Life in a Love

POEM TEXT

Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.
My life is a fault at last, I fear:
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.
But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again,—
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.
While, look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in the dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,
I shape me—
Ever
Removed!

SUMMARY

Get away from me? That's impossible, my love! As long as I am myself and you are yourself, and you and I are both living in the same world—me, the one loving you, and you, reluctant to love me back—then even if you run away from me, I must continue to go after you. I worry that my life is ultimately a failure, and yet it seems as though I am simply destined to live like this! Although I'm trying my best to gain your affection, it's unlikely that I'll succeed. But what happens if I fail to achieve my goal? Well, then I must simply keep trying, even though the effort keeps me perpetually on edge. I'll wipe away my tears and simply laugh if I fall while chasing after you; even though I might be frustrated and confused for a moment, I'll get right back up and start the chase all over again. In this way, chasing after you will take up my whole life, but I'm resigned to that. All it takes is one look from you—even if it's from a distance and in the darkness of the night—and then no sooner has my old hope been buried than a new hope crops up, focused on the exact same goal: you. This new hope, which I myself create, will last even if we remain parted forever.

THEMES

UNREQUITED LOVE AND FATE

The speaker of "Life in a Love" describes the unrelenting passion he feels for his (now, or soon-to-be, ex-) lover. Although he knows it's likely that he will never achieve his goal of rekindling their romance, the speaker argues that fate, a force greater than his own will, compels him to strive for his lover's affection until death parts them. Love, here, isn't particularly happy or romantic; instead, it's a kind of inescapable, irrational burden that pushes the speaker to endlessly and fruitlessly pursue the object of his desire.

The speaker begins the poem by asserting that, even though his lover has left him, he must continue pursuing her as long as they both live. The poem's opening lines ("Escape me? / Never—") reveal that the speaker refuses to believe that their split is permanent. Though his lover "eludes" him, he says he "must" pursue her for "as long as the world contains [them] both." In other words, so long as they're both living, he has no choice but to chase after her. Until either he or his lover dies, it's simply the speaker's "fate" to continue his campaign to reclaim her affection.

That he feels destined to relentlessly seek his lover even if she continues to rebuff him implies that this pursuit is something beyond the speaker's control. Thus even as he admits that he will "scarce succeed," he also says that this failure won't convince him to give up on his love; rather, it will only result in keeping his "nerves at strain." In other words, failure is just a kind of momentary setback rather than a reality check. Unrequited love, here, seems to defy all good sense.

To that end, the speaker resigns himself to the fact that his life will revolve around a kind of impossible quest. Although he knows that he may fail at his "purpose," he is willing to accept that the "chase" will "take up [his] life." Rather than give up, the speaker asserts that he will "dry" his eyes, "laugh at a fall," and "begin again." While he acknowledges that his lover may always remain "removed" from him, he believes that he will "ever" continue to seek her love.

In refusing to accept the separation his lover desires, Browning's speaker exemplifies the obsessive, somewhat destructive passion that love can inspire. Rather than move on, the speaker believes it's his fate to nurture his unrequited love and pursue its object as long as they both live.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

THE POWER OF HOPE

The speaker of "Life in a Love" acknowledges that an intractable hope compels him to chase after his beloved after she has left him. Despite knowing that his love may very well remain unrequited, nothing proves more compelling to the speaker than the hope that his lover will one day return his affection. Thus while, on the one hand, the poem speaks to the irrational, helpless nature of unrequited love, in a more generous reading it also illustrates the sustaining power of hope in impossible circumstances.

Throughout the poem, the speaker balances his desire to reunite with his lover with his fear that he may fail to do so. Ultimately, hope prevents the speaker from giving up his pursuit—and because his hope is consistently renewed every time it falters, he believes he will continue seeking his lover all his life.

The speaker says that with one "look" from his lover, even in the "dusk and dark," he will be motivated to take up the chase again. He argues that "no sooner" does one "old hope" die but a "new" hope inspires him and drives him to aim for the "self-same mark"—that of reclaiming his lover's affection. In other words, even though he remains "ever / Removed!" from his lover, the strength of his affection causes him to imagine new sources of hope rather than admit permanent defeat.

