonnet is still not one of acceptance. Love may give "Vindicating grace," but the lady renounces her lover because of her own unworthiness:

And yet, because I love thee, I obtain
From that same love this vindicating grace,
To live on still in love, and yet in vain,...
To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

[II.11-14, CPW, p.217]

The persona still cannot express herself, and her love to her lover. The innermost voice of the self, "the silence of/ womanhood" cannot be expressed. The persona still feels too unworthy and tainted by grief to accept her lover:

...I stand unwon, however wooed,
And rend the garment of my life, in brief,
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,
Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

* [II. 11-14, CPW, p.217]

The Poet fears to contaminate her lover, by her grief. The torn garment is a Biblical allusion to the sackcloth and ashes of mourning. Yet so intense is her love that she must summon her fortitude to continue to renounce her lover.

Doubt is the central idea of sonnet XV wherein the two lovers cannot share the same light: "We look two ways" [1.3]. The Poet looks toward death and grief, while the lover is worldly and exalted. The speaker has been safely enclosed from life's contacts in a chrysalis of grief like "a bee shut in a crystalline." This image is undoubtedly a topical one
reflecting the contemporary interest in geology and the finding of artifacts such as a fly in amber. Poetically, it suggests the isolation and near-suffocation of the speaker in her emotional situation. It also helps explain the fear of an inability to escape, that is, to fly. The speaker continues to express fear regarding love, this time it is a fear of the end of love, which would send her back into her state of isolation. Sonnet XIV and XV show the persona accepting love but fearing it will end now.

In sonnet XVI, the lover, like a king or warrior, overcomes all the doubts and the loneliness of the speaker. Fear can be forgotten as their two hearts grow to be one [II. 4-6] and the persona's heart ceases to quake. Being conquered will uplift and exalt her, as previously it changed and transfigured her, so that at least she can be accepting: "Beloved, I at last record, /Here ends my strife" [II.12-13, CPW, p. 218]. The sonnet concludes with a command: "Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth." By now the Poet seems to accept the love of her lover, it is as if she cannot fully renounce death, for the final images of the sonnet XVII ask him to choose her role:

How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?  
A hope, to sing by gladly? Or a fine 
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?  
A shade, in which to sing -- of Palm and Pine? 
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

[II.10-14, CPW, p.218]
In sonnet XVIII and XIX the Poet admits that her youth has passed. She is marked by grief, her head hangs in sorrow and her cheeks are pale from her years of illness. But love defeats death, it is love that wins the lock of hair, not the funeral shears:

\[\text{...I thought the funeral shears}
\text{Would take this first, but love is justified,}
\text{Take it thou, ... finding pure, from all those years,}
\text{The kiss of my mother left here when she died.}\]

[II.11-14, CPW, 218]

Having given a lock of her own hair, the speaker then receives one from her lover and praises it in sonnet XIX. The two Poets exchange locks of hair, and the Rialto bridge of Venice, that symbol of commerce, is transmuted to "the soul's Rialto" by the spiritual nature of their love. Finally, after all the doubts and uncertainties she comes to accept his love for her. She still refers to immortal life, but that is a part of her, she revels in the lover's love for her and rejoices in it. In the sonnets VIII to sonnet XIX, the effect of love on the Poet is seen. The change which takes place in the persona is slow and gradual. The love of her lover transforms her life - the feeling of gloom is changed into the feeling of exaltation.

Sonnets XX to XXVIII depict the state of mind of the Poet. The Poet now accepts the love of her lover and exults in it. She lays aside her doubts and uncertainties
and thinks only of the state she is in. The Poet persona is so much enveloped by love that she is surprised at her previous state of isolation. The persona marvels that she could have felt no intimation of her beloved's presence in the world:

... When I think
That thou wast in the world a year ago,
What time I sate alone here in the snow
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink.

[II.1-4, CPW, p. 219]

The Poet gives an exclamation of joy: "Why, thus I drink/Of Life's great cup of wonder!" The Poet is amazed at not having guessed that such a person as her lover existed. There is an atmosphere in this sonnet that reminds anyone who has been in love of the joy which is so immense that it seems to fill the world. It is this sense of psychological expansion that the Poet seeks to convey, concluding with a final condemnation of her own slow-wittedness: "Atheists are as dull,/Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight." This conclusion is a natural one for a Poet who has written hymns and sonnets containing references to the sight of the face of God or Jesus.

