Elizabeth Barrett Browning was born in 1806 and was a thoughtful and intelligent writer. She had a social conscience and was an opponent to slavery and child labour.

She married her husband, Robert Browning, who was 6 years younger than her and was disowned by her father and cut off socially by her siblings. Elizabeth and Robert, also a poet, moved to Italy where they lived comfortably and were famous because of their literary work.

No female poet was held in higher esteem among cultured readers in both the United States and England than Elizabeth Barrett Browning during the nineteenth century. This is one of 44 sonnets in a collection entitled Sonnets from the Portuguese, which was published in 1850 but written some years earlier during Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s courtship and subsequent marriage to Robert Browning. The poems were originally personal and intended only for Robert Browning’s eyes; subsequently, he persuaded Elizabeth Barrett Browning to publish them.
Sonnet 29

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there 's nought to see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

KEY VOCAB
insphere – encircle
Sonnet Structure

Sonnets have 14 lines, each line having 10 syllables with 5 stressed syllables.

This kind of rhythm is called iambic pentameter.

An iamb is a di-DA beat and pent means ‘five’, (as in pentagon).

‘I think of thee! – my thoughts do twine and bud’

A sonnet is usually divided into 8 lines and 6 lines and expected to have a volta (a change in direction of some kind) after the 8th line.

It might be the first 8 lines pose a question that the last 6 lines answer or perhaps the last 6 lines pose a counter argument to the first 8 lines.
What is the poem about?

The narrator tells her lover how much she thinks about him when they’re not together. She’s worried that her thoughts will obscure the reality of what he’s actually like.

However she assures him that her thoughts do not compare to the reality of him. She wants him to be a strong presence in her life and to be with him rather than just thinking about him.
Feelings and Attitudes

The narrator longs with to be with her lover instead of just thinking about him.

She thinks about her lover all the time when they’re apart. Her language is forceful- she uses imperatives which almost order him to be with her.
Fulfilment, nature, distance, longing...

Consider how relationships are presented as fulfilling in ‘Singh Song!’ and ‘Climbing My Grandfather.’ Natural imagery is also used to show distance in a relationship in ‘Letters From Yorkshire’ and ‘Winter Swans.’
The narrator addresses her lover directly, which makes the poem seem more personal.

Exclamation mark emphasises the pleasure she takes in thinking about him.

Natural imagery shows how her thoughts focus on him like a vine wraps around a tree – her thoughts are constantly growing and developing.

Suggests her love for him is extensive.

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About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly

Metaphor – the narrator is the “wild vines” and her lover is the “tree”. This is emphasised by the internal rhyme of “thee” and “tree”.

Caesura creates a turning point in the poem.

Her thoughts threaten to stop her from seeing him as he really is.
Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should, 
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare, 
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee 
Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere! 
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee 
And breathe within thy shadow a new air, 
I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.
Sonnet 29

Poem dictionary

Twine – wind around something
Straggling – not orderly
InspHERE – completely enclose