Thus even though the speaker insists that "fate" pushes him to endlessly pursue his beloved, he's perhaps more in control than he's willing to admit: it is the speaker himself who imagines a new source of hope when the old hope falters, basically ensuring that he is never free of his infatuation. At the heart of the poem, then, is an understanding that deep desires can generate a kind of relentless hope that drives people to strive for their goals regardless of the likelihood of success. Whether this is romantic and noble or delusional and obsessive is left for the reader to decide.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!

The first line of "Life in a Love" establishes the central tension of the poem: the fact that the speaker's lover has "escaped" or left him. By presenting this line as a question, the speaker implies the presence of a conversational partner (who could be interpreted as either the lover or the reader) and creates dramatic tension.

This opening line is specifically an example of aporia, a poetic device that Browning uses throughout the poem—presenting doubt only to quickly bat it away. The speaker is aware of the potential futility of his chase but pushes on regardless. Indeed, in lines 2 and 3, the speaker answers his own question: he asserts that his "Beloved" could "never" leave him.

These lines are both extremely short and strongly end-stopped, closing with a question mark, dash, and exclamation point. The effect is a sharp, forceful opening to the poem that reflects the speaker's unwavering commitment to his cause.

LINES 4-7

While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.

In lines 4-7, the speaker explains the nature of the relationship between himself and his "beloved." He also explores the concept of fate, one of the central themes of the poem, as the reason why he is unable to accept his lover's desired separation. So long as the speaker is who he is and his beloved is who she is, and so long as both exist in the same world, then if she is "loth" (or "loathe," reluctant) to be with him, he "must" go after her. In the speaker's mind, this is just the way it is!

On a formal level, these lines feature clear parallelism in order to juxtapose, or contrast, the speaker and his beloved. Take line 4, where the clauses on either side of the comma mirror each other and reflect the separation of the speaker and his beloved:

> While I am I, and you are you,

The diacope within this line (the repetition of "I" and "you" highlighted above) also reinforces the sense that the speaker is predestined to pursue his beloved; of course the speaker will always be himself, just as his beloved will always be herself—a fact that the repetition of those pronouns underscores.

There's more parallelism in line 6, in which the speaker describes himself as "loving" while his lover is "loth." These words have opposing meanings (the speaker is the one who loves, while his beloved does not), but the alliteration links them; the "loving" speaker is sonically connected to his "loth" beloved.

Then, in line 7, the speaker notes how these opposing attitudes lead to opposing actions: the beloved runs away, while the speaker runs towards. Again, the speaker uses shared sound (this time assonance) to link himself with his beloved: while the

lover "eludes" the speaker "pursues," trapping both parties in an endless chase for as "long as the world contains [them] both."

Finally, the idea that the speaker "must" pursue his lover suggests his belief in his own lack of agency, or in the presence of a greater force than his own will driving him forward in this chase.

LINES 8-10

My life is a fault at last, I fear:
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.

In line 8, the speaker writes that he "fears" his life is a "fault," or failure, as he has not achieved his most central goal: that of reuniting with his beloved. However, he doesn't blame this failure on a lack of effort: he says that even if he tries his "best" he's probably not going to "succeed." Why does he keep going, then?

The speaker relates his pursuit to "fate," an inescapable, mystical force that determines the course and contents of people's lives. The idea of "fate" is used to capture the obsessive, irrational nature of the speaker's actions: he seems to know he likely won't gain his beloved's affection, but he can't give up seeking it. Instead, he's trapped in a cycle of attempt and failure that he believes is out of his hands; his need to go after his beloved is written in the stars.

The alliteration of "fault," "fear," and "fate" links these three important words together and makes them ring out to the reader's ear. The emphasis on these words conveys the fact that while the speaker fears failure, he is driven to continue his unsuccessful pursuit by fate. Alliteration (and broader sibilance) appears again in line 10, where the speaker says that he "shall scarce succeed," similarly honing in on the hapless nature of his mission. While he can still perceive the wonderful future that could be his should his lover come back to him, he is constantly confronted by the failure and pain of her continued rejection.

