

READING UP THE VERSE PATTERN OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S *HOW DO I LOVE THEE?*

Ariya Jati

Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang

Abstract: Reading a poem is systematic, distinctive and patterned. Written as a sonnet, *How do I Love Thee?* is akin to neither Shakespearean nor Petrarchan sonnet. The verse pattern of the sonnet is typical: it is composed of two quatrains and one sestet, rhyming in *abba abba ababab*. Each iambic pentameter line of the sonnet is isochronous. The alliteration and assonance associate the words deployed to express the greatness of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feeling of love.

Key words: Shakespearean sonnet, Petrarchan sonnet, iambic pentameter, isochrony

Reading a poem is unlike reading any other reading materials. The reading of a magazine, leaflet, textbook or newspaper is not carried out systematically. In reading a newspaper article, for an instance, there is hardly a restricted manner. The article can be read very quickly or very slowly. Paragraphs of the article can be read at loose reading speed. Such reading of the article renders to its readers different reading time. One reader may take up a few seconds for her/ his reading of the article whereas others may need more time to finish it.

The reading of a poem, however, is performed systematically. In reading a poem there is a restricted manner constituting the order of the reading. The poem can only be read properly. Verses of the poem can only be read at the right reading speed. The reading of the poem renders to its readers generally the same reading time. Thus, one reader takes up relatively equal time to that of other readers for their reading of the poem.

Reading a poem is not similar to reading other literary works either. The reading of a novel or drama can not be carried out similarly as that of a poem. A novel is generally read ordinarily. It is written in a lengthy prose. The novel usually lacks rhythmic patterns found in a poem. The reading of the novel may likely take up as long as that of any other ordinary writings. And the reading of the novel is unlikely at the same tempo as that of the poem. Hence one's reading pace of the novel is distinguishable from her/ his reading pace of the poem.

A drama is generally read ordinarily, too. It is written in a dialogue. The dialogue of the drama is normally pronounced in ordinary speech. Stresses and pauses of the drama are commonly placed as those of everyday vocalizations. The reading of the drama is unlikely of the same intonation as that of the poem. Hence one's reading articulation of the drama is distinguishable from her/ his reading articulation of the poem.

Reading a poem is distinctive. The distinctiveness of the reading of the poem actually lies in the poem's limited construction. The construction is structurally confined to lines in verses. A poem is constructed in a certain number of verses. And each verse has few lines only. The construction shapes the pattern of the poem. And the pattern shapes the manner of the reading of the poem.

A poem is read verse by verse. Each verse is read line by line. Each line is read word by word. And each word is read syllable by syllable. One syllable is read with stress and the other one without stress. In a word of three syllables, for example, one syllable in the word may be stressed and the other two unstressed. These stressed and unstressed syllables in words mark a pattern of stress in a line. The stops in reading a number of words before another one, moreover, mark a pattern of pauses. And the recurring patterns of stress in lines of a verse mark a pattern of rhythm.

Reading a poem is then patterned. How a poem is read is outlined by the construction of the poem. Although the poem is, for an instance, constructed in a three-line verse with just one word on each line, the poem deserves a proper reading. The reading of the poem swifts at a right pace for the poem has its tempo. The reading also swifts harmoniously for the poem has its beat. In this sense, the poem has its pattern of stress, pause and rhythm. So, the reading of the poem has to consider the poem's pattern of stress, pause and rhythm.

THE VERSE PATTERN IN *HOW DO I LOVE THEE?*

A poem can be constructed in two or three verses. A poem can as well be constructed in only one verse. In fact, one of the most widespread forms of a poem construction is a poem constructed in a single verse. The verse consists of a number of lines, constituting the whole poem. The reading the poem is therefore restricted to the lines and patterned by the stress, pause and rhythm of the verse.

Amidst numerous lines within which a poem is constructed in a verse, a poem of a fourteen-line verse is frequent. Such a construction of a poem is labeled as a sonnet.

The reading of a sonnet, like that of other types of a poem, has to consider the sonnet's pattern of stress, pauses and rhythm. The sonnet must be read up with awareness so as for its readers to be able to decipher the meaning of the sonnet and to interpret it. Through the pattern of stress, pause and rhythm, the reading of the sonnet strides on line by line to reach the meaning which the writer of the sonnet has intended her/ his sonnet to bear.

