



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

Unit A2 2

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Content/Specification Section	Page
Starting Point	2
A01 Textual knowledge and understanding	5
A02 Poetic Methods	14
A03 Contexts	16
A04 Connections	18
Specimen Question	19
Useful Links and Activities	20
Appendix 1	21
Glossary of terms	22



Starting Point

In this Unit you will explore 16 of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems (listed in Appendix 1).

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poem or poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyze the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. **This AO is the driver of Unit A2 2: Section A and is of primary importance.**

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible;

illustrated, quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

analysed so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

related to the key term of the question.

2. Use of the terms "image" and "imagery"

For our purposes in this section "images" and "imagery" are to be sought and found in the language of the poems, and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as "In this poem the reader has the image of nature



as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is a figure of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification, etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. This feature, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified - here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated - a full and apt quotation should be selected;

analysed – so as to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved (e.g. through a consideration of the syntactical features of the quotation offered); and

related to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterisation or development) should be understood by students.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the poem(s).

No specific sources are prescribed or recommended. Nevertheless, the questions address a contextual issue – social, cultural, historical, biographical, or literary – and candidates will be expected to provide appropriate information from outside the text. Contextual information of the stipulated type which is made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Demonstrate knowledge of the context which shaped the poems** – this could include social, cultural, historical, biographical and/or literary detail.
- **Comment on the significance of chosen contextual information** – link your selected contextual details to their impact on the poems’ intention and/or creation.
- **Use only relevant contextual information appropriately applied** – as stated before, it is important to focus on what is actually asked and shape your information accordingly.

Be aware that while context is important in consolidating our understanding of the poetry, you should not overuse contextual information, especially at the expense of



textual analysis. A few contextual details, succinctly expressed and strictly related to the question, are far superior to entire paragraphs on the world outside of the poem(s).

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between and within poems discussing features such as similarities, contrasts, continuity and development in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore Barrett Browning's poetry. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that the text is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a writer's preoccupation may not receive explicit statement in a poem.



A01: Textual knowledge and understanding

As you read this guide, you will begin to develop knowledge and understanding of meaning and form your own interpretations of the poems. This guide will suggest areas for discussion and further research. You will need to adapt knowledge and understanding in order to frame an examination response that is relevant to the key terms of the question. You will need to support your ideas with relevant reference to the text, and present logical interpretations. You will need to use accurate and clear language and appropriate literary terms.

A summary of the content of each of the poems with a short commentary:

The Cry of the Children

This poem published in Barrett Browning's first collection of poems written in 1844 talks about the plight of children forced into working in the mines and factories. The poem exposes these dreadful conditions and describes the thoughts of those children with a plea for change, showing Barrett Browning's liberal political views.

The Mask

This poem published in 1850, allows Barrett Browning to discuss the need for a mask in polite but repressive Victorian society, and through her speaker she talks about the need of "a smiling face" even though she is grieving. The poem was written at the time that Barrett Browning was grieving after the death of her brother, Edward, by drowning in Torquay.

The next six poems all feature in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* from 1846, published in 1850. These are a sequence of 44 love sonnets written about her relationship with her husband Robert Browning, described by some critics as her "love poems"¹. Although she was originally hesitant to publish these intimate works, her husband persuaded her to do so, as he was confident of their quality. The use of the term Portuguese reflects Robert's nickname for his new wife as "my little Portuguese" and allows the works to appear as if they are translations of foreign sonnets.

The face of all the world is changed

This sonnet looks at Barrett Browning's journey from the despair of her illness and her depression to her *heavenly relationship* with her new husband, Robert Browning and how her life has totally changed. It is one of Barrett Browning's more spiritual works and considers issues concerning the soul and spiritualism.

What can I give thee back

This sonnet revolves around Barrett Browning's growing concerns that she is not able to match Robert's generosity in their new relationship. The gift Robert is giving is his heart and Barrett Browning is concerned with what to do in this moment as she feels physically

¹Introduction to *Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* - Sally Minogue - Wordsworth - 2015



incapable of matching this and asks Robert to understand the reasons for her inadequacy.

And yet, because thou overcomest so

In this sonnet, Barrett Browning feels overwhelmed by her lover and the power he has over her, but she recognizes the protection that he is offering her as originating in something “*noble*” and chivalrous in the way he behaves. For these reasons the speaker is willing to submit to his greatness.

Belovèd, my Belovèd, when I think

This sonnet looks at where Barrett Browning was emotionally, physically and mentally before she met Robert Browning. The first half of the sonnet allows Barrett Browning to reminisce about her painful situation; at the volta, the tone of the poem changes to one of wonder at her saviour and in this respect Robert Browning appears to take on god-like qualities.

Let the world’s sharpness like a clasp knife

This sonnet emphasises the mutual love that Barrett Browning has with her husband and that love is able to overcome all the pressures of the world around them. The metaphor of the knife is there as a potential threat to their bond but one that is overcome. The use of language to contrast danger with safety is a feature of this sonnet.

