

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

## Early Life

Born Elizabeth Moulton-Barrett 1806-1861

Eldest of 12 children (1 had died – Mary – age 4—11 survived)

Grew up in a country manor house called Hope End in Hertfordshire. She was born into a wealthy family whose fortune derived from a slave plantation in the West Indies.

Father – Edward Moulton-Barrett – dominating

Mother – Mary Clark – submissive

The boys were sent to school, while the girls remained home with a governess. But Elizabeth did learn by sitting in on sessions with her brother and his tutor, and through encouragement of a neighbor, a scholar named Hugh Boyd. Elizabeth was largely self-educated after age 11. She translated Greek and wrote her own books at a very young age. She first published when she was in her teens. She was very close to her father when she was young. She adored him, and he encouraged her. She began composing verse when she was four. When she was six, she received a ten-shilling note from her father for her efforts, and he dubbed her the Poet Laureate of Hope End. From *The Hope End Years*, written by Barbara Dennis: “There was never any question as to who held sway over the community at Hope End, or who demanded and received the unquestioning loyalty, obedience, and love of the young family. For Elizabeth, it was her father, Edward Moulton Barrett, who was at the centre of her life. Their relationship was characterized in her childhood by uncritical adoration on her side, and on his by indulgent affection and admiration. In the early years he was generous with both time and money. He encouraged Elizabeth’s writing, he funded all the expenses of *The Battle of Marathon* in 1820, and was delighted with her success when it came. He permitted all his children an unexpected degree of familiarity, and they all in later life confirm the happiness of their childhood and their deep love of their father” (19-20). Before turning ten, she had read histories of England, Greece and Rome, several of Shakespeare’s plays, and *Paradise Lost*. She learned Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. She also read Wollstonecraft, which developed her interest in human rights and social causes. She and two of her sisters suffered from an undiagnosed illness when she was 15—headaches, pain in side, muscle twitches, fatigue. Her sisters recovered, but she remained sickly, which led to her becoming reclusive. Her doctor prescribed a form of opium, and she then battled addiction. When she passed her father’s limitations, he became very critical and condescending. From *The Hope End Years*: “A minor crisis came in February 1827, when she showed him a poem on which she had been working for months. He received it with a coldness and discouragement that she found quite dismaying, and he compounded his cruelty with a dismissal she found hurtful beyond words: ‘You see the subject is beyond your grasp—and you must be content with what you can reach...I advise you to burn the wretched thing’” (qtd. in Dennis 32). In writing about his response later, Elizabeth noted, “I believe I did not consider my talents so limited, and

I certainly did not know that he thought so...I cannot give up completing the poem I was advised to burn” (qtd. in Dennis 33).

**Before you move on to the next lecture, consider the following: Why do you think Mr. Barrett’s view of his daughter’s talent changed as she got older, and her talent became more evident? In thinking about core self-esteem vs. situational self-esteem, how might Elizabeth Barrett have been better positioned to develop core self-esteem than Mary Wollstonecraft, even though Barrett’s father eventually withdrew his support?**

## **Adulthood**

Her mother died in 1828 when Elizabeth was 22. After her death, Elizabeth’s father became more repressive, and even went so far as to forbid all of his children to marry. He wanted to be the sole focus of their lives. Slavery was abolished in England in 1833. Since the Barrett’s wealth depended on the slave plantations, money became an issue, and a loss of wealth forced the family to move. They moved to London in 1835, where Elizabeth grew more dependent on her father as her health was made worse by London’s damp and polluted air. Elizabeth also became very isolated. Because she was ill, she did not have to take charge of the domestic tasks in the household. Therefore, she spent all her time in her room reading and writing. As the eldest daughter in a family without a mother, she normally would have been expected to spend much of her time supervising the domestic servants, but her weakness prevented her from leaving her room. Relieved of all household responsibilities, she was free to devote herself to reading and writing.

