# Love in a Life

## POEM TEXT

I

Room after room,
I hunt the house through
We inhabit together.
Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—
Next time, herself!—not the trouble behind her
Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!
As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew:
Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.

II

Yet the day wears,
And door succeeds door;
I try the fresh fortune—
Range the wide house from the wing to the centre.
Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.
Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?
But 'tis twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,
Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

## SUMMARY

Moving from room to room, I search the whole house in which we live. My heart, don't be afraid—you'll find her eventually. And when you do, it will actually be *her*! That is, you won't just find the swaying curtain left in her wake or the scent of her perfume lingering on the sofa. When she touched the room's decorative crown molding, it seemed to come to life—the floral design budding with new flowers; that mirror over there seemed to glimmer as her feather passed.

But the day drags on, with one door just leading to another. I try my luck again, searching every part of this vast house, moving from the outer hallways inward. But it's always the same! She leaves the room just as I come in. I'll spend my entire day on this search—what does it matter? But look: now it's starting to get dark, and I still have so many rooms left to travel through and closets in which to look—so many gaps and corners to bother!

## THEMES

### LOVE, LOSS, AND SEPARATION

The mysterious "Love in a Life" explores the fear of losing one's beloved. The poem's speaker searches for his lost lover through a vast, maze-like house, but she always seems to have just left each room before he enters. Even as the day grows darker and there are seemingly endless hiding places left to explore, the increasingly frantic speaker vows to continue his search. Readers never learn whether the speaker finds his beloved in the end, nor why she's so elusive in the first place. Many take the poem as a metaphor for the fear of losing a lover to death or illness. Above all, however, the poem illustrates the obsessiveness and desperation that may stem from being separated from one's love.

At first, the poem suggests that the speaker has simply lost sight of his beloved. He "hunt[s]" through the house that they "inhabit together," and he reassures himself that he'll find the woman "herself" rather than the fleeting traces of her presence that she keeps leaving behind. He speaks as though this woman has just popped off into another room for a moment; the curtains seem to ruffle in her wake and her perfume still lingers on the couch. Her presence fills the house, spurring on the speaker's desperate "quest."

But as the hours pass, the speaker's confidence starts to sound more like a panicked refusal to accept the reality of his loss. Though the speaker's lover never seems far away, she's never actually *present*. The house itself seems to bend and warp, growing more cavernous as the search goes on and one empty room just leads to another ("And door succeeds door"). It's as though the speaker's reality has become defined by the search itself; his beloved remains vivid in his mind but physically out of reach, leaving the speaker to obsessively wander through the empty rooms of this house alone.

Indeed, the speaker even says "who cares?" as the night begins to fall, suggesting that nothing matters to him more than this desperate hunt. The speaker ends the poem without his beloved but determined to look into every "closet" and "alcove" even as the hope of finding her grows dim.

The poem ends as mysteriously as it began, leaving it open to a number of metaphorical readings. The speaker's search might represent the pain of loving someone who has died, for example. Or, perhaps, the speaker is simply deluded, unable to accept the end of his relationship with someone who no longer loves him. It's also worth noting that Browning wrote this while his wife and fellow poet, Elizabeth Browning, was very ill. Perhaps, then, the poem thus reckons with the reality that no

relationship can truly last, and that separation is a fact of life. Maybe the speaker's "hunt" is simply a way to keep him alive, holding onto the possibility of a reunion as a way to give life meaning.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-8
- Between Lines 8-9
- Lines 9-16

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

*Room after room,*
*I hunt the house through*
*We inhabit together.*

The speaker spends his time searching for his beloved in their shared home. This person could be the speaker's wife, though the poem never specifies their relationship; still, it's clear that this woman is very important to the speaker. The particulars of her disappearance—where she's gone, why she's gone, even who she is—also remain a mystery, adding to the poem's eerie, mysterious tone.

The diacope of line 1 (the repetition of the word "room") suggests that this search is repetitive and perhaps even endless. This house seems cavernous and maze-like, one room leading to another and then another. The use of the word "inhabit" is also strangely formal; the speaker could have just said that they "live" together. (Maybe he says "inhabit" because this woman is not actually alive!)