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange

The final sonnet in the collection for study is a monologue in which the speaker addresses her lover about the intensity of their relationship and the fear of loss. It is often considered to be one of Barrett Browning’s most emotional poems about the themes of companionship, love and heartache.

Hiram Powers’ Greek Slave

In this work, Barrett Browning uses the image of a Greek slave as an opportunity to discuss injustice. As a social reformer she was keen to outlaw slavery which was a major political topic when this poem was written in the late 1840’s. Hiram Powers was an American sculptor working in Italy and Barrett Browning hoped that by drawing attention to his famous sculpture of the slave, which she viewed, that art and universal truth would triumph over the evils of slavery.

A Curse for a Nation

This poem published in 1860, was one of Barrett Browning’s most controversial political poems. Differing interpretations of the main messages of the poem exist – is it a criticism of the corrupt political and social conditions within England and its misguided foreign policy, or a criticism of slavery in America? Whatever the true interpretation, Barrett Browning’s political indignation shines through.

A False Step

This poem published in 1862 is about missed opportunities and presents with sardonic irony a man whose affections have been thoughtlessly trodden on by a woman. In this respect critics have commented that this poem is the reverse of ‘My Heart and I’ discussed



below and, rarely for Barrett Browning, focuses on the feelings of a male.

Void in Law

This poem published in 1862 after Barrett Browning's death is a bitter lullaby to a child in the form of a dramatic monologue. The poem centres on a distressed woman who is left with a baby, after the departure of her *husband* who was legally bound elsewhere. The woman does not accept that a man can leave without taking on his responsibilities. The poem is full of religious undertones and painful tensions between the love the mother has for her child and for her lost lover.

My Heart and I

In this poem published in 1862 after Barrett Browning's death, the plight of *redundant women* (those left behind by their husbands' death) is looked at through a speaker mourning her dead lover and feeling a sense of desperation, tiredness and insignificance, and a resigned desire for her own death. Many critics have seen this poem as being Barrett Browning's epitaph and her belief that, even in the weariness of life, what matters most is to have been loved.

First News from Villa-Franca

This poem centres around the treaty of Villa-Franca that brought the end to the Austrian/French conflict in 1859. Barrett Browning was critical of the French for seeking peace as it exposed the independence movement in Italy of which she was a great supporter. This poem published after her death shows her deep political involvement with events of the time particularly in Italy, her adopted homeland.

The Forced Recruit

This poem was based on the battle of Solferino in 1859, on a series of incidents where Italian "*forced recruit[s]*" were compelled, if captured, to stand in the enemy Austrian ranks unarmed. This highly emotional piece and its deep pathos shows Barrett Browning's deep involvement in the fight for Italian independence, and her love for that country.

Mother and Poet

Written in 1861 and published after her death this poem reflects on a mother's suffering after the death of her two sons in war. The poem is nostalgic for times together but also shows an element of guilt. This lyrical poem, based on the work of the Italian poet and patriot Laura Savio also examines the fate of women and the pains of war.



Some of the themes in Barrett Browning's poetry with potential poem pairings (N.B. This list is not exhaustive):

Injustice – 'Hiram Powers' Greek Slave', 'Void in Law'.

'Hiram Powers' Greek Slave'.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- use of the sonnet form - compact, condensed and intense - to present an impassioned rejection of slavery;
- use of apostrophe to the statue: "*appeal, fair stone*" to convey the speaker's passionate appeal;
- use of violent imperatives: "*pierce to the centre*", "*break up*", "*strike*" - to stress the vigour with which the injustice of slavery should be attacked; and
- use of caesural pause "*not alone/ East's griefs but west, - and strike...*" - to draw attention to the suffering of slaves everywhere.

Love and Marriage – 'Belovèd, my Belovèd, when I think', 'If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange', 'And yet, because thou overcomest so', 'A False Step'

'Belovèd, my Belovèd, when I think'.

This is one of Barrett Browning's most celebrated sonnets where she compares her lonely life in the first part of the sonnet in the octave, with her new life with Robert in the second part in the sestet. This is Sonnet 20 in a sequence of 44 sonnets where gradually Barrett Browning appears to be growing in confidence and stature in this new relationship.

Critics have argued that what Barrett Browning has done in this sonnet is to manipulate the courtly love traditions with the traditional dominant male, and reverse this to allow the female to dominate in thought, word and physical desire. Barrett Browning shows here powerful passion for Robert and wonder at what has happened.

