



# Expression of Intimacy: Rereading Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "First Time He Kissed Me, He but Only Kissed"

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**Abstract.** Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "First time he kissed me, he but only kissed" is unveiling. Yet, it is often overshadowed by her more celebrated poems. This study attempts for a renewed perusal of this sonnet. This study will reveal not only figurative language, but it also historical background of the sonnet. Through a close reading of its structure, rhythm, and figures of speech, this article discloses a delicate expression of intimacy. The study adopts Kennedy and Gioia's concept of structure; rhythm; and figures of speech. The study applies George's approach of library research. The analysis delves into the sonnet's text and history, and it shows how Browning undergoes uneasiness in her relationship. Browning's sonnet inhales suppression for herself and it exhales liberation for her beloved.

**Keywords:** Sonnet, Structure, Rhythm, Figures of Speech, History

## 1 Introduction

How a kiss is expressed in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "First time he kissed me, he but only kissed"[1] becomes central to the discussion in this article. Barrett Browning's expressions of the kiss are structured in a sonnet, and the sonnet reflects the impact of a seemingly simple act of affection as expressed intimacy. The kiss should have been confidential, and, the writer believes, how Barrett Browning expresses how it affects her emotions should have been confidential, too. Through Barrett Browning's expressions of the kiss, the writer sees overt intimacy, since how a somewhat natural gesture evokes private emotions into public notions.

Barrett Browning's sonnet, however, is often overshadowed by her more celebrated poems, for example "Aurora Leigh." Still, the writer thinks that "First time he kissed me, he but only kissed" is one of its kind: the sonnet is reflective by itself. This sonnet is shorter than the other poem, but it presents an intimate view into the early stages of a grave relationship in just fourteen lines. The kiss was personally intimate, and then it grew into a secret wedding; and that makes the fourteen lines deserve a discussion. The fourteen-line poem contains features to express intimacy in its own way, and its features make the sonnet a worthy companion to her aforementioned longer, more complex

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work, revealing a different facet of her poetic genius. Thus, it is the features which bring forward the discussion about the expression of intimacy in the sonnet.

The discussion is intended to describe the features which Barrett Browning's sonnet contain to express the intimacy. The features which will be discussed comprise the sonnet's structure, rhythm, and figures of speech. In addition, historical background is also included in the discussion. How the historical background is literarily related to the structure, rhythm and figures of speech is expected to bring in reliability in the description of the features.

## 2 Methods

In order to describe the features, the writer foremostly studied Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets, and then he became specifically interested in writing about "First time he kissed me, he but only kissed". Reading up on the sonnet multiple times, the writer chose the expression of intimacy as the topic to be discussed. The writer admits that the process which he has taken to discuss the expression through the sonnet's features will be designated as library research.

At the start of the library research process, as you gather background information on your chosen topic, brainstorm about it, and begin to discover and review sources, it is your initial idea—expressed as a research question—that keeps you moving forward [2].

Throughout the process, the sonnet will be described of its structure, rhythm, and figures of speech. The historical background of the sonnet will also be described in the process. Those elements are considered relevant to the topic, and this study adopts Kennedy and Gioia's concept of how to analyse elements of poetry.

The library research process in this study starts off with the discussion about the sonnet's structure, rhythm and figures of speech. The research process continues with that about the sonnet's history. The relation between both kinds of information is expected to describe the expression of intimacy more extensively.

The structure of Barrett Browning's sonnet is modified from that of a common English sonnet. In an English sonnet, sometimes called a Shakespearean sonnet, the rimes cohere in four clusters: a b a b, c d c d, e f e f, g g. Because a rime scheme tends to shape the poet's statements to it, the English sonnet has three places where the procession of thought is likely to turn in another direction. Within its form, a poet may pursue one idea throughout the three quatrains and then in the couplet end with a surprise [3].

The modification in the structure of Barrett Browning 's sonnet includes the sonnet's rime scheme and versification, both of which are deemed to receive and confess the expressed intimacy.