LINES 11-15

But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again,—
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.

The speaker introduces the next section of the poem with another example of aporia, posing a question just to answer it himself. In response to the previous line, in which he worries he shall not succeed regardless of his effort, he asks, "But what if I fail of my purpose here?"

The speaker then launches into an analysis of how he will navigate and experience this failure should it occur. To "fail" would simply keep his nerves on edge and lead him to "dry [his] eyes" and "laugh." Rather than give up his quest, the speaker says, he must simply push through the "fall" of failure and "get up" to "begin again," as though he's simply tripped on the road to victory. While he acknowledges the effort or "strain" that the chase demands of him, by imagining his pursuit of his lover as his "fate" the speaker is able to endure continued failure without losing motivation.

The speaker's conclusion that the chase "takes up one's life" suggests that he has internalized the idea that it is his fate to continue a life-long pursuit. The final two words in the line, "that's all," demonstrate his resignation to this fate. If he stumbles, he'll shake the failure off and keep going—that's all there is to it.

LINES 16-19

While, look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in the dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,

In line 16, the poem's tone shifts: the speaker moves from discussing his resignation to the fact that he'll likely spend his life in a failed pursuit to an examination of how his hope for success keeps renewing itself.

The line opens with the word "while," indicating the arrival of a new thought that differs from what came before. The speaker then brings imagery of his lover into the poem for the first time, envisioning her standing as far from him as she can and looking at him "in the dust and dark." This distant, dim look is all it takes, the speaker says, to reignite his hope that they will reconcile.

Note how the poet's description of an "old hope" that "goes to ground" echoes the previous lines' extended metaphor of failing as a physical fall. The phrase "goes to ground" allows for a few interpretations:

- The phrase references to the phenomenon of animals taking cover when a predator prowls (as his hope does when confronted with his lover's disregard);
- It suggests the speaker's hope becoming "grounded," just as the speaker himself is following his "fall";
- And, finally, the reference to "ground" might evoke his hope being buried in the earth (that is, dead).

But, after glimpsing the subtle "look" from his lover, the speaker asserts that a "new" hope will arise with the same object/goal ("self-same mark") as the "old" one. The alliteration of the thudding /d/ sound in "deep in the dusk and dark" heightens the impact of this moment, creating a gloomy but seductive atmosphere. Alliteration again appears in line 18, with a repetition of the /g/ sound in "goes to ground," and in line 19 with the /s/ sounds of "straight to the self-same mark." All these

repeated sounds create a musical, lyrical tone that emphasizes the romantic nature of this dramatic monologue.

LINES 20-22

I shape me—
Ever
Removed!

In line 20, the speaker reveals that he himself is "shaping" this new hope that keeps springing up: he has taken the minor encouragement of his lover's "look" and expanded it into a belief that she will one day love him again. The three words "I shape me—" also provide a secondary meaning: the speaker is not only shaping his hope, but is also shaping *himself*. As the chase "takes up his life," so his hope "shapes" his character.

Note how the poem's final three lines mirror the structure of its opening three lines, as though the poem has come full circle—much like the speaker himself. These lines parallel each other not only in their number and length (going from three syllables, to two, and then again two), but they also in rhyme with each other:

Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
[...]
I shape me—
Ever
Removed!

They create bookends for the poem, underscoring the idea that the speaker ends exactly where he began: steadfastly pursuing an absent beloved.

Of course, there is one key difference in the punctuation in the first line of each section: while line 1 ends with a question mark, line 20 wraps. up with a dash. Gone is even the feigned doubt with which the speaker opened the poem, replaced by the speaker's emphatic acceptance of his fate, to remain "Ever / Removed" from, while also ever seeking, his beloved.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration pops up here and there in the poem, adding music and emphasis to certain moments and linking thematic ideas. In line 6, for example, the shared /l/ sounds of "loving" and "loth" give a lilting rhythm to the line while also emphasizing the bond (in the speaker's eyes) between the "me" of the speaker and the "you" of the lover (who is "loth," or loathe, to love the speaker back).