The image of loneliness, "*What time I sate alone*" refers to the time Barrett Browning was a recluse in her room prior to meeting Robert in 1845.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the sonnet form often uses one sustained simile or metaphor or central idea; in this case it is the change of lifestyle brought about in the last year with the passage of time and her new relationship with Robert;
- the imagery is very powerful in this sonnet - such as "*in the snow/ And saw no footprint*" and the imagery around the idea of the chain, "*link by link/ Went counting all my chains*";
- the impact of the volta which divides the two parts of the sonnet, "*why, thus I drink/ Of life's great cup of wonder*". The tone and language changes at this point from the "*chains*", the loneliness and "*the silence*" to the "*wonder*", "*thrill*" and "*blossoms*" of her new life;
- the religious imagery of the last two lines suggests that Robert has taken on god-like qualities to Elizabeth, and that being a non-believer (an atheist) must be dull. The strength of their spiritual love is emphasised here; and
- the rhyming pattern is one version of the Italian Petrarchan sonnet form, with Barrett Browning's preferred scheme for the sestet: abba, abba, cdcdcd. There is evidence too of Barrett Browning's disruption of the poetic line with her own very individual use of punctuation.



'If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange'.

This is much later in the sequence of the 44 sonnets and shows Barrett Browning experiencing some self-doubt in her relationship with Robert. She requires some reassurance from Robert that he is equally committed to the relationship, despite the lack of support from her father and the likelihood that she will have to leave home, lose her inheritance and "*miss/ Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss*". She is pleading for his support and an "*exchange*" in this sonnet, the tone of which is restless and anxious.

Barrett Browning appears convinced that the sacrifices will be worth it when they set up a "*new range/ Of walls and floors*", as they truly love one another. She is begging Robert to show her his true love, recognising that "*I have grieved so I am hard to love*".

The balance between what she could lose and what she has gained in this relationship is significant in this sonnet and feminist critics have suggested that this is an example of Barrett Browning "seeking a position free of dependency"².

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the rhyming pattern is typical of Barrett Browning's favoured style – abba, abba, cdcdcd;
- the speaker is clearly Barrett Browning and she is speaking directly to Robert. However she does not use his name and uses "*thee*" and "*thou*" in this personal piece when she says, "*Yet love me – wilt thou?*";
- the sonnet, in the form of a monologue, is full of questions of great intensity and is fevered in its approach. The contrasts in imagery between, for example, "*the common kiss*" and the "*dead eyes*" should be noted;
- the contrasting sections on "*grief*" and "*love*", with the suggestion that one needs to know one, to understand the other; and
- the symbol of the "*dove*" in the last line - is a symbol of purity and peace from its Christian origins, and also as critics have suggested of love and devotion.

Religion and Faith - 'The face of all the world is changed', 'What can I give thee back', 'Let the world's sharpness like a clasp knife'

'The face of all the world is changed'

In this sonnet in the early stages of the relationship between Barrett Browning and Robert, the poet expresses how love has completely changed her life and this sonnet is full of religious references and images related to God and the divine. The main phases of life from baptism to death are referred to, as are references to heaven and angels, as Barrett Browning's life takes on a new spiritual meaning and is totally transformed.

The double meaning of "*all the world has changed*" has been picked up by critics, Barrett Browning's personal circumstances have changed, but also the world around her in terms of industrial and political change.

Barrett Browning suggests she was on the verge of death, "*the outer brink/ Of obvious death*", before meeting Robert and these lines refer to her depression and continual illnesses before her spiritual resurrection into a state of "*heaven*".

This sonnet cleverly brings together their personal spiritual love, its physical warmth and the sense of safety, and expresses Barrett Browning's belief that love has a special and spiritual force beyond the needs of two people.

² *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics*
- Isobel Armstrong
- Routledge - 1996



Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the contrasts in language between the sombre past and the exciting present in such terms as “*dreadful outer brink*”, “*sink*” to “*lute and song*” and “*sweetness, Sweet*”. The first half of the sonnet concentrates on the past, the second half on the present situation;
- the changes of sound and the clever use of alliteration and assonance throughout the sonnet add to the feeling of high emotion and melodrama;
- the rhyming pattern is abba, abba, cdcdcd; also typical of Barrett Browning are examples of deliberate disruption to the poetic line as in Line 12;
- religious symbolism and imagery is evident throughout : “*this lute and song...the singing angels know*” and how her soul has been given a new baptism, “*The cup of dole*”; and
- Robert has taken on an almost god-like presence, “*Because thy name moves right*” and has taken on heroic almost chivalrous associations as a saviour as he “*stole*” closer to save her.

‘What can I give thee back’

This sonnet following on from the previous one shows some level of anxiety from Barrett Browning as she feels inadequate in what she can offer Robert in return for his generous love and his “*largesse*” given freely to her. Some of this anxiety is sexual as she feels inadequate and inexperienced alongside the youthful and vigorous Robert especially with the effects of her illness.

The opening line “*give thee back*” is a suggestion from Barrett Browning of wanting an equal relationship or a degree of mutuality.

