



Symbolic Representations Of Emotions In ‘Sonnet From The Portuguese’

Larita Naomi, Ketut Santi Indriani, I Made Netra

Bachelor of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities. Udayana University

Abstract

Received: 2 November 2025
Revised: 14 November 2025
Accepted: 29 November 2025

This research aims to find out symbolic representation of emotion found in ‘Sonnet from the Portuguese’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, using Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory of denotation and connotation. Focusing on five selected sonnets (1, 6, 14, 22, and 43), the research highlights important symbolic elements, such as metaphor and imagery of love, longing, doubt, passion, and suffering, demonstrating the poet’s emotional depth. Although Browning’s thematic and biographical elements have been examined in earlier research, this analysis closes a significant gap by methodically interpreting the semiotic structures that support the Sonnet’s emotional expression. The study provides fresh insights into the relationship between language and emotion in Victorian love poetry by utilizing Barthes’ framework to show how superficial imagery (denotation) is transformed into more profound emotional meaning (connotation). This study is important because it increases our knowledge of Browning’s literary technique and shows how semiotic theory may clarify the complex emotional representation found in poetry.

Kata Kunci: *semiotics, Roland Barthes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Symbolism, Emotion in Poetry*

(*) Corresponding Author: Laritarichard@gmail.com, kt.santi.indriani@unud.ac.id, imadenetra@unud.ac.id

How to Cite: Naomi, L., Indriani, K., & Netra, I. (2025). Symbolic Representations Of Emotions In ‘Sonnet From The Portuguese’. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 11(12.B), 401-405. Retrieved from <https://jurnal.peneliti.net/index.php/JIWP/article/view/12066>

INTRODUCTION

Sonnets from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1850), which is well-known for its in-depth examination of love, devotion, and emotional fragility, is still one of the most cherished poetry sequences in Victorian Literature. With their rich symbolism and oscillation between skepticism and transcendence, the sonnets, which are written as a sequence of intimate confessions, convey the complexity of the speaker’s feelings. Few studies have methodically explored the semiotic systems that support Browning’s portrayal of emotion. Despite the fact that academics have studied her biographical inspiration and thematic concerns in great detail. In order to bridge that gap, this study applies Semiotic concept proposed by Roland Barthes, namely his ideas of connotation (cultural/emotional associations) and denotation (literal meaning), to decode the symbolic language in five chosen sonnets (1, 6, 14, 22, and 43). Through an analysis of Browning’s imagery’s role as a system of signs, this study sheds light between poetic form and emotional expression.

The sonnet sequence is filled with recurrent symbols that convey the speaker’s changing emotional states. The previous criticism has frequently focused on the poems’ thematic concerns (heavenly and earthly love) or autobiographical setting (such as Browning’s marriage with Robert Browning). However, semiotic symbols accumulate deep emotional meanings and function beyond their literal appearances.

For this analysis, Barthes’ framework is especially useful since it enables a structural breakdown of the meaning-making processes of Browning’s language. Although semiotics has been extensively used to analyze contemporary works, nothing is known about how it might be used to analyze poetry from the 19th century. Thus, this research adds a main discussion:

What key semiotic symbols of emotions are used in 'Sonnets from the Portuguese'? By doing this research, this study not only sheds light on Browning's avant-garde poetics but also shows how social critique was shown in supposedly private verse in Victorian literature. This approach adds to the continuing reassessment of 19th-century women's literature as both politically charged and emotionally resonant by challenging the interaction of semiotics and historical context.

METHODOLOGY

This research analyzes the symbolic representation of emotions in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* using Semiotic theory in Barthes' framework, specifically his differentiation between first-order (denotation) and second-order (connotation) meanings. This approach enables a methodical investigation of how Browning's literal imagery (denotation) gains deeper emotional and cultural significance (connotation). (Bouzida, 2014)

Denotation (first-order meaning)

Here, denotation identifies the explicit, literal symbols in the text. It focuses on surface-level imagery (objects, actions, or descriptions). Taking example from sonnet 43 (line 2) "I love thee to the depth and breadth and height", the denotation is spatial measurements (depth, breadth, height).