Not many people have to "hunt" through their home to find their partner, either. This word adds an element of determination and even aggression to the speaker's search. If he's *hunting* this woman, does that mean she's "prey"—and trying to *escape* him? Or is the speaker simply describing how intense this search feels to him? (Interestingly enough, Browning's "Life in a Love," published in the same collection as "Love in a Life," begins with the speaker declaring, "Escape me? / Never—")

Either way, the breathy alliteration of "hunt" and "house" evokes the desperate, even frantic nature of this search. The enjambment between lines 2 and 3 ("through / We") also might make it feel as though the poem is darting from line to line just as the speaker goes from room to room.

The syntax of these opening lines is pretty strange in general, with the placement of "We inhabit together" at the end of the sentence *after* the preposition "through." The winding word order here makes the poem a bit harder to follow—perhaps like the elusive lover herself! This word order also allows the poet to place "I" and "We" in the same spot in two *separate* lines, subtly emphasizing the fact that the speaker ("I") is separate from his partner (he's not part of that "We" right now).

### LINES 4-6

*Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—*
*Next time, herself!—not the trouble behind her*
*Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!*

The speaker tries to quiet his anxious heart, saying it has "nothing" to fear because the speaker "shalt find" the woman he's searching for. The subtle personification here suggests that the speaker's emotions aren't entirely under his control; his heart seems to have a mind of its own.

The speaker's words are meant to be an expression of confidence. "Shalt" is a modal verb—one expressing certainty that the speaker will find his beloved. And yet, the poem itself doesn't *sound* all that self-assured! For one thing, a flurry of caesurae here create a halting, shaky rhythm, as if the line itself is palpating with uncertainty:

> Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—

The diacope of the word "heart" and the muffled, fricative alliteration of "fear" and "for" add to the line's restless feel.

Next, the speaker insists that he will find the woman "herself" rather than "the trouble behind her." This "trouble" refers to the evidence of her presence that lingers throughout the house—the fleeting *traces* of herself that she leaves behind upon exiting a room, including billowing curtains and the scent of her perfume. The speaker makes it sound like this woman is literally, physically close by—like she's always looking out a window or sitting on a couch only moments before the speaker enters a room.

And yet, her continued absence might also make readers wonder if this woman is actually in the house at all; she seems more like a ghost than a real person. The idea that she'll be "herself" might also suggest that she's been someone *else* lately. Perhaps she's fallen ill or out of love with the speaker; perhaps the speaker is metaphorically longing for this woman as she *used to be* and not as she is *now*.

Finally, pay attention to the poem's form here: line 4 is suddenly much longer than lines 1 to 3. The poem itself expands as the speaker expands his search.

### LINES 7-8

*As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew:*
*Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.*

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker describes more of the traces that his beloved keeps leaving behind. There's a touch of magic about these descriptions:

> As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew[.]

First, a little bit of basic Victorian architecture information: a cornice-wreath is a decorative feature typically built into a ceiling or wall (like these). It's typically made from plaster, and this particular cornice has a floral pattern (which was also very common during the Victorian period). Here, then, the speaker's beloved seems to breathe life into an inanimate object, making it blossom "anew" when it has no business blossoming at all.

It's not clear how or why the speaker's lover brushes the cornice. It could be a reference to her cleaning the room (the feather in the next line supports this too), but it might also just mean that her mere presence is enough to bring the room to life as she passes by.

Listen, too, to the sibilance here, which evokes this brushing motion (think about the sound of a broom on a floor): "As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew." This sibilance also adds a hush to the poem, making this woman seem even more ethereal and elusive.

Next, the speaker says that "[y]on looking glass" (i.e., "that mirror over there") seems to glimmer or shine when she waves her feather at it. The consonance and alliteration here make the line itself glimmer with beauty:

> Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.

This feather could be part of her outfit, or it could be a feather duster that she's using. Either way, these lines paint a picture of a woman who is always just out of reach, consistently close yet always distant.

Also note that lines 7 and 8 actually rhyme with lines 2 and 3 (through/anew, together/feather), but the sheer distance between these rhymes makes them hard to hear. These rhymes are more like *traces* of rhyme, mirroring how the speaker's beloved only appears through the ghostly evidence of a disturbed curtain or a shining "looking-glass."