In terms of the structure of the sonnet, the octave raises two questions which are then partly answered in the sestet. Barrett Browning is questioning her spiritual worth in this sonnet and feels unworthy, a feeling which God is aware of, “*Ask God who knows*”.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the use of colour imagery is powerful throughout. The colour purple is used by Barrett Browning and the suggestion here is that she cannot answer the “*purple*” vigour of her new lover or his heart of “*gold*”. Purple also has royal connotations. In contrast the speaker is “*pale*” in comparison and this colour has been the colour of her life;
- the rhyme scheme is abba, abba, cdcdcd typical of Browning’s manipulation of the Petrarchan sonnet form;
- the image of Robert as someone who is “*princely*” and royal and “*liberal*”, referring to his generosity but also possibly his political viewpoints;
- the use of very direct questions which are partly rhetorical;
- the metaphor of “*the wall*” and what each is offering and leaving for one another. Robert is offering his heart and he is leaving that on the wall as a gift for the speaker;
- the use of contrast – “*high*”/low, and their potential meanings in the sonnet; and
- the meaning and significance of the last line as a revelation of the thinking of the speaker.

Political Oppression - ‘The Cry of the Children’, ‘A Curse for a Nation’

‘The Cry of the Children’

This poem laments the fact that children are expected to work like slaves in the mines and factories of industrial England. The poem, one of Barrett Browning’s earliest works, is a cry



for help and for an understanding and appreciation of the vulnerable and exploited.

The poem was written in response to the 1843 'Report on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Mines and Manufactories' produced by Barrett Browning's friend Richard Horne in support of his recommendations for reform.

This poem is an early indication of Barrett Browning's use of poetry to make a strong social comment and can be seen as a parallel to the works of such authors as Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*) or William Blake ('The Chimney Sweeper').

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- this lengthy narrative poem is full of rich imagery, "*They are weeping in the playtime of others, / In the country of the free*", and "*the black flies that crawl along the ceiling*" and by providing this Barrett Browning draws the reader into the plight of the children with a tone of bitter indignation;
- there are clear contrasts of language between the images of a soulless industrial society, "*the wheels are droning, turning*" with the apparent heaven of the countryside with its serenity and peace, "*the young birds are chirping in the nest*", which is highly sentimental and nostalgic;
- the poem is full of questions: to the factory owners, to society in general and to the reader;
- the continual use of the senses – "*do ye hear*", smells, the repetition of references to eyes and seeing;
- the use of repetition is particularly important to emphasise the points being made: "*weeping*", "*old*";
- there is a clever use of irony using terms such as, "*In the country of the free*", "*In our happy Fatherland*"; but the conclusion, "*O cruel nation*" shows the speaker's real feelings; and
- the use of religious imagery throughout and questions about faith and potential religious doubt.

'A Curse for a Nation'

From the collection *Poems before Congress*, published in 1860, this poem shows, as most critics now argue, Barrett Browning's concern for the growing racial problems in America. Her correspondence with Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave her the impetus to write this poem. It is one of her most controversial poems.

It appears that the poem was written at the request of the Anti-Slavery Bazaar in Boston as an attack on slavery.

Feminist critics have looked at this poem as an example of the differences portrayed by Barrett Browning between the two sexes: "*To curse, choose men. / For I, a woman, have only known / How the heart melts*". The fact that the speaker is a woman discussing such significant political issues shows Barrett Browning's huge self-confidence in a male-dominated era.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- critics see this narrative poem as being one of Barrett Browning's most carefully constructed, with strong imagery and a very powerful message. The Prologue features a reported dialogue between the speaker and an "*angel*"; The Curse is uttered by the angel but recorded by the speaker in terms of the crime and the punishment. Each of the two sections has its own stanza form. The tone of indignation is present throughout;



- look at the place of the “*curse*” in the poem (it appears 24 times) – the pronouncement of it and its potential consequences. In this poem, the curse is Barrett Browning speaking out in her own voice. What does the curse represent - slavery?;
- the rhyming and rhythmic pattern in the first two lines of the stanzas, disruptions to the poetic lines and the structure as a whole, and the effective use of repetition should be noted;
- the use of political terms such as, “*oligarchic parliament*”, “*feudal law*” and the religious undertones and examples which are present throughout the poem, “*good men are praying erect,/ That Christ may avenge*”;
- the lack of specific place and name detail in the poem which is unlike Barrett Browning - why is this? One of the few references is the “*Western Sea*”; and
- the use of imagery of physical torture and mistreatment: “*strangling martyrs*”, “*throttle them backward*” and the use of sound to indicate the thunder of indignation and the overall sufferings of the under-privileged.

War and Death - ‘First News from Villa-Franca’, ‘The Forced Recruit’

Both of these poems centre on Barrett Browning’s interest and involvement in the Italian unification movement. She had a profound interest in this movement and the rights of the Italian people struggling against autocracy.

‘First News from Villa-Franca’

The Treaty of Villa-Franca signed in 1859 between the Emperors Francis Joseph of Austria and Napoleon III of France brought the Franco-Austrian war to a close, putting a temporary halt to the hopes of Italian reunification.