Furthermore, the rhythm of Barrett Browning’s sonnet may be predominantly designated as iambic pentameters. The rhythm is made of five feet of stressed and unstressed syllables in each of the lines of the sonnet. But most often when we speak of the rhythm of a poem we mean the recurrence of stresses and pauses in it. When we hear a poem read aloud, stresses and pauses are, of course, part of its sound [4].

In an iambic pentameter line there are five iambs (a foot consisting of an unstressed and followed by a stressed syllable). There are, among others, four of the principal metres in English poetry. Each of the metres is labelled for its basic foot, or molecule (usually one stressed [‘] and one or two unstressed [--] syllables)

1. Iambic (foot: the iamb, - ‘):  
The fall ing out of faith-ful friends, re-new ing is of love  
- ‘ - ‘ - ‘ - ‘ - ‘

2. Anapestic (foot: the anapest, - - ‘):  
I am mo narch of all I sur-vey  
- - ‘ - - ‘ - - ‘

3. Trochaic (foot: the trochee, ‘ -):  
Dou-ble, dou-ble, toil and trou-ble  
‘ - ‘ - ‘ - ‘ -

4. Dactylic (foot: the dactyl, ‘ - -):  
Take her up ten-der-ly [5]  
‘ - - ‘ - -

The commonly used names for the metres comprise:

monometer	one foot	pentameter	five feet
dimeter	two feet	hexameter	six feet
trimeter	three feet	heptameter	seven feet
tetrameter	four feet	octameter	eight feet [6]

The figures of speech in the discussion, moreover, comprises imagery and metaphor. Defining the term “imagery” denotes that of an “image”. Though the term image suggests a thing seen, when speaking of images in poetry we generally mean a word or sequence of words that refers to any sensory experience. Often this experience is a sight (visual imagery, as in Pound’s poem), but it may be a sound (auditory imagery) or a touch (tactile imagery, as a perception of roughness or smoothness) [7].

The description of the imagery of the intimacy in the sonnet will be made through that of a sight, a sound, and a touch retrieved from the sonnet’s lines. Meanwhile,

“metaphor” is often present in a literary work without being conscious of. If, however, we are aware that words possess literal meanings as well as figurative ones, we do not write *died in the wool* for *dyed in the wool* or *tow the line* for *toe the line*, nor do we use mixed metaphors as did the writer who advised, “Water the spark of knowledge and it will bear fruit,” or the speaker who urged, “To get ahead, keep your nose to the grindstone, your shoulder to the wheel, your ear to the ground, and your eye on the ball.” [8].

The description of the metaphor of the intimacy in the sonnet will be made through the words in the sonnet which have both literal and literary meanings. The literal and literary meanings are inseparable from historical background of the sonnet, including that of the poet. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was born in a large country house outside Durham, England. The eldest of twelve children, she was raised in a close, affectionate family ruled by her possessive father. Ill health kept her at home as an adult, but she nonetheless achieved literary fame and corresponded with many famous writers. [9]

One of the famous writers during the era was Robert Browning, about whom apparently the sonnet was written.

### 3 Result and Discussion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet, “First time He Kissed, He But Only Kissed,” exemplifies her innovative approach to poetic form and intimate expression. The sonnet's rhyme scheme and its structure diverge from the conventional English sonnet form, reflecting Barrett Browning's desire to transcend classical genre boundaries as well as social norm ones. The structure mirrors the thematic progression from the initial impression of a kiss to the poet's ultimate possession of the moment, as she transitions from a reserved recipient to an outspoken lover. Through vivid imagery and rhythmic mastery, Barrett Browning immerses every reader in the intimate encounter, capturing the delicate intimacy. This sonnet not only showcases her technical prowess but also her ability to convey profound private emotions, making it a significant piece in her oeuvre and in Victorian poetry.