The sonnet originated in Italy (Morner and Rausch, 1991: 206 -- 207). The sonnet was recorded to have been there since the thirteenth century. It was developed by the Italian poet Petrarch and was brought to England by Sir Thomas Wyatt. The sonnet was modified by the Earl of Surrey and by William Shakespeare as well as by poets since Shakespeare. There are two most important types of sonnets.

The two most important types of sonnets are the Italian (or Petrarchan) and the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet. The Italian sonnet is organized into two parts—an octave and a sestet. The Italian sonnet lines rhyme in *abba, abba, cde, cde*. The English sonnet, however, is organized into three quatrains and a couplet. The English sonnet lines rhyme in *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*.

English has been well recognized for its sonnet writings, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been one of the greatest sonnet writers in English (Briggs, A. D. P., 1999: 50 – 51). Together with her are prominent figures such as Philip Sydney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Donne, John Milton and William Wordsworth. Besides that the following names have had the tribute as great sonnet writers. They are John Keats, D.G. Rossetti, Henry W. Longfellow, Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay and W.H. Auden.

How do I Love Thee? is a case of point of sonnets written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This sonnet is brought in this paper to be read up for the meaning borne in the sonnet. The reading of the sonnet is foremostly carried out to describe the pattern of stress, pause and rhythm which the sonnet possesses. The reading is later on carried out to bring out the meaning induced by the pattern.

The following lines are a citation of *How do I Love Thee?*

How do I Love Thee?
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,
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.
I love thee to the level of everyday'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.
 I love thee with the passion put to use
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood 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.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

SCANSION ON *HOW DO I LOVE THEE?*

Each line of *How do I Love Thee?* is significant in the reading of the sonnet. The line affects the way readers read and hear the sonnet (Freeborn, 1996: 142). The line possesses rhythm sensible to the readers when they read or hear the sonnet. Hearing the reading along each line of the sonnet, the readers can feel a foot tapping on the floor at a regular basis. Or they may even tap their foot when they read one. It is because each line of the sonnet is marked by rhythmic patterns produced by the stressed and unstressed syllables within the words on the line.

Below is how each line of *How do I Love Thee?* Is patterned according to the stressed and unstressed syllables on each line as well as to the pause between the two adjacent lines.

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
 How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

x / x / x / x / (/ /)
 For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)

I love thee to the level of everyday's

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

x / x / x / x / x / (/ /)
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
I love thee with the passion put to use

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
In my old griefs, and with my childhood faith

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
With my lost saints – I love thee with the breadth,

x / x / x / x / x / (x /)
Smiles, tears of all my life! – and if God choose,

x / x / x / x / x / (/ /)
I shall but love thee better after death.

Meter

Each line of *How do I Love Thee?* is marked by a series of unstressed (x) and stressed (/) syllables. There is regularity in the series of the unstressed syllables as well as the stressed ones within the line of the verse. The series starts with an unstressed part that is followed by a stressed one of the syllables of the words within the line, making up the pattern of rhythm of the line. The series of the unstressed

and stressed syllable repeats itself within the line, making up the meter of the line. The meter is the name given to the regular patterning in verse of stressed and unstressed syllables (Wales, 2001: 253).

It is observable that *How do I Love Thee?* possesses an iambic foot in each of its line. The sonnet, moreover, possesses five feet within each of the line, making up a pentameter line. A pentameter is a line containing five feet (Burton, 1974: 172). Such a series of typical pattern of the line recurs similarly along the lines of the sonnet, making up the prosody of *How do I Love Thee?* It can then be stated that the prosody of the sonnet is iambic pentameter.

At the end of each line there is another metrical foot in bracket. The metrical foot seemingly gives a pause the reading of one line of the sonnet before another following line. The pause can be recognized as an iamb and a spondee. The iamb is present on the first, second and third line; whereas the spondee is present on the fourth line. The iamb and spondee are also present in a similar order on the fifth, sixth, seventh and eight line consecutively. The presence of pauses in such an order forms a quatrain.

The iamb, moreover, is present on the ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth line. The iamb is followed by the spondee on the fourteenth line. The presence of pauses in such an order forms a sestet. In the sonnet there is a typical order of the pauses at the end of each line. From the first line to the fourteenth line the order lets the readers of the sonnet see that *How do I Love Thee?* is constructed of two metrical feet. The sonnet is constructed of two quatrains and one sestet.