Barrett Browning in this work, published after her death, expresses her disappointment and bitterness in a strident way with lines such as, “*There is no peace, and shall be none*”, “*Our very Dead would cry ‘Absurd’*”. Her deep involvement with the Italian people was revealed by the bout of depression and illness which followed this event.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- this narrative poem is written from the perspective of the Italians whom Barrett Browning is representing in this piece as the “*we*”, whereas the opponents are the collective “*they*”, emphasising the idea of opposition. Barrett Browning’s anger emerges with terms such as “*cursed flag*”, “*Are we all blind/ Or mad*” in this melodramatic piece;
- the repetition of the term “*peace*” at the beginning of the stanzas and the use of question marks, the use of rhetorical devices and exaggerated punctuation disrupt the poetic line and emphasise her view on this peace and her bold stance in this poem. The use of the term “*liberty*” is significant suggesting peace has not brought this;
- the ways in which Louis Napoleon (and the other Emperor) is represented and the feeling that he has personally let the Italians down; and
- the use of religious imagery in the final stanza and the use of onomatopoeic terms such as, “*click and rush of the ball*”, “*crunch of the tooth*” in this stanza.

‘The Forced Recruit’

This poem centres on the battle of Solferino in 1859 where the French forces defeated the Austrians in Northern Italy. The poem describes the fate of the young men of Venice press-ganged to fight against their will on the side of the Austrians as “*forced recruit[s]*”, without any ammunition or hope of survival.

The poem emphasises the bravery of the “*fair-featured and slender*” Venetians who die as



heroes for the Italian cause as religious martyrs and focuses on one unnamed individual. The poem is highly emotional and is full of pathos but as Barrett Browning said of the poem, "It is so entirely the fact which makes the poetry...my only merit is telling it simply and clearly" .³

The poem was submitted to an English periodical *The Cornhill Magazine* perhaps in an attempt to court public sympathy for the Italian cause in England.

Poetic methods to consider (what follows is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive):

- the bold stance taken by Barrett Browning in this narrative poem and her use of rhetorical devices and disruptions to the poetic line to emphasise the points she is making;
- the extended metaphor of Italy as a political matriarch shown in terms such as "*filial obedience*" and "*the lips of her guns*";
- the powerful imagery of national emblems throughout: "*One tricolour [the Italian flag] floating above them*"; "*blazon the brass with their names*", the war memorials that follow;
- the contrast between the depiction of the Venetians, "*fair-featured and slender*" with the harshness depicting the Austrians, "*enemy tortured and goaded*"; and
- the use of emotional and melodramatic diction, "*tyrants who march in upon her*", "*tear me/ This badge of the Austrian away*". The entry of the poet in the final stanza with the clear message.

Listed below are some other themes that are worthy of consideration:

Women and their place in society - the theme of the wronged female and men's fickleness appears in several works such as 'Void in Law'. Women are seen as victims and throughout her works Barrett Browning presents an incisive view of the relationship between men and women. There was a slight change of emphasis during her time with Robert Browning but the role of women in society remained an abiding theme, as was picked up by feminist critics. The theme of Women's Suffering is explored in 'Mother and Poet', 'The Mask', 'My Heart and I'.

Classical Greece and Rome - the classics were a lifelong absorption for Barrett Browning, who taught herself Ancient Greek and Hebrew and referenced her interest throughout her poetry, perhaps to ensure that she would be accepted as a committed and respected writer. 'The Cry of the Children' begins with an epigraph from the *Medea*, an ancient Greek tragedy.

N.B. The selection of poems under the thematic headings are offered merely as guidance for the student. Many of the poems in the Anthology will relate to a number of themes. The important examination issue is to choose a poem that may convincingly be argued to express the theme identified in the question.

³ *The Brownings' Correspondence*
- Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson
- Wedgestone Press - 1989



A02 Poetic Methods

You will need to analyse ways in which the poet uses form, structure, language and tone to shape meanings in poems. You will need to communicate clear, well-developed exploration of the writer's methods, in relation to the key terms of the question.

As Simon Avery has commented, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the great experimenters in nineteenth-century poetry...particularly for her innovative and challenging verse"⁴. Her poetry as she said "was not without traces of individual thinking and feeling"⁵. She is known as a poet who pushed the boundaries of poetic convention.

General stylistic conventions include but are not limited to:

Archaisms and Archaic Language

In many of her poems Barrett Browning uses archaisms and archaic language. The use of these out-of-date expressions is to achieve particular effects. She is also known for her inventive use of vocabulary, particularly the use of idiomatic expression and neologisms.

Poetic Form and Versification

Barrett Browning's poetry can be divided into four types of verse:

The Ballad or Romance - in her earlier poetry this was Barrett Browning's preferred form. Such poetry contained a refrain at the end of each stanza, a highly structured rhyme scheme combined with colloquial language and fanciful or exaggerated elements. This true romantic form she inherited from poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge and employed in poems such as 'The Romance of the Swan's Nest'.

The Lyrical - used extensively throughout her career, these poems had a song-like structure and rhyme scheme, with a simple rhythm and with highly emotional content uttered by a single speaker; poems that are highly lyrical include 'Void in Law' which is written as a lullaby and 'Mother and Poet'.