## LINES 9-12

> *Yet the day wears,*
> *And door succeeds door;*
> *I try the fresh fortune—*
> *Range the wide house from the wing to the centre.*

The speaker says that the day "wears." It's dragging on, in other words, and the speaker is growing tired and frustrated. This is understandable, given that every door he walks through just leads to another:

> Yet the day wears,
> And door succeeds door;

The diacope here echoes that of line 1 ("Room after room"), once again suggesting the relentlessness of the speaker's task (he seems almost as if he is stuck in an M.C. Esher picture!). The house seems to shift and contort, and readers might get the sense that the speaker is never going to find his beloved at all.

The speaker pushes on with the search nevertheless, "try[ing] the fresh fortune"—that is, his luck. The alliteration of "fresh fortune" heightens the poem's language and suggests the speaker's excitement at the possibility that *this time* he'll find her. He declares that he'll journey across "the wide house," moving from its outer wings back to its "centre." The width of line 12 evokes the house's size, which seems to keep expanding.

## LINES 13-14

> *Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.*
> *Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?*

Just two lines ago, the speaker seemed excited to "try the fresh fortune"—to try his luck at finding his beloved once again. Here, though, that "fortune" proves no different than it ever was. "Still the same chance!" the speaker says; she remains out of reach, seeming to exit each room just as he walks in. The end-stop after "enter" creates a little pocket of silence that evokes the emptiness of the house.

At this point, readers might once again question whether this woman has *really* been just a few steps ahead of the speaker this whole time. It seems highly unlikely that she's been silently running through this maze-like house for hours, and by now the speaker is starting to seem unreliable—if not outright delusional. He says it's just bad fortune that she leaves every room as he enters, but, in truth, she's probably not there at all. Love, the poem suggests, makes people desperate; the speaker's continued search seems to reflect his fear of being separated from his beloved and his refusal to accept being alone.

Line 14 suggests that the speaker does sense that his behavior is irrational. He "spends [his] whole day in the quest," but insists that this doesn't matter ("who cares?"). That he calls this search a "quest" is also telling, given that this word generally suggests a long, arduous, and often doomed search. It sounds like he sees himself as a kind knight chasing after a mythical treasure. Like "hunt" in line 2, it's also simply a strange, intense way to describe looking for someone who lives in the same house!

## LINES 15-16

> *But 'tis twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,*
> *Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!*

Daylight begins to fade in the poem's final two lines as "twilight" set in. This suggests that the speaker's time running out—literally, in the sense that it's getting dark, and perhaps figuratively, in the sense that he fears not finding his beloved before she's gone for good. (For someone to be in the "twilight" of their life means they're at the end of their days, closing in on

the darkness of death; perhaps he fears his beloved dying before he can see her one last time.)

It's not clear who the "you" is in line 15. Perhaps it's the reader, or maybe the speaker is simply talking to himself; he's essentially saying, *"Look, it's already getting dark and there are so many more places she could be hiding—so I'd better get a move on!"* The speaker seems at once wild, frantic, and excited about continuing the search:

> [...] with such suites to explore,
> Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

The sibilance here casts the ending in hushed, whispery tones, evoking the sinister quiet of the night. And notice how the parallelism of these clauses makes the house seem infinitely vast; there aren't just suites of rooms but endless nooks and crannies to "importune," or bother.

The speaker makes himself sound like a pestering, unwanted presence in this house. Perhaps that's because his search is disturbing the house's peace. It's clear, at least, that his desperate desire to find his beloved is disturbing his *own* peace, and that he's going to be looking for his lover for a long time to come.

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"Love in a Life" is filled with alliteration, which makes the poem's language—and thus the speaker's search—sound all the more urgent and intense.

Listen to the /h/ sounds of lines 2-3, for example (and note that "inhabit" can be considered alliterative because its /h/ sound lands at the start of a stressed syllable, *in**ha**bit*):

> I hunt the house through
> We inhabit together.