Rhyme

How do I Love Thee? possesses two rhymes in the two metrical feet. Rhyme itself is a kind of phonetic echo or phonemic matching found in verse (Wales, 2001: 346). The rhymes tap on *-ays* (line 1) or *-ace* (line 4) and *-ight* (line 2 and 3) in the first quartet lines. The quartet lines rhyme in *abba*. The rhymes tap on *-ay's* (line 5) or *-aise* (line 8) and *-ight* (line 6 and 7) in the second quartet lines. The quartet lines rhyme in *abba*. The remaining rhymes tap on *-use* (line 9) or *-ose* (line 11) or *-oose* (line 13) and *-aith* (line 10) or *-reath* (line 12) and *-eath* (line 14). The sextet lines rhyme in *ababab*. The whole sonnet, therefore, rhymes in *abba abba ababab*.

Alliteration and Assonance

Each line of *How do I Love Thee?* alliterates repetitiously. Alliteration is the repetition of the initial consonant in two or more words (Wales, 2001: 14). On each line the consonant of one word rhymes initially with the other one. In the sonnet alliteration is used to suggest what is being described by the association of sounds. So, the rhyming words are deployed to suggest cohesion in each line so as for them to become emphatically interpreted.

In the sonnet each line also assonances strappingly. Assonance is used for a variety of expressive effects (Wales, 2001: 33). In the sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning the double assonance on each line enforces the lexical link of the stressed words and suggests certain effect. So, the rhyming words are deployed to, moreover, suggest association of what is being described with what is being intended by the writer of the sonnet on each line.

The alliteration and assonance in *How do I Love Thee?* are then set to exemplify the meter of the sonnet on the one hand. They embody the rhythm pattern of the sonnet, suggesting the regularity of the reading tempo and the beat of a yearning heart in *How do I Love Thee?* On the other hand the alliteration and assonance in the sonnet are set to induce the phonemes of the sonnet. They bring on the distinctive functional sounds, resulting in completely different meanings of the alliterating and assonancing words and in feasible interpretation of the words.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,

The words 'love' and 'count' on the first line have the alliterating sound of [l] and [k] as well as the assonancing sound of /ʌv/¹ and /aʊnt/. The two words inferably imply a question of the way of loving somebody. Within the line Elizabeth questions of how many possible ways that she can expect somebody whom she adores to know her love for him.

I love thee to the depth and b readth and height

¹ The phonetic transcription of the words in the sonnet is based on *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*.

On the second line the words depth and breadth alliterate on [d] and [b] and assonance on /ɛp/ and /rɛd/. *Depth, breadth* and *height* are dimensional measurement showing distance from the bottom to the surface, the left to the right and the underside to the upper side. The words cover a wide range of area. It is inferable from the two words that the sonnet writer is incredibly serious about her love although she can not express it obviously. Elizabeth has to think about her feeling of love carefully to even understand it as it involves many aspects of her life.

My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight

The word 'soul' alliterates and assonances with the word 'sight' on the third line. The two [s]s alliterate to each other on the line. The phonemes /χ/ and /ait/ are in assonance to each other on the same line. The line depicts the great distance within which it is possible only for the sonnet writer's true nature to see somebody whom she loves. Elizabeth believes that through her deepest thought she can reach her beloved one. And the word 'soul' indicates the non physical part of her. It shows that she also realizes that she may not be able to reach her beloved one physically.

For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

On the fourth line [t] alliterates with [b] and /O/ assonances with /bi:I/. It can be inferred from the line that the span of her love will surpass her general experience of the world in her own life philosophically. Lines two, three and four, following line one, are most likely of a statement. This first quartet declares how great her love is for her beloved one.

I love thee to the level of everyday's

On the fifth line two [l]s alliterate and /ʌv/ and /ɛvδl/ assonance to each other. The line depicts the degree of seriousness of the love of the sonnet writer, stating that she loves her beloved one daily.

Most quiet need, by sun and candle light.

The word *sun* and *light* alliterate and assonance to each other on the sixth line. On the line [s] alliterates with [l] and /ʌn/ assonances with /aʊt/. This sixth line carries on the degree of seriousness of the love of the writer from the previous line. It is inferable that Elizabeth needs her beloved one endlessly. The sun can be a metaphor for the day time and the candlelight for the night time. She calls for him just like she calls for her own needs during the day time as well as the night time.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

On the seventh line [l] is alliterated with [r] and /ʌv/ is assonanced with /aɪt/. The sonnet writer is depicted on this line to emphasize the quality of her love. Her love is declared to be free as human right ought to be.