Connotation (second-order meaning)

This part explores the hidden emotional, psychological, or cultural associations of the symbols. It connects Browning's language to Victorian-era values, gender norms, and literary conventions. Taking the example from sonnet 43 (line 2), the same spatial imagery (depth, breadth, height) connotes: boundless, infinite love (transcending physical limits) and spiritual devotion, reflecting Victorian ideals of love as sacred and eternal.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses the descriptive qualitative method to analyze the symbolic representation of emotions in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Because it allows for a comprehensive examination of textual meanings with an emphasis on linguistic patterns, symbolic elements, and their contextual interpretations, the qualitative approach is especially well-suited for this research. (Sandelowski, 2000)

This research process involves several key stages. First, the data collection phase on primary textual sources, more especially, five chosen sonnets from 'Sonnets from the Portuguese'. These sonnets were selected because of their extensive use of symbolic language and depth of theme.

For the data analysis, this research uses a combination of textual and semiotic approaches. In order to find recurrent symbols and their literal meanings (denotation), the first step is to closely examine each sonnet. The deeper emotional and cultural meanings of these symbols are then interpreted using semiotic analysis grounded in Roland Barthes' paradigm. Lastly, contextual research shows how Browning's poetry simultaneously reflects and subverts modern conventions by linking her symbolic language to more general Victorian social and gender beliefs.

For this research, the descriptive qualitative approach has several benefits, especially its ability to reveal complex meanings in literary works. Despite the method's inherent

subjectivity, Barthes' semiotic framework offers an organized framework for analysis, reducing the possibility of interpretive bias. In the end this approach makes it easier to thoroughly examine how Browning's symbolic language expresses emotion within its historical and cultural setting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of five selected sonnets (1, 6, 14, 22, and 43) reveals Elizabeth Barrett Browning's deft use of semiotic symbols to engage with Victorian cultural conventions and express a range of emotional states. This research reveals the several levels of meaning that Browning's poetic language operates on using Barthes' framework of denotation and connotation.

Sonnet 1

Key Symbol: 'The sweet years, the dear and wished for years" (Lines 2-3)

Denotation:

The expression "sweet years, the dear and wished for years" refers to a special period of life, either past or future, that feels priceless or hopeful. Repeating "years" implies that time passes in cycle, while referring to the years as "sweet" and "dear" gives them an emotional value.

Connotation:

Browning's conflicted feelings toward memory and time are expressed in this sentence. The "sweet years" might represent her healthier, more active childhood prior to sickness isolating her, while the "wished-for years" probably represent her aspiration for love and creative satisfaction during her engagement to Robert Browning (Mermin 1989). the sonnet's larger conflict between artistic hesitancy and passionate desire, balancing previous joy with future longing, is reflected in the tension between "dear" (cherished) and "wished for" (not yet achieved) (Leighton, 1986).

Sonnet 6

Key Symbol: "Thy shadows" (Line 2)

Denotation:

"Thy shadows" simply refers to the shade that is produced when someone is close enough to obstruct your light. By using "Henceforward" (1850), Browning demonstrates that this is a persistent state that endures across time rather than a temporary state.

Connotation:

There is a complex blend of love and surrender in this shadow imagery. In contrast to Sonnet 1's menacing shadow, this one depicts a willing intimacy, becoming a part of someone else's identity ("nevermore alone"). Both comfort (such shade) and loss (of distinct identity) are present, reflecting Victorian marriage ideals in which wives were supposed to fully integrate with their husbands (Mermin 1989). The lingering shadow ("henceforward") illustrates how two lives become permanently entwined and relates to subsequent lines about clasped hands and synced heartbeats.

Sonnet 14

Key symbol: "A trick of thought/ That falls in well with mine" (Lines 4-5)

Denotation:

"Trick of thought" refers to a persistent thought pattern that coincidentally links ("falls in well") with the speaker's own thought process. The word "trick" describes a unique mental

habit, whereas the verb “falls” implies that this harmony is unintentional rather than intentional (Browning, 2009). Another linguistic change that occurs when “her” is replaced with “mine” is the transition from third-person observation to direct address.

Connotation:

Romantic ideals are gently questioned by this wording:

- 1) “Falls in well” suggests compatibility is arbitrary rather than predetermined.
- 2) “trick” presents common beliefs as ephemeral eccentricities rather than connections.