The Narrative - where Barrett Browning tells a story, normally at length. This style was often adopted in her later poems centring on Italy such as 'First News from Villa-Franca' or 'The Forced Recruit'. She published *Aurora Leigh* in 1856 which she described as "a novel in verse" telling the life story of a woman writer and showing a concern with the rights of women.

The Sonnet - Barrett Browning used the sonnet extensively, a fourteen line structure with a strict rhyming pattern and using iambic pentameters. Sonnets were ideally suited to Barrett Browning's poetic temperament and were in contrast to her much lengthier poems. These sonnets are full of feeling and emotion and normally expressive of one central idea. The most famous of these are the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and other poems such as 'Hiram Powers' Greek Slave'.

Within these forms of versification, Barrett Browning experimented extensively particularly with the use of rhymed couplets and accentual verse.

⁴ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: style, subject and reception* - Simon Avery - Longman - 2011

⁵ *The Brownings' Correspondence* - Ed - Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson - Wedgestone Press - 1989



Innovative Rhyming

Barrett Browning took a special interest in the effects of rhyme and prided herself on her innovations in this area. She is particularly known for her use of half rhyme. 'The Cry of the Children' in particular was known for the "roughness of the rhyme". She was also known for her use of sight rhymes and double rhymes. Many critics saw her as a clever "arranger of words, phrases and rhythms"⁶, which added to the emotion and at times mournful nature of her works.

Other notable poetic features

Imagery

Barrett Browning is renowned for her use of imagery which allows her poetry "to sparkle with effective meaning". A good example of this from 'Void in Law' is the line "*Her throat has the antelope curve*" but there are many others. Some of her imagery in the sonnets to describe the female body was criticised severely by conservative critics at the time as being shocking and inappropriate. Biblical, religious and classical imagery is also used extensively throughout her works and particularly in such poems as 'Hiram Powers' Greek Slave'.

Style and Subject

Her 1844 volume showed Barrett Browning's desire to take on challenging subject matter and this continued throughout her career. She experimented stylistically to achieve her effect, particularly in her later works where she wrote of Italian unification. As she said, "never flinch but deal boldly with modern life"⁸.

Barrett Browning took a bold stance with the use of rhetoric for example in her use of questions, repetitions and direct address to present arguments, particularly in such poems as 'The Forced Recruit'. This often coincided with disruption to the poetic line through the experimental use of punctuation: dashes, ellipses and capitalisation, etc.

⁶ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*
- Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott
- Longman - 2003
⁷ *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*
- Sally Minogue
- Wordsworth - 2015
⁸ *The Brownings' Correspondence*
- Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson
- Wedgestone Press - 1989



A03 Contexts

Elizabeth Barrett Browning - her life and work

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in 1806 in Durham, the daughter of a wealthy retired Jamaican plantation owner, and one of eleven brothers and sisters in the Barrett family. Her family home in Malvern was full of privilege, lorded over by her loving but imperious father, and she was an accomplished and well-read child especially in the classics and the political writers of the eighteenth century. She had a voracious thirst for knowledge.

From 1821 she suffered from a nervous disorder and growing frailty, and this led to bouts of depression which worsened when her mother died in 1828, and her favourite brother Edward drowned in Torquay in 1838. Her religion stayed with her throughout her life. She was a member of the Methodist faith and this helped her through a lifetime of ill health.

She wrote her first poem at the age of 12. She described this work as “Pope’s Homer done over again, or rather undone”⁹. After the family’s move to London in 1837, Elizabeth’s fascination with the literary world grew. Because of her illness and bouts of depression she lived as a recluse but she continued to write. Her first major work *The Seraphim and Other Poems* appeared in 1838.

Her **friendship** with her cousin John Kenyon, a wealthy patron was of great importance, allowing her to publish the critically acclaimed *Poems* in 1844. One of her admirers was Robert Browning who wrote, “I love your verses, with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett”¹⁰. He arranged to meet Elizabeth in 1845, beginning one of the great literary courtships which ended in marriage in 1846 (despite her father’s disapproval), and soon after they left for Italy and in 1849 they had their only child.

Elizabeth could never really believe that the younger, worldly and vigorous Robert Browning could love her and these doubts were expressed in her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* which she finally published in 1850. These were highly acclaimed and there were calls for her in 1850 to become the next Poet Laureate but instead the post went to Tennyson.

Other works followed: *Casa Guidi Windows* in 1851, the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* in 1857, *Poems before Congress* in 1860 and the *Last Poems* in 1862 (posthumously).

Barrett Browning had a wide circle of artistic friends that included: William Thackeray the novelist, Harriet Beecher Stowe the American author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, fellow poets Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson, social reformer John Ruskin and the sculptor Harriet Hosmer whom she described as “the perfectly emancipated female”¹¹. Her various letters to these friends about her work have been an invaluable source in interpreting her works. She was also influenced extensively in her works by the Romantic poets such as Byron and Shelley, political reformers such as Wilberforce and Garibaldi and social reformers such as Henry Mayhew.

