

How Do I Love Thee? – E B Browning

One of the first questions posed about any poem which is a little bit tricky, is 'what does it mean?' That question can be, in itself, a bit tricky. After all, students sitting exams are probably the only people to ask that question with any real urgency. Yet, as we've said before, the poet did not expect it to be studied, dissected, put under a microscope. Nor is it always possible to 'explain' a poem any more than it is possible to explain an oil painting or a piece of music.

However, because poems use words and we know words carry meanings, it's natural that we respond to poetry in a more explicitly intellectual way. Also, if you are a student studying a particular poem, you really do feel you have a need (even a right) to 'get it'. And that's what the teacher is for, right?

The aim here has never been a place to find out what a poem 'means', though. There are other sites that do that and one of the best I've come across is

www.shmoop.com/how-do-i-love-thee-sonnet-43/

It provides a very detailed look at the sonnet expressed in student-friendly language which can be slightly irritating but is, in the end, pretty well done. These are worth discussing with students rather than blindly accepting.

What we do try to do on this site is to provide ways of engaging students with poems. One way in to the mindset of the writer is to look for comparisons in song lyrics. Given that 90% of songs are about love in one form or another, there's no shortage. Browse <https://toloveforward.com/famous-romantic-songs-lyrics-that-will-make-you-believe-in-love-again/> or ask students to find their own songs which express the total commitment of 'I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach'. Romantic songs are given to a certain amount of hyperbole, so it shouldn't be difficult - 'Deep as the ocean / high as the sky...' and so on.

What, apart from modern idioms, distinguishes the Sonnet 43 from most song lyrics? For me, it is the tension between the boundless all-embracing nature of the love and the very restrained way in which it is expressed, a restraint heightened by the sonnet form itself. Ask students, how would she say or sing this lyric? Would they think, like me, that it would be sung intensely but softly – or would they imagine a current most popular singer belting it out as a power ballad? (YouTube provides a few interesting arrangements. If any students have musical ability, they could compose their own – or perhaps just the melody for the opening or closing lines.)