The Poet needs the reassuring voice of her lover to still the doubts that stem from her own inner gloom, or her night-time reveries or nightmares, which Mrs. Browning was sometimes subject to. Child-like, the persona asks, "Say over again and yet once over again/That though dost love me." The Poet in sonnet XXI feels that she too is a new-born with the balmimg enfolding of her lover's love. The sonnet, unified in
the idea of the repeated pronouncement of love, concludes
in the sestet by stilling her fears of lines 7-8 by ecstatic
repetition of the phrase. Line twelve uses trochaic rhythm
so that the emphasis is on "Love me, love me, love me." The
lover is urged to "toll/The silver iterance." The Poet
concludes the sonnet on a spiritual note, as if the persona's
thoughts always move toward God: "Only minding, Dear,/To love
me also in silence with thy soul."

The next two sonnets continue the theme of rejoicing
and also present a new note. For the first time, the persona
whole-heartedly rejoices in life and the prospect of physical
love. Though, death awaits her in a corner but there is "a
place to stand and love in for a day." Again, the image of
physical, earthly love is couched in spiritual terms:

When our two soul s stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curved point, -- what bitter wrong
Can earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented?

[II.1-6, CPW, p. 219]

In a recent study of women authors it is suggested
that this reference is consciously Freudian and sexual. Further,
Ellen Moers, submits that it may be unconsciously sexual but
it is an image and diction in agreement with its sister sonnets.

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The souls, represented as angels, have been referred to in the sequence as early as sonnet III in the reference to their ministering (or guardian) angels passing one another in surprise, their wings brushing one another in flight. Now such closeness has grown in the lovers relationship that one is sure of that the spirits of the Poet’s are much better acquainted:

...Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us, and aspire,
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, Beloved, - where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

[II. 6-14, CPW, p. 219]

The fire of love igniting the wings of angels is an image combining the sensuous and the spiritual such as the pre-Raphaelites were to use. The persona in this poem rejects the ethereal sphere of love, stating that if they rose higher, toward heaven, angels would surround them and intrude on their "deep, dear silence." Again, the poet wishes to preserve the silence of souls referred to in the concluding sonnet XXI. "Earth's the right place for love," as Robert Frost states and Mrs. Browning also knows. On earth the spiritual union of the lovers can repel "contrarious moods of men," leaving room for lovers, even though, as the Poet reminds us, this life is short, "With darkness and the death-hour rounding it"[I.14, CPW, p. 219].
Though she is aware of life's brief moment, Mrs. Browning expresses, as all women in love do, the desire to hear the words of love and to have time to enjoy them. Therefore these statements of love in the sonnets are both particular and universal.

Mrs. Browning in sonnet XXII expresses the kind of relationship she had envisioned for herself and her husband—the love of equals. A month before they married, both Elizabeth Barret and Robert Browning exchanged their views and definitions of love and marriage. The first letter is by Robert Browning:

Just now I took up a periodical and read a few lines of a paper on the charm that there is in a contrariety of tempers and tastes, for friends and lovers—and there followed platitudes in a string—the clever like the stupid, the grave choose the lively and so forth. Now unless, the state of the liker and chooser is really considered by him as a misfortune,—what he would get rid of if he could in himself, so shall hardly desire to find in another—except in this not very probable case, is there not implied by every such choice, an absolute despair of any higher one? The grave man says (or would if he knew himself) —'except on my particular grounds such a serious humour would be impossible and absurd... and where can I find another to appreciate them? Better accept the lower state of ignorance that they exist even, and consequent gaiety,—than a preposterous melancholy arising from no adequate cause.' And what man of genius would not associate with people of no talent at all, rather than the possessors of mere talent, who keep sufficiently near him, as they walk together, to give him annoyance at every step. Better go with Flush on his four legs, avowedly doglike, than with a monkey who will shuffle along on two for I don't know how many yards.

Barrett - Browning (Robert Wiedemann), Letters, 2, 418 (12 August, 1846).
Elizabeth Barrett replies:

As to [the] other question, about the communion of contrarieties, I agree with you, thought for thought, in all your thinking about it -- only adding one more reason to the reasons you point out... There is another reason at the bottom of all, I think -- I cannot but think and it is just that, when women are chosen for wives, they are not chosen for companions -- that when they are selected to be loved, it is quite apart from life -- 'man's love is of man's life a thing apart.' A German Professor selects a woman who can merely stew prunes -- not because stewing prunes and reading Proclus make a delightful harmony, but because he wants his prunes stewed for him and chooses to read Proclus by himself. A fulness of sympathy, a sharing of life, one with another, ... is scarcely ever looked for except in a narrow conventional sense. Men like to come home and find a blazing fire and a smiling face and an hour of relaxation. Their serious thoughts, and earnest aims in life, they like to keep on one side. And this is the carrying out of love and marriage almost everywhere in the world -- and this, the degrading of women by both.

