

IF THOU MUST LOVE ME

If Thou Must Love Me is sonnet no.14 of the collection Sonnets from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861). She was a major woman poet in the Victorian era (1830-1890) of English literature. Sonnets from the Portuguese is a collection of 44 love sonnets published in 1850. In the sonnets Elizabeth Barrett Browning shows her love for her future husband Robert Browning, who himself was a great Victorian poet.

The sonnet is in the Italian or Petrarchan form of sonnet with the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CD CD CD.

If Thou Must Love Me: Line by Line Explanation

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

In the very first line of the poem, the poet reveals her expectations from her lover. If the lover really wants to love her, he should love her for nothing but only for love's sake. **To make it easy:** Love me because of love and because of the essential eternal quality of love on earth. Love me for love's sake, not for any other reason.

Do not say
'I love her for her smile – her look – her way
Of speaking gently, – for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day' –

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning does not want to be loved for her physical beauty, gentle manner of speaking or her way of thinking. She asks her lover not to love her for her smile, her look or her gentle speaking. She also tells him that he may find some of her qualities compatible with him. The lover may discover that his thought process certainly matches with hers in a particular day. But the poet forbids him to show those as reasons for his love.

For those things in themselves, Beloved, may
Be changed, or change for thee, – and love so wrought,
May be unwrought so.

The poet in *If Thou Must Love Me* now explains why she disapproves of her physical charm or her nature as the reasons for his love. Those are transitory or short-lived. The poet's good looks can fade away with time. She can forget to smile. She may be rude in her speech in future. And the lover's thoughts may contradict with that of hers. Moreover, those things may change for the lover himself. He may not find the same thing beautiful enough with the passing of time. If the love is shaped (wrought) with such transitory materials that will be destroyed (unwrought) in the same way. So that love cannot be permanent. The lover (Robert Brown) should love Elizabeth sincerely and genuinely to make it last long.

Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,
A creature might forget to weep who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Sonnet *If Thou Must Love Me* doesn't want her lover to love her out of pity. He may be loving her to sympathize with her by wiping her tears from her cheeks. But the poet argues that she (compares herself to a creature) may forget to weep in future. She may not need a man to show sympathy. In that case, the lover may feel uncomfortable and she may lose his love.

But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

In the last two lines of the sonnet *If Thou Must Love Me* the poet conveys her **concept of ideal love**. She explains how a man should love a woman. That is, unconditional love –genuine and sincere love – love for love's sake only.

Only then, the lover may be able to love her forever, denying the grasp of Time, through love's eternity.