Alliteration reappears in line 8, the quick repetition of /l/ and /f/ sounds again filling the poem's language with music and drama as the speaker laments his lovelorn state:

My life is a fault at last, I fear:

Elsewhere, alliteration draws readers' ears (and thus attention) to specific ideas and images. Take the hissing /s/ sounds of "scarce succeed" in line 10, which underscores the speaker's belief that "success" in his pursuit is hard to come by, or "scarce." The repetitive sounds of "straight to the self-same mark" in line 19, meanwhile, emphasize the narrow, obsessive nature of the speaker's pursuit. Finally, the thudding /d/ sounds of "deep in the dust and dark" in line 17 bring the image of the speaker wandering around in the heavy, oppressive darkness to life on the page.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "loving," "loth"
- **Line 8:** "life," "fault," "last," "fear"
- **Line 10:** "scarce succeed"
- **Line 17:** "deep," "dust," "dark"
- **Line 19:** "straight," "self-same"

APORIA

The speaker uses aporia twice in the poem, first in its opening lines. By framing the words "Escape me?" as a question, the speaker indicates the presence of another person with whom he is in conversation. Of course, given that the speaker's beloved has apparently tried to end things already, it's likely that she's not *really* there; the speaker is addressing the idea of her.

What's more, the speaker isn't really asking a question; instead, he's creating the space in which to *negate* the idea that his beloved could ever truly "escape" him. Emphasizing this is the fact that the question set on its own line and followed by the definitive "Never—" in line 2.

Aporia pops up again in line 11, where the speaker asks, "But what if I fail of my purpose here?" This second use of aporia relates line 11 back to line 1, as it questions what might happen should the beloved's "escape" be, at least momentarily, successful. Again, the speaker is only asking this question in order to make a point: that no matter what failure he may encounter, he will "get up" and continue his pursuit. He's not *really* worried about failure, because he knows such failure won't stop him.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "Escape me? / Never— / Beloved!"
- **Lines 11-14:** "But what if I fail of my purpose here? / It is but to keep the nerves at strain, / To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall, / And, baffled, get up and begin again,—"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism bookends the entire poem, whose final threes lines mirror its first three lines. This creates a sense of circularity that reflects the cyclical, relentless nature of the speaker's pursuit.

Lines 1-3 and 20-22 follow the same structure, each chunking consisting of three lines made up of three, two, and then again two syllables. The two sections also echo each other in terms of sound, creating three sets of rhymes: "Escape me"/"I shape me"; "Never"/"Ever"; and "Beloved"/ "Removed." This repeated structure encourages direct comparison between the two sections, which emphasize the idea that the lover will not "ever" be able to "escape" the speaker.

There is one key difference here, however, which is all the more striking because these lines are otherwise so similar. While line 1 concludes with a question mark, its corresponding line at the end of the poem (line 20) wraps up with a dash:

> Escape me?
> [...]
> I shape me—

This change in punctuation might reflect the evolution of the speaker's emotion, which moves from disbelief and confusion (feigned or otherwise) to more forthright resignation and acceptance.

There are other examples of parallelism in the poem as well, in lines 4, 6, and 7. In each line, the speaker contrasts himself and his own behavior (he is "loving" and "pursuing") with his beloved (who is "loth" and "eluding"). Note how the speaker places himself firmly on one side of each line and his beloved on the other:

> While I am I, and you are you,
> [...]
> Me the loving and you the loth,
> While the one eludes, must the other pursue.

This draws the reader's attention to the separation between these two characters. At the same time, both exist within the span of one line again and again; they are separate and yet always linked.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Escape me? / Never— / Beloved! / While I am I, and you are you,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Me the loving and you the loth, / While the one eludes, must the other pursue."
- **Lines 20-22:** "I shape me— / Ever / Removed!"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem is firmly end-stopped from nearly beginning to end, which creates a sense of a steady, self-assured, and methodical speaker. Despite his purported passion for his beloved, the lines of the poem are pretty self-contained; almost all of them reach a firm pause at their ends, which builds a picture of a speaker in control of his emotions. This is perhaps somewhat disorienting, given that the speaker also insists that he's totally at the mercy of fate—that his dogged pursuit is, in fact, out of his hands. It's as though, to this speaker, behaving irrationally is in fact entirely rational, and all this end-stopping conveys the speaker's resignation and acceptance of his apparent destiny.