This illustrates a problem for Victorian women to have their opinions taken seriously in relationships, as their intelligence was sometimes dismissed as “charming quirks”. Browning reveals a hidden fear: love is fragile if it relies on matching “tricks of thought” because people’s beliefs change over time (Mermin, 1989). She challenges the idea that thinking alike ensures enduring love by rejecting traditional attractions (smiles, appearances) and demonstrating that even intellectual ties are inconsistent.

Sonnet 22

Key Symbol: “Wings break into fire” (Line 3)

Denotation:

Wings grow longer (“lengthening wings”) and then suddenly catch fire (“break into fire”). The word “until” indicates that this occurs following the souls’ silent defiance (line 2), and the word “break” implies both abrupt change and possible destruction. The “-ing” in “lengthening” indicates that this is a continuous process rather than a one-time occurrence.

Connotation:

Traditional images of angels are dramatically reimagined in this flaming artwork. With erratic energy, Browning’s wings move (“lengthening”) and break (“break”) in contrast to static Victorian halos or soft wings. There are other interpretations of the fire, including spiritual purification, creative desire, and even the dangerous force of love between equals (Mermin 1989). “Break” alerts us, however, that this isn’t some simple, pleasant transcendence.

From standing erect (line 1) to winged flaming, resembling Dante’s souls ascending through the circles of heaven, the entire scene changes quickly. The central irony of the poem, however, is that they would prefer to “stay on earth” despite this glory. Furthermore, the revelation of wings after the souls became human (“erect and strong”) defies expectations because true transcendence isn’t a gorgeous set of pre-made wings but rather a fight that may consume them.

Sonnet 43

Key Symbol: “Old griefs” (Line 10)

Denotation:

The term “old griefs” describes the speaker’s previous emotional sufferings or sorrows. While the plural noun “griefs” denotes several episodes of misery or suffering, the adjective “old” emphasizes that these griefs happened in the distant past.

Connotation:

The use of term “old griefs” conveys a profound emotional impact and demonstrates how Browning transforms past heartache into current love. These words imply that her past misery, loneliness, or loss were changed rather than eliminated by love. The phrase “passion put to use” in them suggests that her loss has heightened her emotional intelligence, making her current love more intense due to her past experiences.

This captures a profound emotional reality: love grows through suffering rather than replaces it. Browning gives her “old griefs” significance by allowing them to strengthen her commitment rather than dismissing them as pointless. The phrase implies silent fortitude, not letting grief consume you, but allowing it to serve as fuel for something bigger.

CONCLUSIONS

The study comes to the conclusion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese uses a complex system of symbolic representation that engages with Victorian cultural standards and conveys complex emotional states on several levels of meaning. The study illustrates how Browning's poetic language employs denotative symbols that take on deeper connotative connotations through a close examination of five chosen sonnets (1, 6, 14, 22, and 43). This reveals both subtle social critique and personal emotional expression. What emerges most significantly is Browning's strategic negotiation of cultural constraints through symbolic representation. The poetry establishes a system where traditional imagery is systematically reconfigured to express dimensions of female experience typically excluded from public discourse. This symbolic reconfiguration creates a textual space where personal emotion and social critique coexist, allowing for the articulation of unconventional perspectives within established literary conventions. In the end, this analysis emphasizes the value of semiotic methods for comprehending the intricate connections between cultural background and individual experience that are encoded in literary texts. A notable example of how poetic language may both conform to and defy societal norms is Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, which provides important insights into the dynamics of literary expression under restrictive historical conditions. The study emphasizes how important Browning's writing is still for comprehending how emotion, representation, and cultural discourse interact.

REFERENCES:

Bouzida, F., 2014. The semiology analysis in media studies: Roland Barthes Approach. Presented at the Proceedings of SOCIOINT14-International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities, Emir Abd-el-Kader University, Istanbul, pp. 1001–1007.

Browning, E.B., 2009. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Selected Poems. Broadview Press, Canada.

Leighton, A., 1986. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Mermin, D., 1989. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Sandelowski, M., 2000. Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Res. Nurs. Health* 23, 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)