She died in 1862 in Robert Browning’s arms in Florence in her beloved Italy where she had been at her happiest and had found personal fulfilment. Robert Browning’s tribute

⁹ *Preface to Poems* - Elizabeth Barrett Browning - 1844

¹⁰ *The Brownings’ Correspondence* - Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson - Wedgestone Press - 1989

¹¹ *The Brownings’ Correspondence* - Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson - Wedgestone Press - 1989



to his wife was: “The simple truth is that she was the poet and I the clever person by comparison”¹².

Elizabeth Barrett Browning - her political, social and philosophical views

Elizabeth Barrett Browning on being a poet: her view of “the mission of a poet was that it meant self-abnegation above all, that if knowledge is power, suffering should be acceptable as a part of knowledge.... Poetry has been as serious a thing to me as life itself”¹³.

Much of Barrett Browning’s poetry deals with the injustices which she saw going on around her: the slave trade in America (her poetry was published in an abolitionist journal in Boston); the oppression of the Italians by the Austrians (her residence in Italy gave her sympathy for the Italian cause which she saw as resisting oppression); child labour and poverty (as seen in poems such as ‘The Cry for the Children’); the restrictions placed on women, their subjugation by males and the lack of protection in the law for those who needed it. As a social and political liberal she fought many causes, not frightened to alienate those around her including the political system of the country of her birth. However, earlier optimism turned to later disillusion in her writings.

Much of Barrett Browning’s work carries a religious theme, especially her sonnets where religious imagery abounds. She believed that “Christ’s religion is essentially poetry”¹⁴ and her interest in the Greek Christian poets was particularly strong as was her interest in theological debate. To many critics, this lifelong Christian has emerged as the “Christian woman poet of the Victorian Age”¹⁵.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning - her literary legacy and critical opinion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was held in high esteem by her contemporaries as perhaps the most influential female poet of the nineteenth century and she influenced many other female poets and authors who followed such as Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, but she was overshadowed by the male poets of the time such as Tennyson and her husband Robert Browning.

In 1850 when the Poet Laureate position was being considered, *The Athenaeum* periodical commented: “There is no other living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim”.¹⁶ She was popular in the United States where her views on freedom and enlightenment were particularly valued. Of late she has received less attention apart from that of the strong feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s, who saw her as a poet who dealt with gender issues ahead of her time and argued that her “feminist enlightenment”¹⁷ proved an inspiration for those who followed her. In this respect Barrett Browning’s passionate belief in the value of women’s intellect and emotions has been highly esteemed.

Although Barrett Browning can be considered as a Romantic in the Victorian context, the innovative and experimental nature of her poetry was particularly recognised: her experimental ballads, her subversion through the female voice, her revival of the sonnet and her personalisation of the causes that she took up.

Her legacy as a strong and independent woman who embraced work and love has made her popular amongst female critics especially as she created female characters who take centre stage such as the poetess in *Aurora Leigh* and the lead speaker in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.

She was an avid writer and her output was huge - her complete *Poetical Works* run to over 600 pages.

¹² *The Brownings’ Correspondence* - Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson - Wedgestone Press - 1989
¹³ *Preface to Poems* - Elizabeth Barrett Browning - 1844

¹⁴ *The Brownings’ Correspondence* - Ed Phillip Kelley and Ronald Hudson - Wedgestone Press - 1989

¹⁵ *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* - Michael Galchinsky - 2003

¹⁶ *The Athenaeum* - April 1850

¹⁷ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* - Margaret Foster - Chatto and Windus - 1988



A04 Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the given poem and the second poem selected in the exam.

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within and between Barrett Browning's poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

To meet the requirements of this Assessment Objective, you must:

- **Explore the connections** between the poem printed in the Resource Booklet and the poem you choose, and the external/contextual information you have studied. Always bear in mind that the Driving Objective for this unit is **A02** (Poetic Methods).
- **Note both similarities and differences** – this could be between voices, themes, aspects of imagery or any other techniques you find.
- **Make sure the connections noted are significant and relevant.**



Specimen question:

By referring closely to the Extract from *Mother and Poet* (Extract **6(b)**), printed in the accompanying Resource Booklet and one other appropriately selected poem, and making use of relevant external contextual information on the position of women in nineteenth-century society, examine the poetic methods which Browning uses to write about the theme of women's suffering.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of each poem.

'Mother and Poet'

A02

- Use of the monologue form to articulate the suffering of a woman who has lost both her sons in the war for Italian independence.
- Use of iambic and anapaestic metres to create a vigorous rhythm which helps to convey the speaker's pain, anger and suffering (e.g. stanza 3).
- Use of contrast between the speaker's experience of sorrow and suffering – "*I fell down at his feet*" - with the public mood of celebration, "*triumph at Turin*", "*cheers in the street*", "*they cheered in the street*".
- Use of imagery related to pain and restriction, "*Cling*", "*strangle*", "*stings*" - applied to motherhood to give a further sense of the speaker's suffering.