As many of the poem's lines are end-stopped, the lines in which this device is *not* used stand out. And, importantly, these enjambed lines appear only towards the poem's end, after his "beloved" has spurred a new hope in the speaker:

> While, look but once from your farthest bound
> At me so deep in the dust and dark,
> No sooner the old hope goes to ground
> Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,

The lack of any indicated pause at the end of line 16 might evoke the strength of the beloved's "look," which shoots right through the line break. Similarly, the swift jump between "ground / Than" in lines 18-19 evokes the speed and excitement with which the speaker's "new" hope shoots up from the ground.

Finally, the lack of punctuation between "Ever / Removed" in lines 21-22 underscores the ongoing nature of the speaker's situation, in which he is, and understands he will long remain, "removed" from his beloved.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me?"
- **Line 2:** "Never—"
- **Line 3:** "Beloved!"
- **Line 4:** "you,"
- **Line 5:** "both,"
- **Line 6:** "loth,"
- **Line 7:** "pursue."
- **Line 8:** "fear:"
- **Line 9:** "indeed!"
- **Line 10:** "succeed."
- **Line 11:** "here?"
- **Line 12:** "strain,"
- **Line 13:** "fall,"
- **Line 14:** "again,—"
- **Line 15:** "all."
- **Line 17:** "dark,"
- **Line 19:** "mark,"

- **Line 20:** "me—"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Throughout the poem, the speaker uses an extended metaphor that compares his quest to regain his beloved's affections to a physical chase. While his description of "pursuing" his beloved in line 7 doesn't necessarily bring to mind an image of him literally running after her, that changes by line 13: here, the speaker compares failing in this pursuit to physically stumbling and then getting up again.

The use of this metaphor adds excitement and energy to the poem while also conveying the sense of desperation and exhaustion that the speaker's unending attempt to reunite with his beloved produces. That is, the metaphor creates a visual depiction of an emotional experience and conveys the pain that the speaker incurs when he fails to achieve his goal.

The speaker builds on this physical idea of love in lines 18-19, again using language related to "falling" and getting up to talk about failure and hope. Saying that his hope "goes to ground" echoes the image of him tumbling earlier in the poem, while the image of a "new" hope going "straight to the self-same mark" presents hope like an arrow that's zeroed in on the speaker's beloved.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "While the one eludes, must the other pursue."
- **Lines 13-15:** "and laugh at a fall, / And, baffled, get up and begin again,— / So the chase takes up one's life, that's all."
- **Lines 18-19:** "No sooner the old hope goes to ground / Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,"

ANTITHESIS

The speaker uses antithesis to highlight the separation between himself and his beloved.

In line 4, for example, the speaker places himself on one side of the line and his beloved on the other, implying that there's a sharp distinction between their two identities—between that "I" and "you." The diacope of this line (in which the words "I" and "you" are both repeated) emphasizes this divide: the speaker and his beloved are always simply themselves, and those selves are at odds.

Then, in line 6, the antithesis becomes even clearer as the speaker refers to himself as the "loving" one in this pairing and his beloved as "the loth" (that is, the one "loathe" to love the speaker back). These words have opposing meanings, and thus reflect the fact that the speaker and his beloved view their relationship in very different ways.

The speaker thus uses in part to illustrate his dilemma: he and his beloved want opposing, incompatible things. This idea is continued in the next line, in which the speaker states that his lover "eludes" while he must "pursue." Here again, the two characters' desires are at total odds—an observation that leads the speaker to conclude that his life "is a fault," or a failure.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "While I am I, and you are you,"
- **Lines 6-7:** "Me the loving and you the loth, / While the one eludes, must the other pursue."

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears a few times in the poem and works a lot like alliteration, adding emphasis to certain ideas and generally filling the poem with music. (Note that much of this assonance is tied to the poem's steady rhyme scheme, which is discussed separately in this guide.)