The rhyme scheme of Barrett Browning's sonnet is a b b a a b b a, c d c d c d, and it structurally reads to express Barrett Browning's intimacy in the kiss. The sonnet is structured in two phases of versification where the procession of the poet's thought shifts from impression to possession. The octave in the sonnet suggests an impression of how she receives the kiss, which “sought the forehead, and half missed” (line 8) [10]. The sestet suggests possession of how she confesses that the one who gave her the kiss is to be “My Love, my own” (line 14) [11]. The writer found that the shift astonishing: the kiss, which was apparently given in secret through the first phase, transforms a seemingly reserved person into an outspoken poet through the latter one. The shift may indicate that the intimacy in the kiss is no longer kept inside personally.

Barrett Browning's structuring of the sonnet is innovative. The sonnet is not structured of three quatrains and a couplet; instead, it is structured of an octave and a sestet. Barrett Browning intended to "create a new poetic form that combined storytelling, reflective analysis, and artistic unity, transcending classical genre boundaries" [12]. Akin to how she structured the sonnet, the writer assumes that Barrett Browning wanted to express the intimacy so emotionally that the rime scheme as well as the octave and sestet surpassed the conventional structuring of English sonnet.

Barrett Browning is one of Victorian poets who drew inspiration from ancient Greek and Latin poetry, leading to a renewed interest in metre [13]. As a case of point of the rhythm, the following line is scanned so as to display the pattern of stresses and metre of the line:

●   ‘   -   ‘   -   ‘   -   ‘   -   ‘  
First time he kissed me, he but only kissed

The line above does not adhere to the conventional English structure, with an octave (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the final six lines). Correspondingly, Barrett Browning skilfully arranges the iambic pentameter, creating a natural rhythm which reflects the ebb and flow of the lovers' embrace.

The sonnet's imagery, such as "parted lips" and "faint perfume", immerses every reader in an intimate encounter, while its metaphors like the "soul's baptism" and "smouldering fire" the tone of feelings. The opening line, "He kissed me, but no more than just a kiss," directly sets the tone, evoking a sense of restraint and the balance between physical and emotional intimacy. The use of the word "but" in the title and opening line creates a subtle tension, hinting at the complexity of the moment of intimacy being described. The line "When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst" designates both visual and auditory imagery, and "The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed" tactile one. How "(a) ring of amethyst" is presented to the writer's visual senses literarily substitutes how the kiss has grown the intimate encounter, encircling the poet's self and emotion. In addition, how "the angels speak" is presented to his auditory senses literarily substitutes how the poet only wants to talk and listen to the angels about kiss. Besides that, how "...and sought the forehead, and half missed" is presented literarily substitutes a sense of suppression and liberation. The writer has the sense that the kiss was fearfully taken, and it was then awkwardly given. The write sees complication of the kiss in the sonnet, signifying a dramatic monologue within. The poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning "and other Victorian poets demonstrate that the dramatic monologue has long wrestled with the intricacies of desire, sexual or otherwise" [14].

Reading the sonnet, the writer thinks that Barrett Browning speaks to him silently to express her feelings so that she knows that he feels her private emotions for her beloved intimately. The writer is convinced that how she expresses the intimacy is important to designate a literary work written in the Victorian context, with social norms limiting expressions of intimacy. To the writer the sonnet reads to amplify Barrett Browning's poetics in crossing boundaries of the era. Barrett Browning's poetics reads as a

challenge for literary conventions in Victorian literature. Initially private, the sonnet became a public literary work, intensifying her expression of intimacy.

The writer is of the opinion that the historical context in which "He kissed, he but only kissed" was written contributes to the loudness of the sonnet's expression of the intimacy. During the Victorian era, when Barrett Browning composed this work, the expression of intimacy was often constrained by social norms.