The sonnet XXII is an example of this theory of marriage of Elizabeth and Robert Browning. Elizabeth finds the equality of souls very important. Union in marriage is not the joining of two halves to make a whole, the one in charge of esoterica while the other takes care of exoterica. Instead, both parties ought to be or become whole person and contain the complementary aspects of human nature within themselves.

7Ibid., 421-22 (13 August, 1846).
Most women ask their lovers at some or other if they would really miss them if they died. It is a fatuous human question. Mrs. Browning asks in the sonnet XXIII from this perspective and from the experience of living too closely with the idea that death was imminent. Affirmation of love and life is again stated in this sonnet. It contrasts death and the effects on the loved one with images of love and sacrifices one might make for it:

Is it indeed so, if I lay here dead,  
Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?  

... I am thine -  
But... so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine  
While my hands tremble? Then my soul, instead  
Of dreams of death, resumes life's bower range.  
Then love me, Love! Look on me,... breathe on me!

[I. 1-2, 6-10, CPW, p. 219]

"I am thine," the persona sates, then breaks off to say, "so much to thee?" The idea of wine as expressing the communion of the lovers is again used here: "Can I pour thy wine/ while my hands tremble?" It is as if the persona decides to be strong for her lover. Line 9 reinforces the image of the preceding sonnet, the space to love in for a day. Brighter ladies may renounce wealth or titles; the persona here renounces death while at the same time affirming her faith and joy in God:

I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange  
My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

[I. 13-14, CPW, p. 219]
Because of the use of the imagery of death in the early lines of the sonnets, the reader may feel that the persona has lingering doubts or fears of death; which is a possibility. Such imagery is common in the early poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and its use of in the sequence provides great contrast between the former state of the persona and the present one, which is illumined by love.

The persona seeks isolation in sonnet XXIV, but not the isolation she earlier experiences in sonnet XX with snow and cold and loneliness; now she desires to be in the private world of warmth and love she has begun to experience. Images of enclosure are used here suggesting the oneness of the lovers and their being shut-away from disapproval. They are held by the hand of love. One is reminded of Rodin's sculpture, "The Hand of God," that cradles embracing figures. Noise too would be shut out:

Let the world's sharpness like a clasping knife
Shut in upon itself and do no harm
In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,
And let us hear no sound of human strife
After the click of the shutting.

[II. 1-5, CPW, p. 219]

The image of the world's sharpness suggests the lack of understanding of the interfering parents and families, lovers endure. This image is extended through line 9. The related words are: Clasping, knife [1.1]; shut, harm [1.2]; strife [1.4]; click [1.5]; stab [1.8] and injure [1.9]. It is love that shields and protects the lovers from the threat of the world.
The lovers, close as root and blossom, integrally one, grow "out of man's reach" [1.13].

The rejoicing in love of the speaker continues in sonnet xxv; past griefs and sorrows are objectified, as a necklace, "Sorrow after sorrow took the place/ Of all those natural joys as lightly worn/As the stringed pearls" over her heart. Eventually these sorrows weighed heavily upon her heart as sorrow changed to despair and the persona seemed to be beyond the reach of God's grace. Then, with the advent of love, the persona is able to share her burden:

...Then thou didst bid me bring
And let it drop adown thy calmly great
Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing
Which its own nature doth precipitate,
While thine doth close above it, mediating
Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.

[II. 9-14, CPW, p. 219]

As the lover has been a comforter, strong and powerful, in previous sonnets, so he is presented here as enclosing the persona in the warmth of his love. This image of safety in enclosure (which also suggests burial), occurs in "De Profundis," when the speaker wishes to hide herself in the earth to escape her grief. In this sonnet there is a sense of calmness and serenity in the diction of the sestet, suggesting the intervention of the lover between the stars, or heaven, representing eternal life, and the unaccomplished fate of her death.
In sonnet XXVI, the Poet reveals the change her lover brought in her dreams and illusions. She says: "I lived with visions for my company/Instead of men and women," [II. 1-2, CPW, p. 219]. But this illusion soon wearied her; the visions grew dusty, a word suggesting age and mortality. But all this is changed by her lover:

...Then THOU didst come -- to be
Beloved, what they seemed. Their shining fronts
Their songs, their splendors...
Met in thee,...