One particularly important moment of assonance comes in line 7, where the /oo/ sound of "eludes" repeats in "pursues." This shared sound underscores the link that the speaker perceives as existing between himself and his beloved.

At other moments, assonance seems to convey the speaker's relentless, dogged hope. The long /i/ sounds of "dry one's eyes," the long /ay/ sounds of "chase takes," and the long /o/ sound of "old hope goes" towards the poem's end all add some subtle lyricism and pep to the speaker's declarations.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "eludes," "pursue"
- **Line 8:** "at last"
- **Line 13:** "dry," "eyes"
- **Line 15:** "chase takes," "up one's"
- **Line 16:** "but once from"
- **Line 17:** "me," "deep"
- **Line 18:** "old hope goes"
- **Line 19:** "straight," "same"

VOCABULARY

Loth (Line 6) - The "loathing" one. In other words, the speaker's beloved finds his presence deeply undesirable or unpleasant.

Eludes (Line 7) - To escape or avoid something or someone, particularly in the context of a search or hunt.

Pursue (Line 7) - To chase or to seek.

Nerves at strain (Line 12) - The speaker is saying that his "nerves," or feelings/emotions/anxieties, are at max capacity or under a lot of stress. In other words, he's completely on edge.

Baffled (Line 14) - Confused.

Farthest bound (Line 16) - Most distant boundary or border. The speaker is saying that his beloved is as far as she can possibly be from him.

Self-same (Line 19) - Exact same; identical.

Mark (Line 19) - In this context, the word "mark" refers to a goal or a target.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Life in a Love" consists of 22 lines written in a single, long stanza. Excluding the first and final three lines, one might break this stanza up into four quatrains (a.k.a. four-line stanzas), based on the poem's rhyme scheme (that is, the poem follows a specific rhyme *pattern* throughout, but its rhyme *sounds* shift after every set of four lines).

The poem also has a distinct introduction and conclusion that closely mirror each other: the poem's first and final three lines are exactly the same, form-wise. This mirroring brings a sense of circularity to the poem, which, in turn, reflects the endless loop of hope and loss that drives the speaker onward.

METER

"Life in a Love" is generally written in accentual meter. Most lines have four stressed beats, but where those stressed beats fall isn't all that regular; there are various numbers of unstressed beats between them.

Many of the poem's lines fall into an iambic rhythm (meaning they have an unstressed-stressed beat pattern). Line 4 follows an iambic beat, for example, with stresses falling on every second syllable:

> While I | am I, | and you | are you,

But this pattern isn't very regular. Many lines feature anapests (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) or trochees (stressed-unstressed). Most of these lines still have four stressed beats, but they aren't in a steadily iambic pattern. Take line 6, which starts with a stressed beat ("Me") and might be scanned as follows (two trochees followed by two iambs):

> Me the | lov|ing | and you | the loth,

Line 17 features another variation, with an anapest for the third foot:

> At me | so deep | in the dust | and dark,

The poem thus feels musical thanks to having a relatively stable number of stresses per line, but it doesn't feel overly strict or rigid.

And, of course, the first and final three lines of the poem diverge from this accentual meter altogether. This break emphasizes these lines, which bookend the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem uses plenty of rhyme, but where those rhymes fall isn't always predictable. Setting aside the opening and closing three lines (which, as previously noted, bookend the poem and very different, form-wise, from the rest), the poem can be broken up into four four-line stanzas (a.k.a. quatrains), each of which introduces new rhyme sounds into the poem.

The first two of these quatrains (lines 4-11) both follow a sandwiched ABBA pattern (albeit with new rhyme sounds introduced in lines 8-11, technically making the rhyme scheme ABBA CDDC). The next two quatrains (lines 12-19) then follow an alternating pattern of ABAB (again, with new sounds introduced).

Altogether, then, accounting for all the different rhyme sounds, the middle of the poem's rhyme scheme looks like this:

> ABBA CDDC EFEF GHGH

Meanwhile, lines 1-3 rhyme with lines 20-22. These rhymes are spaced across the span of the poem, creating a clear introduction and conclusion and also lending the poem a cyclical feel—like it ends where it began. The stark difference of these sections heightens the emotional impact of the words as well, which invoke the speaker's turmoil over the loss of his lover.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is anonymous, given no name, age, nor gender. That said, the fact that the poem appears within a book of poetry dedicated to Robert Browning's wife and the love of his life, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, means it's possible to read the speaker as a representation of the poet himself.