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

The alliterating sounds of [l] and of [p] mark the eighth line. The assonancing sounds of /ɪv/ and of /reɪz/ mark the line, too. The line depicts an expression of the pure love the sonnet writer has. Her love is as pure as all human beings respect, honor and thank to God. Line six, seven, following line five, are explicable as an uncompromising affirmation, stating that she will always keep her good faith for her beloved one.

I love thee with the passion put to use

The two words alliterating and assonancing to each other on the ninth line are 'love' and 'passion'. The initial consonants [l] and [j] of each of the word alliterate to each other. The phonemes /ɪv/ and /u+z/ are in assonance to each other. Within the line Elizabeth's love is depicted as a very strong feeling about her beloved one. Elizabeth wants to explain the purpose of her very strong feeling of being attracted to the beloved one.

In my old griefs, and with my childhood faith

The initial consonant [g] alliterates with [f] and the phoneme /ri+f/ is in assonance with /eɔɪ/ on the tenth line. It is inferable from the line that she still has her

passion for her beloved one although she has suffered from extreme sadness. Despite her sadness, she has still got her strong feeling of confidence, trust and optimism about the beloved one.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

There are two words which alliterate and assonance to each other on the eleventh line: 'love' and 'lose'. The two initial consonants [l] are in alliteration as well as the two phonemes /l̥v/ and /l̥uz/ are in assonance to each other on the line. Within the line Elizabeth is depicted as she was making a statement, indicating that she was herself not completely sure about the truth of what she was saying. She was depicted as she was in a position where she might suffer if she carried out her feeling of love unsuccessfully.

With my lost saints – I love thee with the breadth,

Two sounding initial consonants [l] alliterate each other on the twelfth line. And on the line the phoneme /l̥v/ is in assonance with /l̥st/. The line exemplifies the preceding one, depicting the sonnet writer who might no longer have her guardian angel. The angel is plainly written as *saints* whom once belonged to her. The angel was extremely kind, patient and unselfish to her. And these character traits have rendered Elizabeth's appreciation for the angel.

Smiles, tears of all my life! – and if God c oose,

On the thirteenth line the word *God* alliterates and assonances with the word *choose*. The sounding initial consonant [g] is alliterated with [t] and the phoneme /l̥st/ is in assonance with /l̥uz/. It can be inferred from the line that Elizabeth makes a wish to the Lord upon her destiny. She believes that God only knows the answer to her question of how is she supposed to love her beloved. For her love she is willing to experience the good as well as bad times throughout her life.

I shall but love thee better after death.

The sounding initial consonants [ae] and [l] are in alliteration to each other on the fourteenth line. On the same line the phonemes /ael/ and /l̥v/ are in assonance

to each other. The line is closely related to the earlier line, especially about the inference of destiny. Within the last line of the sonnet, Elizabeth is depicted to wish to still be able to love her beloved one even after she is herself lifeless. From line nine to line fourteen it is inferable that Elizabeth emphasizes the greatness of her love, which she asserts to go beyond all aspects of her physical life.

From the first line to the last one, there is a series of stressed syllables at more or less regular intervals as well as of unstressed syllables at the same length of time. This has the linguistic name of isochrony (Freeborn, 1996: 141). The reading of each line regularly coincides with the foot tapping on the floor as the rhythm pattern of the sonnet.

CONCLUSION

Written in fourteen lines, *How do I Love Thee?* is exceptional. Written as a sonnet, the verse is similar to neither Italian sonnets nor English ones. Unlike both chief types of sonnet form, *How do I Love Thee?* is composed of two quatrains and one sestet, rhyming in *abba abba ababab*. Each line of the sonnet, of which metrical foot is iambic pentameter, is isochronous. The word alliteration and word assonance on each line are generative to the meaning of the sonnet. The alliteration and assonance associate the words deployed to interpret the intention of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the sonnet writer, within *How do I Love Thee?*. It is inferable from the lines that Elizabeth expresses the greatness of her feeling of love hopelessly. So great is her feeling for her beloved one that she would do anything for it. And so great is her love that, as she declares, even death can not separate her from her beloved.

REFERENCES

- Briggs, A. D. P. 1999. *English Sonnets*. London: J. M. Dent.
- Burton, S.H. 1974. *The Criticism of Poetry*. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Freeborn, D. 1996. *Style: Text Analysis and Linguistic Criticism*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Morner, K., & Rausch, R. 1991. *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Illinois: NTC Publishing Group.
- Wales, K. 2001. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.