[II. 8-12, CPW, p. 22]

This satisfaction gives the persona not only joy but "satisfaction of all wants," more, it also represents a gift of God.

In sonnet XXVII, we again find rejoicing and affirmation of love. The speaker praises her lover for saving her by raising her from her prostrate passion "from this drear flat of earth" [1.2]. Also, he breathed new life into her, suggesting the breath of the Holy Spirit or the Hebraic spirit upon the waters. Both possibilities show Biblical influence in Mrs. Browning's work. After this introductory statement of 6 lines, the Poet uses repetition:

... My own, my own,
Who camest to me when the world was gone,
And I Who looked for only God, found thee!
I find thee;

[II. 6-9, CPW, p. 220]
This phrase, with its musical repetition, refers to the sense of isolation from the men of sonnet XXVI.

Instead of eternal life the persona had come to expect, she finds temporal love and renewed strength to face life: "I am safe, and strong, and glad" [II.9]. "I am safe" represents the tripping anapestic meter Mrs. Browning is fond of but uses little in this sonnet sequence. Its use here contains monosyllables that add weight and import to the adjectives; they fall on the regular metric beat, adding emphasis to their already strong form. These words also describe the transformation in the persona. She now feels as if she stands in the paradise of the Greek afterworld, the Elysian fields, filled with asphodel, the narcissus-like flower often mentioned in myth and legend. She has found Paradise on earth. There is a contrast of the state of the speaker before and after the advent of love [1.10-11]. More contrasts conclude the sonnet with references to good and bad; life and death.

The last comparison "That love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well" [II.14] has often been made throughout the sequence; its use here serves to emphasize her lover's worth and the power of love.

Sonnet XXVIII continues the joyous theme with reference to the love letters of the couple. Again there is a contrast of life and death; here it is not applied to the persona but is transferred to her letters. "They seem alive
and quiver/ing/ Against my tremulous hands," she states. The sonnet summarizes their relationship and records its progress. The persona recalls that in her lover's first statement of love, she felt weak and trembling:

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

[II. 9-10, CPW, p. 220]

Looking over this sonnet, one can even see the impetuous emotional quality of the writing in the uses of exclamation points and ellipses or dashes. The picture of the emotional persona, reading her letters in silence, is sharply thrown into relief by the image of God's will expressed as thunder. Thunder, sudden and loud, usually startles or frightens most people, in this case it represents the dramatic change in the persona's life. The sonnets from XX to XXVIII, show the persona revelling in the love her lover and the way the love of her lover has changed her.

Again from sonnet XXVIII to XXXIX, the doubts and uncertainties arise in the Poet's mind. She again and again seeks reassurance from her lover of his love for her. The opening lines of sonnet XXIX continue the thought of the preceding sonnet: the persona is thinking of her lover, as she has been again reading his letters. As she leaned upon him for protection from the world in sonnet XXIV, so she depicts the closeness of the two in this poem by using the metaphor of
a tree and its vine. She is a "wild vine," a description that accords with her impetuous nature. The persona wishes to exchange her thoughts for the real physical presence of her lover and thereby shatter her thoughts:

... as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down, -- burst, shattered everywhere!

[II. 8-11, CPW, p. 220]

In the concluding lines the persona expresses the thought that in the new atmosphere of her lover's presence, she does not think of him. Then she is pre-occupied with his nearness and absorbed by him. The use of the phrase 'new air' in line thirteen is an allusion to a change from the stale air of her sickroom in the Barrett home, which was kept closed and warm.

Again, doubts assail the Poet, because though she has accepted her lover's love, but on being alone, she feels sadness and a doubt that the light cast by love may come again. Sonnet XXX asks a question and shows the persona seeking reassurance from her lover:

Beloved, dost thou love? or did I see all
The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when
Two vehement light dilated my ideal,
For my soul's eyes?

[II. 10-13, CPW, p. 220]

Love is again described as light, this time the light of
The Poet doubts that the vision of love and the transport of glory she feels can be real: "Will that light come again?" She asks.

The persona moves through several sonnets showing an almost child-like reliance upon her lover, seeking reassurance and steadiness from him. Just to see him makes her feel complete and all her doubts are settled: "Thou comest! all is said without a word." Silence is used here to show the non-verbal communication between the lovers. When the lover comes, and looks at her, the persona is almost transported by joy; "I sit beneath thy looks,.../In the noon-sun," [II. 2-3, CPW, p. 220].