This string of aspirated sounds requires the repeated expulsion of air. In other words, the line is filled with *breath*, which evokes the speaker's frantic huffing as he chases after his beloved. Later, listen to the crisp alliteration of "curtain" and "couch" and the guttural /g/ of "glass gleamed." These sounds ring out clearly in the poem, perhaps suggesting just how sharp and vivid the speaker's impressions of his beloved are even in her absence. The chime between "looking-glass" and "gleamed" also simply sounds decorative or ornamental, adding a touch of beauty to a moment describing the beloved's effect on the house.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "hunt," "house"
- **Line 3:** "inhabit"
- **Line 4:** "fear," "for," "find"
- **Line 6:** "curtain," "couch's"
- **Line 8:** "looking-glass gleamed"
- **Line 11:** "fresh fortune"
- **Line 13:** "Still," "same"
- **Line 14:** "quest," "cares"
- **Line 15:** "'tis twilight," "such suites"
- **Line 16:** "Such," "search," "such"

### CAESURA

The caesurae in "Love in a Life" evoke the speaker's fear and anxiety as he wanders through this twisty, maze-like house in search of his beloved. Listen, for example, to the many (many!) pauses in line 4:

> Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—

The speaker is trying to project confidence to his personified "Heart" here, insisting that he's going to find his beloved. But the language here is halting and hesitant—this is hardly the rhythm of a confident and assured man!

Caesurae disrupt lines' momentum like this throughout the poem, bringing the speaker's futile search to vivid life through the poem's language. Take line 5:

> Next time, herself!—not the trouble behind her

And line 13:

> Still the same chance! she goes out as I enter.

Caesurae bring the reader to a halt again and again. With all these sudden stops, readers might feel like they keep smacking into walls or coming across dead ends—perhaps like the speaker himself in his search.

Caesura might also make the speaker sound increasingly frantic and erratic. Take line 14, for example. Here, the speaker even gets close to admitting that his search is futile:

> Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?

The abrupt caesura is like another voice in his mind interrupting the first thought, convincing him that it doesn't matter if this "quest" is pointless.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou"
- **Line 5:** "time, herself!—not"

- **Line 6:** "curtain, the"
- **Line 7:** "it, the"
- **Line 13:** "chance! she"
- **Line 14:** "quest,—who"
- **Line 15:** "twilight, you," "see,—with"
- **Line 16:** "search, such"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance, like alliteration, adds intensity and urgency to the poem's language, helping to give readers a sense of the speaker's troubled and obsessive state of mind.

Much of this is more specifically sibilance, which evokes the quiet of the house and casts a creepy, even sinister hush over the proceedings. Listen to the swooshing /s/ and /sh/ sounds of lines 7-8, for example, which evoke the ghostly movements of the speaker's beloved through the house:

> As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew:
> Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of her feather.

The poem's final lines are particularly dense with consonance, the language building to a sonic crescendo that reflects the speaker's growing desperation. Listen to lines 15-16:

> But 'tis twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,
> Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

Nearly every word here shares sounds with those surrounding it. The dense, complex language reflects the daunting nature of the task before the speaker; all these twisty sounds evoke the vast, labyrinthine house he must explore.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "hunt," "house"
- **Line 3:** "inhabit"
- **Line 4:** "fear," "for," "find"
- **Line 6:** "curtain," "couch's"
- **Line 7:** "she brushed," "cornice," "blossomed"
- **Line 8:** "looking-glass gleamed"
- **Line 11:** "fresh fortune"
- **Line 12:** "wide," "house," "wing," "centre"
- **Line 13:** "Still," "same chance"
- **Line 14:** "Spend," "quest," "cares"
- **Line 15:** "'tis twilight," "see," "such suites to explore"
- **Line 16:** "Such closets to search," "such alcoves to importune"

## END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the poem's lines are end-stopped. All this end-stopping works alongside the poem's frequent caesura to create a halting, even frustrating rhythm; the fact that so many lines come to a clear pause at the end seems to reflect the futility of the speaker's search, the way he fruitlessly moves from room to room without ever finding his beloved. Each end-stop is like a little letdown that disrupts the poem's flow, making the reader pause again and again.

Take the bold end-stop at the end of line 6, for example, which conveys the speaker's intense despair at once again not catching up with his love. The exclamation mark here creates a long pause before "she" (the speaker's beloved) appears in the next line, brushing against the "cornice-wreath":

> Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!
> As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath blossomed anew:

End-stop thus *separates* the speaker from his beloved on the page.