The day after she met one correspondent, Robert Browning, in 1845, he sent her a declaration of love, which she insisted he withdraw if he ever wanted to visit again. Gradually, how- she fell in love with her devoted ever, visitor, but the affair was conducted in secret, since her father had forbidden his children to marry. In 1846 she and Browning eloped to Italy where the couple lived happily until her death in 1861. When William Wordsworth died in 1850, Mrs. Browning was considered for the office of poet laureate (which eventually went to Tennyson). She was the most highly regarded woman poet of the nineteenth century, and her work was immensely popular with both critics and general readers. [15]

Barrett Browning's secrecy seems to have let her nurture an unusual relationship with another poet who would become her future husband, elevating her private emotion as well as literary passion in an unveiling sonnet. It looks as though her sonnet became an oasis for expressing her intimacy, transforming suppressed feelings into liberated beings. Writing the sonnet, Barrett Browning might have felt suppression on how she expressed the intimacy under the social norms of the era; the writer is ascertained, however, that she has set liberation as human beings for not only herself and her husband to be but also every reader in English literature reading the sonnet.

Reading through the lines of the sonnet, the writer sees that Barrett Browning's past times matter. It can be easily seen since "the Victorians were by no means the first to turn to the past for a kind of poetic authenticity felt to be lacking in the present time" [16]. Barrett Browning is deemed to want the sonnet to be genuine. It looks like when she looked back to earlier times, she hoped to find the sense of realness. This may denote that throughout history, Barrett Browning has often felt that something authentic was missing, so she turned to the past to find the authenticity. Figuratively, the poet felt that there was something real in her private emotions missing, so she expressed the intimacy in the sonnet to find the realness of her feelings.

Thus, Barrett Browning's sonnet "First time he kissed, he but only kissed" exemplifies her mastery of poetic form and her ability to convey the intimacy within the constraints of Victorian social norms. By drawing inspiration from ancient Greek and Latin poetry, she revitalized interest in metre and rhythm, skilfully using iambic pentameter to reflect the natural ebb and flow of a lover's embrace. Her innovative structuring of the sonnet, vivid imagery, and use of metaphors create a rich tapestry of sensory experiences which immerse the reader in the intimate encounter. Barrett Browning's sonnet not only challenges the literary conventions of her time but also amplifies the expression of private emotions, making her one of the most highly regarded poets of the nineteenth century. Her legacy continues to resonate, demonstrating the enduring power of poetry to transcend social as well literary boundaries and connect emotionally with the reader.

## 4 Conclusion

Through "First time he kissed, he but only kissed," Barrett Browning has crafted a poetic oeuvre. Browning's sonnet explores the expressions of intimacy through the use of innovative structuring. This study emphasises the significance of a kiss, in which it has its figurative meaning in a restrained relationship. The kiss is powerful: it transforms the poet's private emotions to public recognition.

Then, this study explicates vivid imagery in the sonnet. It describes the physical sensations experienced during the kiss. It uses tactile, auditory, and visual imagery to heighten the intimacy. Besides that, this study clarifies private emotions. It describes the poet's emotional response to the kiss. It reads as though it expressed longing for her beloved one.

This study, moreover, presents metaphorical representations of intimacy. Intimacy is represented in the use of metaphors to convey the depth of the lovers' relationship. The sonnet is described to become a comparison to natural phenomena to suggest the overwhelming nature of the lovers' feelings. In addition, the sonnet has poetic substitution to emphasise the significance of the moment.

Furthermore, this study presents the historical context for the intimacy. The sonnet explores the nuances and complexities of intimate relationships. It also explores the tension between the fleeting nature of the kiss and the lasting impact it has on the poet and her husband to be.

In conclusion, Barrett Browning's sonnet "He Kissed Me, But He Only Kissed" transcends the restrictive social norms of the Victorian era through its innovative structure and vivid imagery. Breaking from the traditional sonnet form and utilizing a natural, flowing rhythm, Browning reflects the progression of the kiss itself. The evocative language utilizes subtle tension and contrasting desires, reflecting the complexity of the moment. This hidden passion becomes a literary innovation, an encounter to the limitations of the time. The very act of publishing the private experience becomes a powerful statement, not just for Barrett Browning and her beloved, but for every reader yearning for personal liberation from suppression. Therefore, the sonnet serves as a testament to the enduring power of the kiss and the lovers' expression for their relationship, even in the face of social constraints.

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