A03

The position of women in nineteenth-century society:

- Barrett Browning was writing in a pre-feminist era when many women had limited rights and opportunities.
- Women were disadvantaged e.g. in their right to divorce, in inheritance matters, in their right to child custody, in legal matters; a woman was of lower status than a man.
- Career opportunities were limited, particularly for 'ladies' or gentlewomen.
- The exclusion of women from the realm of practical affairs coincided with an elevation of their authority in areas of morals, religion and decorum.

Other poems that could be studied alongside the named poem include: 'The Mask' or 'My Heart and I'.

Remember:

- Stick to the key terms used in the question
- Think what the question is really asking you to do
- Make connections throughout, demonstrating your knowledge of the poems and the poet, and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.



Useful Links and Activities

Some questions to consider about Barrett Browning.

While bearing the structure of the examination questions in mind, you may wish to consider the following general ideas:

- Was Barrett Browning a pessimist or an optimist?
- Was Barrett Browning's disruption of poetic conventions appropriate or necessary?
- Which of the forms of versification best suit Barrett Browning's writing?
- How well does Barrett Browning deal in her poetry with the misfortunes of war or the misfortunes of life?
- Has Barrett Browning's poetry been underestimated in the modern age?

Links to other resources / Suggestions for further reading

The following works are useful for further study:

- Dorothy Hewlett - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Life* - Cassell - 1953
- Peter Dally - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Psychological Portrait* - Macmillan - 1989
- Angela Leighton - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* - Harvester - 1986
- Sally Minogue - *The Collected Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* - Wordsworth - 2015
- Margaret Forster - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: A Biography* - Chatto and Windus - 1988
- Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* - Longman - 2003

The whole collection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems can be found online at:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/>

The film – *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934/1957) - looks at Elizabeth's relationship with Robert Browning based on the play by Rudolph Besier which is still available to buy.

Teaching resources on Elizabeth Barrett Browning can be found at:

www.webenglishteacher.com

www.bl.uk – with some interesting sections on poetic methods

www.victorianweb.org – mainly biographical

www.poetryfoundation.org

www.poetry-archive.com – with a series of poetry readings



Appendix 1

Selected Poems named for study:

The Cry of the Children

The Mask

The face of all the world is changed

What can I give thee back

And yet, because thou overcomest so

Belovèd, my Belovèd, when I think

Let the world's sharpness like a clasping knife

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange

Hiram Powers' Greek Slave

A Curse for a Nation

A False Step

Void in Law

My Heart and I

First News from Villa-Franca

The Forced Recruit

Mother and Poet

**GLOSSARY** - this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Aesthetic theory	the name given to the philosophical study of the nature of beauty through its appreciation and definition.
Allegory	a story for which there is a hidden second meaning beyond the autonomous narrative.
Alliteration	the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity.
Apostrophe	a rhetorical term for a speech addressed to a person, idea or thing which may not be present.
Assonance	the repetition of vowel sounds across words to help create a consistent effect. It can be quite subtle, so only comment on it if you can feel you can link it to the effect created. As with alliteration, these can be various.
Ballad	a poem which tells a story in simple, colloquial language.
Bathos	a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
Cadence	inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
Caesura	a break or pause in the middle of the poetic line, usually indicated by a punctuation mark such as a semi-colon, colon or full stop. The effect is to break the rhythm of the line.
Colloquial	language of everyday speech as opposed to formal language.
Conceit	a far-fetched metaphor which compares two things which are dissimilar, with the intention of producing shock or surprise or amusement.
Diction	the language used in a work of literature to enhance meaning or establish register. This term particularly applies to vocabulary choices but is not limited to these.
Elegy	an elaborate formal poem lamenting the death of a single person or of a group.
Epigram	a short, pithy saying, conveying a profound thought in an economical and arresting way.



Hyperbole	language that uses exaggeration for particular effect.
Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects. (See advice on discussing imagery).
Lyric	a poem, usually short, expressing the intense feelings and thoughts of an individual speaker.
Melodramatic	writing tending towards the sensational or exaggerated.
Metaphor	where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Meter/Metre	metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
Metonymy	a figure of speech where a word associated with the subject is substituted for the subject (e.g. “fin” for “fish”).
Monologue	a long speech made by one character.
Motif	a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.
Persona	See speaker.
Personification	to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
Register	a kind of language being used especially appropriate to a certain situation.
Rhetoric	the art of using language to persuade; rhetoric takes in a range of devices.
Rhetorical question	a question which does not require or cannot receive an answer; it is used for a number of purposes.
Simile	where something is directly compared to something else, using “like” or “as”.
Sonnet	a lyrical poem of 14 lines of iambic pentameter rhymed and intricately organised. There are several forms, the Petrarchan with an eight line octave, followed by a six line sestet or the Shakespearean sonnet based on quatrains.
Speaker	the person or speaking voice narrating the poem, often but not always associated with the poet.



**Symbol/
symbolism**

where what is shown, often a material object (the symbol) comes by association to stand for or represent something else, usually non-material.

Theme

a main idea or concern explored in a work of art.

Tone

the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, conveyed through use of language, rhythm and punctuation. (See advice on tone).