The second stanza is then end-stopped from beginning to end. The resultant pauses at the end of each line fill the poem with weighty pockets of silence that emphasize the speaker's solitude.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "room,"
- **Line 3:** "together."
- **Line 4:** "her—"
- **Line 6:** " perfume!"
- **Line 7:** "anew:"
- **Line 8:** "feather."
- **Line 9:** "wears,"
- **Line 10:** "door;"
- **Line 11:** "fortune—"
- **Line 12:** "centre."
- **Line 13:** "enter."
- **Line 14:** "cares?"
- **Line 15:** "explore,"
- **Line 16:** "importune!"

## ENJAMBMENT

"Love in a Life" uses enjambment only twice: between lines 1-2 and lines 5-6. Whereas end-stopping frustrates the poem's flow, never letting it gain steady forward momentum, these enjambments create swift movement and moments of heightened anticipation.

First, listen to the strange enjambment between lines 2 and 3:

> I hunt the house through
> We inhabit together.

The poem itself seems to dart from line to line, perhaps evoking the speaker's frantic, desperate movement as he rushes from one part of the house to another.

There's more enjambment at the end of line 5, where the speaker describes finding, not his beloved, but rather evidence that she was recently nearby:

> Next time, herself!—not the trouble behind her
> Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!

Enjambment thrusts the reader across the line break without pause, subtly evoking just how close the speaker's beloved feels to him at this moment. That "her" is separated from the movement of the "curtain" in the next line—but just *barely*.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "through / We"
- **Lines 5-6:** "her / Left"

## PERSONIFICATION

In lines 4-6, the speaker directly addresses his own heart, subtly personifying it in the process. He tries to reassure his heart, talking to it as though it's a frightened animal and promising that they'll both find their missing beloved soon enough:

> Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—

The heart, here, represents the speaker's emotional self. In personifying his heart and then addressing it directly (an example of the device known as apostrophe), the speaker is implicitly granting his heart its own will and agency. This personification suggests that he doesn't have control over emotions—that the love he feels is something with a life of its own. He can't help it, he seems to say here; the heart wants what it wants.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—"

## DIACOPE

Diacope is an important part of "Life in a Love," highlighting the relentless, monotonous, and fruitless nature of the speaker's search for his beloved.

The first example of this device comes in line 1:

> Room after room,
> I hunt the house through
> We inhabit together.

The repetition of the word "room" simply mirrors the fact that there are multiple rooms in this house! This diacope reveals that the speaker's "hunt" has been going on for some time and makes the reader wonder just how big this house might be if one "room" keeps leading to another. The diacope in line 10 works similarly:

> And door succeeds door;

To the speaker, it feels like as soon as he goes through one door another appears. This repetition thus suggests that his search has no end in sight.

There's more diacope in line 4, though this has a bit of a different effect on the poem:

> Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt find her—

The speaker is talking to his own heart, trying to reassure it (and, thus, himself) that he's going to succeed. But the repetition of the word "heart" suggests the speaker's nervousness and need to convince himself that he's not going to fail. Perhaps this diacope even evokes an anxious *heartbeat*, the word itself beating through the line.

**Where Diacope appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "Room," "room"
- **Line 4:** "Heart," "heart"
- **Line 10:** "door," "door"

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker asks a rhetorical question in line 14:

> Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?

The speaker isn't looking for an answer here. Instead, he's asking this question to make a point: that it doesn't *matter* how long he spends in this epic "quest" to find his beloved.

Readers have probably started to question the speaker's sanity at this point, and this line suggests that, on a certain level, he understands that it's irrational to spend the "whole day in the quest" for someone who probably isn't there. Yet, as the rhetorical question makes clear, he's beyond the point of caring. His conviction is based on his passion, and no amount of reasoning is going to change that. The rhetorical question, then, demonstrates the speaker's commitment to the "hunt" for his lover while also suggesting that, on some level, he realizes it's never going to be successful.

**Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**

- **Line 14:** "Spend my whole day in the quest,—who cares?"

### PARALLELISM

The parallelism and anaphora of the poem's final lines suggest the speaker's excitement and mania. Having declared that night is starting to fall, the speaker ends the poem by pointing out just how many places he has left to look for his beloved. As he describes these places, he repeats the same grammatical structure in each clause: "such [blank] to [blank]":

> But 'tis twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,
> Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

The anaphora of "such" emphasizes just how *many* "suites" (or sets of rooms), "closets," and "alcoves" remain in this house. The similar language of these clauses also hammers home the relentless, repetitive nature of the speaker's task.