In any case, it's clear that the poem is written from one distinct, limited perspective: readers are only getting the speaker's side of things here. The speaker longs to be reunited with his lover, who has apparently initiated a separation. From the speaker's point of view, he cannot accept their estrangement so long as they're both living—and thus must pursue his beloved until he regains her affection.

The speaker is at once optimistic that he will achieve his goal ("Escape me? / Never—") and, paradoxically, filled with doubt that he will ever be successful. Ultimately, the speaker adopts a resigned attitude, insisting that it doesn't actually matter whether or not he believes he'll succeed; it's simply his destiny to seek out his beloved.

SETTING

"Life in a Love" was written in 1855, at a time in which Browning was living in Florence with his wife, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The setting of the poem, in one sense, is the entire "world" in which both characters exist — the speaker makes it explicit that as long as they both live in this "world," the speaker's mission to reunite with his lover must continue.

However, in another sense the setting of the poem is not any one material place or time; rather, it is the relationship between the speaker and his lover. This is the environment in which the poet "falls" and "get's up," forever metaphorically "chasing" after his love.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Life in a Love" appears in Browning's collection *Men and Women*, in which his complimentary poem "Love in a Life" was also published. In "Love in a Life," the speaker's aim is merely to encounter or "find" his lover, while in "Life in a Love," the speaker's beloved is actively eluding him. "Life in a Love" thus forms half of a dramatic monologue that Browning developed to explore the experience of finding and seeking love.

Browning rose to prominence in the mid-1800s, and his poetry reveals both the influence of the Romantic poets who preceded him and the Victorian era in general. The earlier Romantics, whose poetry evolved in part as a reaction to the Enlightenment's focus on science and reason and the industrial revolution, celebrated individuality, human emotion, and the overwhelming wonder of nature. The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley had a particularly profound influence on the young Browning.

However, Browning's own poetry diverged from the Romantic tradition in its exploration of more practical, realistic themes—including the concerns of the working class and the relationship between science and society. In this way, Browning was firmly a part of the Victorian literary movement, alongside writers such as Thomas Hardy, the Bronte sisters, and Christina Rosetti.

With the publication of his poem *Paracelsus* at age 23, Browning achieved recognition and was lauded by contemporaries including Charles Dickens and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. He traveled abroad seeking inspiration for his lengthier poems, eventually settling down with his wife, the famous Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in Florence, Italy.

Browning also helped popularize the dramatic monologue form through his frequent use of first-person speakers who make their case to a listening reader (with his poem "My Last Duchess" being perhaps the most famous example). Writers and poets who were influenced by Browning and went on to experiment with the dramatic monologue form include W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Elliot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Browning wrote during the reign of Queen Victoria (who ruled England from 1831 to 1901), a time of massive scientific, societal, and religious upheavals. Considered a literary Golden Age, the Victorian era saw writers grappling with vast shifts in the religious, moral, and class structures of their world.

New ideas such as Darwin's theory of evolution challenged people's conception of their place in society, while the rise of dangerous factory work and economic disparity led to an increased focus on poverty, child labor, and the treatment of women. Browning's poetry was often written in response to the conversations of the day, and he explored topical subjects such as the relationship between art and morality and the conflict between materialism and altruism in his work. Yet, while he was interested in contemporary conversations, Browning also often set his poetry in the more distant past, such as in the Renaissance period, in order to avoid coming across as overly didactic to his modern audience.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Browning's "Two lives of love" — Read an article that explores Browning's conception of and interest in romantic love by comparing his two poems "Life in a Love" and "Love in a Life." (https://www.jstor.org/stable/45285300?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)
- Browning's Biography — Learn more about Browning's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a live reading of "Life in a Love." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GeliXzyRjY)
- The Victorian Era — Learn more about the exciting era in which Browning lived and wrote. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover

HOW TO CITE

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