Again, the persona doubts her lover's warmth of love and questions him sonnet XXXV:

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
And be all to me?

[II. 1-2, CPW, p. 222]

Lines two to six catalogue the inevitable doubts felt when one home is to be left for another. She again wants assurance from her lover, that he will replace the feeling the persona has for her dead loved ones: "Wilt thou fill that place by me which is/Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?" Yet she pleads with her lover to enfold her in his heart, again using an image suggesting shelter and protection.

There is a restatement of the persona's doubts that her lover's constancy could be enduring: "When we met first and loved, I did not build/upon the event with marble"
That the fickle moon would see her lover faithful. Although, she has often renounced death for love in the sonnets, she has the lingering fear that concerns her lover: she would rather renounce the oneness and unity of their love if she, by loving him, might diminish the joy of his life: "If he, to keep one oath/Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold" [II. 13-14, CPW, p. 22]. The Poet exalts the virtues of her love in sonnet XXXIX. In these sonnets, the persona has praised her lover even as she explored some of her doubts.

From sonnet XL onwards, the Poet has finally accepted the love of her lover and glories in it. For her love is the very life of her. All doubts are settled. We can see in sonnet XXVI, "I lived with visions for my company," as a sonnet of transition. The movement is from doubt on the part of the speaker to acceptance of love. Thereafter from sonnet's XXVII to XXXIX. The Poet moves towards increasing security in love. The Poet talks of love of others, but in a tone of mild depreciation. Others have talked of love, even to her, she admits, but it is not love such as her partner brings in sonnet XL. The lover heals, brings spiritual ideas into her life, and has the power to wait. Only one person, her lover, paused to listen carefully to her song, neglecting his own music-making (or poetry) for her: "thou, who, in my voice's sink and fall/When the sob took it, thy divinest Art's/Own instrument didst drop down at
The persona cannot thank her lover enough for his love and attention. Earthly love does not seem to be adequate for her expression. She would like to do much more, calling upon her inner self:

... to shoot
My soul's full meaning into future years,
That they should lend it utterance, and salute
Love that endures, from life that disappears.

[II. 11-14, CPW, p. 223]

The persona concludes sonnet XLI with a wish that she could utter her soul. She leaves one with the idea of unending love even if life disappears.

The Poet has now fully accepted her love she had for her lover and vice versa, she now glorifies in it. She asks the important opening question in sonnet XLIII: "How Do I Love Thee?" The Poet says simply: "Let me count the ways." The thirteen lines that follow, chronicle the feelings of the Poet and relate to the entire sequence, she begins with a statement that contains abstractions:

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.

[II. 2-5, CPW, p. 223]

The modifying phrase "My soul can reach" shows the speaker stretching; the picture, is one of reaching and straining. She attempts to create a feeling of space. The image is almost Miltonic, as if the Poet seeks to stretch toward
Heaven, as do the powerful figures of Milton's work. The soul is reaching outward. The abstractions represent the persona's deep emotions:

I Love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely; as they turn from praise.

[II. 5-8, CPW, p. 223]

Lines four and five refer to the common ordinary needs that, for the Poet who prizes silence, are "most quiet needs." There is no time when the Poet does not wish to be with her lover. Line 7, "I Love thee freely, as men strive for Right," may seem abstract, but in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's values, right and freedom are very important. The poem continues:

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 breadth,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

[II. 9-14, CPW, p. 223]

In the discovery of her love for Robert Browning, she has regained the love she has missed since suffering bereavement at the loss of her brother and 'dead loved ones.'

This emotion accounts for the transforming effect love has had upon her, which is amply attested to in the sonnet sequence. The speaker Poet loves wholeheartedly and her emotions are ecstatic: "I love thee with the breadth, Smiles,
tears, of all my life!" of lines twelve and thirteen. The conclusion, with its incremental repression of the vow, circles back to the metaphysical idea of the first affirmation and reinforces the many ideas in the poetry about love enduring until eternity: "If God choose,/I shall but love thee better after death." This sonnet is the penultimate sonnet of the sequence, it embodies in compressed form, the many sentiments of the whole sequence.