On the one hand, he sounds excited at this moment; there are so many places his beloved might be hiding, meaning there are more chances to find her. At the same time, there being so many places to explore means there's a chance he will *never* find her!

The parallelism here perhaps even suggests that the speaker's luck *isn't going to change*; it doesn't matter what location he slots into that [blank] above; the result will be the same (he'll have "Still the same chance" of finding his beloved).

**Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 15-16:** "such suites to explore, / Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!"

## VOCABULARY

**Thou Shalt** (Line 4) - You will (with certainty).

**Cornice-wreath** (Line 7) - A decorative feature on a ceiling or wall. Made of plaster and, in this case, with a floral pattern.

**Anew** (Line 7) - Again (newly).

**Yon** (Line 8) - That (over there).

**Looking-glass** (Line 8) - Mirror.

**Gleamed** (Line 8) - Shone.

**Wears** (Line 9) - Drags on.

**Succeeds** (Line 10) - Follows.

**Range** (Line 12) - Travel extensively.

**Wing** (Line 12) - Part of a house that extends outwards and to the side (and usually has multiple rooms).

**Quest** (Line 14) - Lengthy journey/misson.

**'Tis** (Line 15) - It is.

**Suites** (Line 15) - A group of rooms.

**Closets** (Line 16) - Small rooms.

**Alcoves** (Line 16) - Recesses or nooks.

**Importune** (Line 16) - Harass, bother.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Love in a Life" has 16 lines split into two eight-line stanzas (a.k.a octets or octaves). Each stanza is numbered as well, which might imply that there is a kind of progression between them (as though they're chapters in a book).

Readers might think of these stanzas as metaphorical "rooms" in the "house" that is this poem itself. (In fact, the word "stanza" means "room" in Italian!) It's also worth noting that both stanzas begin with three short lines and then switch over to much longer lines for the remainder of the stanza. The expanding poem evokes the seemingly ever-expanding house through which the speaker searches.

### METER

The lines of "Love in a Life" vary greatly in length, ranging from just four syllables at the start of each stanza and twelve at the end. The sudden shift from short to long lines evokes the way that the house seems to grow ever larger around the speaker as his search grows more desperate.

While the number of *syllables* varies, the stanzas are pretty similar in terms of their actual metrical rhythms. The first three lines of each, for example, have the same pattern of stressed and unstressed beats:

> Room af- | ter room,
> I hunt | the house through
> We inha- | bit toge- | ther.
> [...]
> Yet the | day wears,
> And door | succeeds door;
> I try | the fresh for- | tune—

As we've scanned it here, these are all dimeter lines (meaning each has two metrical feet) with two stressed beats apiece. The first lines here feature a trochee (DUM-da) followed by an iamb; the second an iamb followed by an anapest (da-da-DUM); and the third an iamb followed by an anapest with a dangling unstressed syllable at the end.

Read aloud, the lines suggest the speaker's furtive, frantic movements around the house. And while it's possible to scan things slightly differently, it's clear that these chunks of the poem mirror each other. It's like the poem is stuck in a loop, its repetitive rhythms reflecting the fact that the speaker is stuck moving from room to room to room.

Also notice that many lines in the poem end with an unstressed beat, just like the third lines in the quotation above (together, find her, behind her, feather, fortune, enter). All these weak line endings might give readers the sense of the speaker's strength wavering, perhaps revealing he isn't actually all that confident he'll find his beloved.

Elsewhere, variations in the poem's rhythm give the poem a kind of restless energy that betrays the speaker's state of mind. Here's line 6 as an example, which begins with a trochee, followed by an iamb and two anapests:

> Left in | the cur- | tain, the cou- | ch's perfume!

### RHYME SCHEME

"Love in a Life" has a complex rhyme scheme that repeats in each stanza:

ABCDDABC

Effectively, each stanza circles back on itself in a big loop: it starts with those ABC rhyme sounds, has a quick interlude with two D rhymes in a row, and then repeats those ABC sounds.

This pattern might remind the reader of someone: the speaker himself! He roams the house, searching room after room, finding nothing but resolving to carry on anyway. His search never really *changes*, and he essentially ends the poem in the same place he started: without his beloved by his side and with many rooms left to "explore."