However, she developed lung problems in the pollution of London, and her doctor advised that she move to a warmer climate. Her father would only let her go as far as Torquay on the Devonshire coast. She remained there for three years, and while there, her uncle and brother Sam died of yellow fever in the West Indies, and then her brother Edward (her favorite brother) who was staying with her, died in a sailing accident. From *The Hope End Years*: “Elizabeth lay in a state of stunned incomprehension for weeks that turned to months, bound, as she told her friend Mary Mitford in the first letter she could pen, ‘in chains heavy and cold enough to be iron—and which have indeed entered into the soul.’” (44). Mary Mitford responded by convincing Elizabeth to accept a spaniel puppy Elizabeth named Flush: “From the last days of 1840 every letter from Torquay carried rapturous news of Flush’s exploits and progress, and the account of her final return to Wimpole Street in August 1841 is expressed in terms of Flush’s experience” (45). Virginia Woolf later wrote an entire novel from Elizabeth’s dog’s perspective. The novel was humorous on the surface, but very telling of what it was like to live in the Victorian patriarchy of the time. Even with the distraction of the dog, Elizabeth grieved her brother’s loss for years, and practically spent the next five years in her bedroom back in London: “She wore mourning throughout the year, her notorious dependence on opium grew, and she thought of ordinary life as at an end. Poetry, always the central preoccupation of her life, now became her only motive for living” (45). Even though

she was writing and publishing, she refused most visitors, even Wordsworth himself. After the publication of *Poems* in 1844, she became an international celebrity—one who was essentially a shut-in.

**Before moving on to the last lecture, consider the adversity Elizabeth faced—the grief of losing so many she loved, and her own physical frailty, including addiction. Do you believe she possessed the strength of will and sense of self to survive and thrive, or would it take external influence to keep her from giving up and giving in?**

### Later Life

She did continue to see her friend and mentor Mary Mitford, an older, popular writer of the time. Mitford was the one who brought Robert Browning to Elizabeth's attention. Elizabeth was very famous by this time, and Browning, six years her junior and an aspiring writer, was not. They began corresponding through letters after Elizabeth included a reference to him and one of his poems in one of her poems, and he wrote to thank her. They wrote from January – May of 1845, during which time she wrote her greatest poems, later to be published as *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – the title an attempt to hide their autobiographical nature. They were her love poems to Robert Browning: “Among the finest love poems ever written by a woman, they are her most enduring poetic achievement. A chronic invalid, worn down by a succession of griefs, robbed of the bright-hued cheeks and resilience of youth, living without hope that a new life might someday be hers outside of her virtual prison, she expresses in the sonnets her sense of wonder that her life has been so transfigured. Filled with gratitude for her suitor's offer of love, she at first tells him that they must remain no more than friends because of the disparities in health and age. Marriage, she says, would place a severe burden upon him, for the care of an invalid wife six years older than he would necessarily take him away from the varied social life he has been enjoying. From the earnest look of her lover's eyes...her doubts and hesitations are dispelled. With the full assurance of the depth of his feelings for her, she responds to his love in the most inspired sonnet of the cycle, ‘How do I love thee, let me count the ways’” (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*).

She finally agreed to meet him, and he promptly proposed marriage (Flush also bit him). She initially refused, but they were eventually secretly married in Sept. of 1846, and they escaped to Florence, Italy, where her health improved dramatically. Their marriage was nontraditional in nature. They lived on her income, and she even gave birth to a son, Robert Wiedman Browning (Pen) when she was 43. Robert did much of the active parenting while Elizabeth wrote. Her father never spoke to her again. Six years after her marriage he sent her a scathing letter calling on her to repent for her sin in failing to sacrifice her life and its affections exclusively to him. He also never acknowledged Pen. Her brother Alfred and sister Henrietta also married. All were disinherited. It was during this time that Elizabeth wrote *Aurora Leigh*—a commercial success but not overly loved by critics. Between its publication and 1885, it went through 19 printings. In the mid-1850s, her lung trouble returned, and she died in June of 1861, but not before becoming involved in numerous causes – Italian Nationalist Cause, abolition of slavery in US (slavery had been abolished in England in 1833), and the position of women in Victorian Society. Her

writing fell out of favor after her death, and she became best known for her sonnets. However, Virginia Woolf revived her in 1930. Virginia “deplored the fact that Barrett Browning’s poetry was no longer being read, and especially that Aurora Leigh had been forgotten. She urged her readers to take a fresh look at the poem, which she admired for its ‘speed and energy, forthrightness and complete self-confidence.’ ‘Elizabeth Barrett,’ Woolf wrote, ‘was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet. In Woolf’s view, the heroine of the poem, with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as an artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age’” (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*).