Nevertheless, this is not her final sonnet. In the last sonnet XLIV, the persona is confident that her love is good and right and only hopes that it will have a good effect on the beloved. Zimmerman says, "Finally, in the envoy, the Poet... is no longer ashamed of her heart's flowers, her poems, for she knows that love has produced from a bed of "bitter weeds and rue something of beauty and worth."8

The sequence creates a parallel between the flowers exchanged by the lovers which Miss Barrett cared for very deeply and the poems she now presents to Robert Browning. Flowers in the romance languages stand for compliments, and certainly the lyric poems presented to the poet-lover constitute one of the most extravagant compliments ever paid to a man by a woman. Weaving these two ideas together, Mrs. Browning says, "Take back these thoughts which here unfolded ... From

my heart's ground." This metaphor is extended through the rest of the sonnet to refer to herself as a garden "overgrown with bitter weeds and rue" [I. 9, CPW, p. 224]. Yet among these weeds grow other plants. She offers her lover eglantine, or a rose, a word coming from Middle French, denoting love and Venus the goddess of love. She proffers ivy, the plant that represents passion and is dedicated to Dionysus. Then she ties the bouquet of the sonnets together with lines that round out the metaphor and show her sincerity and love for the Poet, for the poems have their origin in her soul:

...Yet here's eglantine,  
Here's ivy! - take them, as I used to do  
Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.  
Instruct thine eyes to keep their colors true,  
And tell thy soul their soots are left in mine.

[II. 10-14, CPW, p. 224]

The persona no longer asks favours of him and has the confidence to assume that her poems and her love will strengthen him.

John S. Philipson, commenting on sonnet XLIII finds a parallel to this sonnet in St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians III, 17-19. In this text, St. Paul states that the faithful may comprehend the extent of love - the limits of human love. For Elizabeth Barrett Browning her love for her husband is limited on earth by the trammels of her own mortality. Death will remove these "If God Choose." The idea of contrast between the love of God and the romantic love of man is one that can be found in each of the sonnets, whether the writer is protesting

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her inadequacy or extolling her lover. Her thoughts inevitably
turn toward God and the possibility of eternity with a loved
one.

In a recent book discussing literary women of the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ellen Moers notes that Ovid
"set himself the task of rewriting some of the great heroic
love stories of Greek and Roman antiquity from the Woman's
point of view." Using the epistology technique, Ovid created
heroines whose voices seemed to be immediate, fresh, spontaneous
and realistic.¹⁰ Moers feels that Mrs. Browning not only knew
and was influenced by Ovid's Heroids but she also consciously
used the tradition of Shakespeare and his lady. These
sonnets, Moers considers to be "a pure if not distinguished
sample of the Heroids tradition." Further, Moers states that
Mrs. Browning and other women poets of the nineteenth century
wrote the poetry consciously intending to reverse the tradition
of love poems by men.¹¹

The sonnets speak for themselves in the distinct
voice of their author, using terms and images. And the sonnets
fall along with the love poetry of Christina Rossetti, Emily
Bronte, and Emily Dickinson. One critic feels that this "series

¹⁰ Ellen Moers, Literary Women (New York: Doubleday & Co.,
¹¹ Ibid., pp. 164-65.
of love sonnets is worthy of being placed beside the great Elizabethan Cycles.\textsuperscript{12}

The form of the poems in the sonnet sequence is the Italian form used after Milton and Wordsworth, with a scarcely perceptible pause between the octave and sestet. The sense of many sonnets is organic; the thought - developed within the poem is unified, not divided within into proposition and response, or argument and solution. Many begin with a short question; the answer to this question is then given in the remaining lines of the poem, concluding with an epigram. The logical structure of the sonnet, is usually deductive, beginning with a general statement or question, moving to particular images to develop the idea, and closing with an epigram to comment upon the whole.

Shakespeare began twenty-three of his one hundred and fifty-four sonnets with a question, so it is possible that the suggestion for this form came from the Poet's study of Shakespeare. "Sonnets from the Portuguese is ... a unique norm for the amatory sequence."\textsuperscript{13}

The rhyme scheme of the sonnets is Italian, but only four rhymes are used in each sonnet. The sestet rhymes c-d-c-d-c-d. This form shows the relationship of the sonnets


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 19.
to those of Wordsworth and Milton, as Alethea Hayter notes. The sestet rhyme of the sonnets is often characterized by assonance: occasionally consonance also occurs. Sometimes the two rhyme variations are found within the same poem.