Notice, too, how the ABC rhyme sounds here are *separated* from each other by that couplet in the middle of each stanza. This separation perhaps evokes the speaker's separation from his love. It also makes these rhymes more subtle to the reader's ear. In this sense, they mimic the woman's ghostly presence—how she's only detectable through the faint evidence that she leaves behind.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "Love in a Life" has been separated from a woman he loves (perhaps his wife) and is desperate to find her. He searches the house they "inhabit together," finding only traces of his beloved's presence rather than the woman herself. In fact, she seems to leave each room just before he enters it, somehow always nearby yet out of reach.

Readers probably get the sense that this speaker is frantic with worry and perhaps even delusional. He has to remind his own heart to "fear nothing"—which usually isn't something a calm, genuinely confident person would do! Despite hints at his growing doubt, the speaker vows to continue his search even as night falls, poking into every nook and cranny of this cavernous house.

Browning's wife, Elizabeth, was ill at the time he wrote the poem, and it's possible to read "Love in a Life" as an expression of the poet's own worry and grief over the potential loss of his beloved partner.

## SETTING

"Love in a Life" takes place over the course of a day in the house that the speaker "inhabit[s]" with the woman he loves (perhaps his wife).

The word "inhabit" is a bit of a strange choice, given that the speaker could have just said that they "live" together. In saying that they "inhabit" this house, the speaker leaves open the possibility that this woman isn't *actually* there; perhaps the ghostly traces of her presence (which may or may not be conjured by the speaker's imagination) are all that's left. In other words, the house might be haunted by her spirit and/or the speaker's memories.

In any case, this house is clearly huge, and it seems to just get bigger over the course of the poem. The speaker hunts through "[r]oom after room" and opens "door" after "door" in his search for his beloved. And in the poem's final lines, the speaker makes it sound like there are endless places left in which his beloved could be hiding:

> But 'tis twilight, you see,—with such suites to explore,
> Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!

Readers don't necessarily have to take the poem as about a house that *literally* shapeshifts around this frantic speaker. It's just as possible that this huge, confusing house symbolizes the speaker's anxiety, fear, and loneliness. It's almost like he's trapped in a nightmare, and he can't find the way out.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

"Love in a Life" appears in Browning's collection *Men and Women*, in which his complimentary poem "Life in a Love" 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 pair that Browning developed to explore the experience of finding, seeking, and losing love. Both poems express a kind of deep-seated anxiety about being alone.

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, 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.

*Men and Women* appeared in 1855 and was not received well at the time of its publication; Browning's reputation had already been damaged by the failure of *Sordello*, a vast and difficult work, 15 years earlier. Now, *Men and Women* is regarded as some of Browning's best poetry.

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).

## 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.

Browning was also a deeply romantic man, and he lived out one of literature's most touching love stories. In 1845, Browning paid his first visit to a rising star in the literary world: Elizabeth Barrett. Unusually for a woman writer of the time, Barrett had become wildly famous; Browning was only one of many readers to be moved by poetry. He wrote her a fan letter, and, eventually, they fell deeply in love.

Barrett's tyrannical father was having none of it, however. In order to defy Mr. Barrett, the couple had to elope; they left England for Italy in 1846. Outraged, Elizabeth's father disinherited her. The newlywed Brownings, undaunted, set up house in Florence, where they would live happily for over a decade before Elizabeth fell ill (the precise nature of her sickness remains debated).

"Love in a Life" was written not long before she died in her husband's arms at the age of only 55; perhaps Browning's fear of losing his beloved informs the speaker of this poem's impossible "quest."

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Brownings in Love — A short animation about the relationship between Robert and Elizabeth Browning. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbvebiSuXv8)
- The Victorian Era and its Poets — Learn more about this period of major social change and its major poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- A Portrait of Browning — A photograph of the poet in his later years. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Browning#/media/File:Robert_Browning_by_Herbert_Rose_Barraud_c1888.jpg)
- Browning's Biography — Learn more about the poet's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-browning)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT BROWNING POEMS

- Home-Thoughts, from Abroad
- How they Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix
- Life in a Love
- Meeting at Night
- My Last Duchess
- Porphyria's Lover
- The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church
- The Last Ride Together
- The Lost Leader
- The Patriot

# HOW TO CITE

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