Mrs. Browning intended the sonnets as private poems, gifts to Robert Browning. For this reason she did not discuss their publication with others. For the sake of modesty and privacy the sonnets were first published under a title intended to veil their authorship. The sonnets are the extravagant complimentary gift of one poet to another. In them, Robert Browning is paid florid compliments, almost in the style of love poems of the Romance languages. He is extolled as a lover, a friend, a master-musician, a gracious singer and a princely giver. He is a crowned Poet who overshadows her (a prophecy that comes true in terms of critical regard for their work). He is noble and kingly; he has the touch of healing, and his love infuses new life into the poet. Her love and gratitude are intense and she abases herself, feeling unworthy of him, even after love transforms her. The lover is praised as a man who is almost divine, with the same angelic intensity Dante uses to praise Beatrice in the sonnets of the Vita Nuova. He is the hero who delivers her from the dragon of death. Several

critics use the analogy of Perseus and Andromeda as a parallel to the Brownings relationship.

The sonnets are a carefully crafted, almost ecstatic gift of one Poet to another, reflecting their private world and the excitement of their courtship. Yet the poems are elevated to a universal level by their treatment of love's uncertainty, the fears of losing love, and the feelings of unworthiness and joy that many women have at some time or other in an intense relationship. The careful craftsmanship and planning of the sequence show the effort to please a fellow Poet. The Sonnets from the Portuguese is an archetype of the lyric-amatory type in a period of literature that proved to be fertile ground for the sonneteer, leaving readers the legacy of Mrs. Browning's sonnet sequence, D.G. Rossetti's The House of Life, Christina Rossetti's Monna Innominata, and George Meredith's Modern Love.

Another poem with a related theme of love is "Life and Love" which appeared in the 1850 Poems. This lyric personifies the life of the speaker: Life is cold, lying in the snow, awaiting death. Love comes by, gently stoops, and lays upon her the "mystic chrism of holy hands" [St. II. CPW, p. 211]. Similarly, a kiss is "the Chrism of love" in sonnet XXXVIII. Love breaths on Life in this short lyric poem, as the lover has in several of the sonnets in the sequence, and Life looks up to see not what she had expected, but Love.
There is an evident parallel between this short poem and the first sonnet of the sequence, wherein not death but love speaks to and holds the poet by her hand.

"Love" was also celebrated after the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Browning. The sonnet "Love" published in Blackwood's Magazine, May 1847, after Browning's marriage, states in the sestet, the central theme of love:

> When a soul, by choice and conscience, doth
> Throw out her full force on another soul,
> The conscience and the concentration both
> Make mere life, Love. For life in perfect whole
> And aim consumated, is Love in sooth,
> As Nature's magnet-heart rounds pole with pole.

[II. 8-14, CPW, p. 198]

The Poet against states in this sonnet that life is love, as she has in many other poems.

Another poem of 1850 Poems, "Insufficiency," parallels the sonnets X and XI of Sonnets from the Portuguese, in which the persona despairingly says that she is unworthy of her lover and can only renounce him. "Inclusions" treats images of unity between two lovers, the hands touching, the cheeks pressed together. Here the persona is pale, with worn cheeks, as is the persona of the sonnets. The poem concludes with another central idea expressed by the sonnets: the lovers cannot keep physically apart when their souls mingle:

> Oh, must thou have my soul, Dear, conmingled with thy soul? -- Red grows the cheek, and warm the hand; the part is in the whole; Nor hands, nor cheeks keep separate, when soul is joined to soul.

[St. III, CPW, p. 213]
This idea is repeated in her poems and sonnets wherein the Poet states the two lovers must be spiritually united. This Poet shows the transformation and rejuvenation she undergoes because of love.

Love has been shown by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to be an essential condition of living, for without it one is incomplete. Elizabeth Browning in "Aurora Leigh" shows the importance of love in one's life. Aurora, the heroine of the poem, wants her independence and the right to devote her life to art. She does all this, only to find something wanting, for the lack of love casts a pall over all her work and makes her a miserable, incomplete woman. The treatment of the theme of love is one, which Elizabeth Browning expounded in all her poems, wherein women give their all and even die for love.

Aurora Leigh was termed by Mrs. Browning as a "Poetic art Novel." A verse of nine books, averaging over twelve hundred lines each, the poem records the events of Aurora's life, about her role in life - as a Poet and as woman. Aurora refuses Romney's proposal of marriage, on the basis that he didn't want a wife, but a woman who would work with him soothing the ravages of world:

...like a man
Who sees a woman as the complement
Of his sex merely.
Aurora wants to pursue her career for her art, as a Poet and she is ready to face all the difficulties that come across her way. She has a 'vocation - work to do' and she can live "At least my soul's life, without alms from men" [Book II].

Aurora succeeds in her vocation, as a Poet and in Book V, one sees the beginning of the changed attitudes of both characters, as both Aurora and Romney in their mellowing maturity come to see that the extreme stands of excessive optimism of their youth are neither necessary nor useful to them any more.

Aurora reviews her life as a Poet upto this point and finally admits indirectly that she does care about Romney and would like to be able to win him with her poetry, she despairs because her theory that poetry must have some influence on people has been proven false, for her poetry has not moved the one person she wants to move, him. In Book V, one sees the vibrant images of life and sexuality with which Aurora feels her more spiritual poetry must compete in order to bring people to higher sense of themselves in relation to God. Humbled because Romney is unmoved by her work, she regards her lofty hopes as chimerical. Then, she thinks that pleasing a man is not a sufficient justification for a woman to devote her life to writing, and she thinks angrily about the attitudes she as a woman sometimes has. She is determined to avoid the traps that typically beset women. She wants to avoid the pitfalls
of "Women, as they are." Neither fame, the "approbation of the
general race" [65], nor the approbation of one man shall be
her goal.

But, despite the success, both popular and critical,
of her work, it brings only partial satisfaction to Aurora:

...To have our books
Appraised by love, associated with love,
While we sit loveless! is it hard, you think? 
At least 'tis mournful. Fame, indeed, 'twas said,
Means simply love. It was a man said that:
And then, there's love and love; the love of all
(To risk in turn a woman's paradox)
Is but a small thing to the love of one.

[V. 474-81]

Aurora, sees the contradiction of being a successful
Poet of love who is unloved and alone. Because that makes her
sad, she says ironically that she is one more example of Romney's
assertion that women do not do well with generalization. She
has the generalized love of many and the particular love of
none. Her human needs are now stronger than the extraneous
demands that being a woman makes. She is in despair and admits
that she hungers for love - a particular, even mundane, love:

...and since
We needs must hunger, ... better, for man's love,
Than God's truth! better, for companions sweet,
Than great conviction! let us bear our weights,
Preferring dreary hearths to desert souls.
Well, well! they say we're envious,. we who rhyme;
But I, because I am a woman perhaps
And so ill, am ill at envying.

[V. 497-504]

Aurora, recognizes how sterile life is as a Poet in London and
as a woman without Romney, Aurora thinks even the dullest woman's role, by a "dreary hearth," would be preferable to the lifeless and sexless role she has lived so far. She envies other Poets not for their style or poetic successes but for their being loved by wives, parents and children.

Aurora feels that her career has demanded that she deny herself comforts enjoyed by most people... particularly most women, since she is a woman... she says rather poignantly, "I called the artist but a greatened man/He may be childless also, like a man/I labored on alone" [419-21].

Elizabeth Browning, shows the importance of love and family, besides one's own vocation, as Aurora has finally come to acknowledge. Though need for family in Aurora is still there, but she maintains her artistic and feminine integrity by refusing to debase herself simply by marrying someone she dislikes. She refuses the proposal of a Lord Eglinton and is forced to recognize her love for Romney. Her refusal, made when she is most desperate about her loveless life, shows that her union with Romney at the end of Novel is not a capitulation or merely an escape from a dreary life, but it is only love in its pure form that surpasses all this. Aurora's recognition and admission of love for Romney has been accomplished by her acknowledging that poetry, although sometimes useful, is merely words and not a substitute for life.

Aurora, realizes that her single mindedness about her career has been at the expense of her love for Romney and a life with him as a woman. Finally, free from all inhibitions owing
to social and moral obligations, Aurora and Romney look forward to life together with hope. They sing in antiphony, planning their life together in service and love.

Both of them agree that God's love and "the love of wedded souls" [882] are mysterious and they choose not to try to understand. Romney passes to Aurora the charge that he once felt, and he takes on the role of verbalizer:

Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfil
My falling short that must be! work for two,
As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall love!

[IX. 910-12]

Romney describes their future life embossed in their love:

...the world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.

[IX. 923-28]

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's theory of love comes at the conclusion of the poem, expanding the concept of love between individuals to include the influence of that love on the rest of the world with which they come into contact. Their vision projects a unity of love and work in both the personal and public realms. For Barrett Browning marrying the right person, whom one loves, and with whom one can enhance one's own best qualities is the ideal marriage. Love is a necessity and a deeply felt emotional need.
Hearken, hearken!
God speaketh to thy soul,
Using the supreme voice which doth confound.

["Aurora Leigh" Part III.CPW,p.39]