

A COMPARISON OF LOVE EXPRESSIONS IN SAPARDI DJOKO DAMONO'S "AKU MENCINTAIMU" AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S "HOW DO I LOVE THEE?"

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ABSTRACT

*This article presents a comparative literary analysis of two iconic love poems from different cultures and time periods: **Aku Mencintaimu** by Indonesian poet Sapardi Djoko Damono and **How Do I Love Thee?** (Sonnet 43) by English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The main goal of this study is to explore and compare how both poets express love through themes, language style, and structure. Using a comparative approach, the analysis shows that Sapardi expresses love through simplicity and quiet reflection, while Browning uses passionate language and the traditional form of a sonnet to describe her deep emotions. The findings show that even though the two poems use different poetic techniques and come from different cultural backgrounds, they both highlight the universal nature of love, a feeling that goes beyond time, language, and place. This study offers a deeper understanding of how love is beautifully and uniquely expressed in world literature.*

Keywords: Love expression, Poetic structure, Universal love, Comparative literature

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menyajikan analisis sastra komparatif terhadap dua puisi cinta ikonik dari budaya dan periode waktu yang berbeda, yaitu *Aku Mencintaimu* karya penyair Indonesia Sapardi Djoko Damono dan *How Do I Love Thee?* (Soneta 43) karya penyair Inggris Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi dan membandingkan bagaimana kedua penyair tersebut mengungkapkan cinta melalui tema, gaya bahasa, dan struktur puisi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan komparatif, analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa Sapardi menyampaikan cinta

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melalui kesederhanaan dan perenungan yang tenang, sementara Browning menggunakan bahasa yang penuh gairah dan bentuk tradisional soneta untuk menggambarkan emosi yang mendalam. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kedua puisi menggunakan teknik puitis yang berbeda dan berasal dari latar budaya yang berbeda pula, keduanya sama-sama menekankan sifat cinta yang universal—sebuah perasaan yang melampaui batas waktu, bahasa, dan tempat. Kajian ini memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang bagaimana cinta diungkapkan secara indah dan unik dalam sastra dunia.

Kata kunci: Ekspresi cinta, struktur puisi, cinta universal, sastra bandingan

I. Introduction

Love is one of the most universal and timeless themes in literature. Across cultures, eras, and languages, poets have used words to capture the depth, beauty, and complexity of love. This article focuses on two iconic love poems from different literary traditions: *Aku Mencintaimu* by Sapardi Djoko Damono, a prominent modern Indonesian poet, and *How Do I Love Thee?* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, one of the most well-known poets of the Victorian era in England. Although these two works come from different parts of the world and historical contexts, they share a common goal to express love as a deep and personal emotion. Both poems offer unique perspectives on love. Sapardi presents love as quiet, sincere, and unspoken, using simple language and free verse to reflect emotional depth. In contrast, Browning expresses her love in a bold and structured way, using the traditional form of the sonnet and rich poetic devices to describe the intensity of her feelings. Through their different approaches, both poets manage to touch the human heart and show that love can be powerful, even when expressed in silence or in carefully measured words. This article aims to compare and analyze how Sapardi and Browning convey love in their poems, focusing on the themes, language styles, and structures they use. By doing so, the study highlights not only the differences shaped by culture and time but also the shared human experience of love. In the end, this comparison offers insight into how love, as a literary theme, continues to connect readers across generations and borders.

II. Background of the Poems and Poets

Sapardi Djoko Damono is one of the most influential figures in modern Indonesian literature, well-known for his simple yet meaningful lyrical poetry. Born in Surakarta in 1940, Sapardi played a key role in shaping modern Indonesian poetic expression. Unlike earlier poets who often used complex symbolism and formal language, Sapardi chose a quieter, more reflective,

and intimate tone. His poem *Aku Mencintaimu* (I Love You) is among his most quoted and beloved works. Despite its short length and plain language, the poem carries deep emotional weight. Sapardi presents love not as something grand or dramatic, but as a silent and persistent presence in everyday life.

On the other hand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an English poet born in 1806, and she became one of the most prominent literary voices of the Victorian era. She is best known for her collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, which includes the famous *How Do I Love Thee?* (Sonnet 43). This sonnet is a heartfelt expression of love written for her husband, Robert Browning, who was also a celebrated poet. Unlike Sapardi's minimalist style, Browning uses rich metaphors and the structured form of the sonnet to convey the intensity of her love. The poem expresses a love so deep that it extends beyond life into the afterlife.

These two poems were written in very different cultural and historical contexts. Sapardi wrote in post-colonial Indonesia, a time when literature was used as a means of personal and national expression, and where poetry often reflected the emotional life of a society in transition. Browning, meanwhile, lived in 19th-century England, where literary tradition valued classical forms such as the sonnet, and expressions of love were shaped by strict social norms. These differences give each poem its own unique character. Yet, both poets succeed in capturing the sincerity and depth of love, making their works rich subjects for comparative analysis.

III. Thematic Comparison

The central theme explored in both poems *Aku Mencintaimu* by Sapardi Djoko Damono and *How Do I Love Thee?* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is deep, sincere, and enduring love. Despite the poets' different cultural and historical backgrounds, both works portray love not simply as a romantic feeling, but as a powerful spiritual force that transcends time and space.

In *Aku Mencintaimu*, Sapardi expresses love through simplicity and quiet presence. Love is not something that needs to be declared loudly or shown extravagantly; instead, it exists in silence, in small gestures, and even in absence. Through expressions such as "dengan sederhana" (simply) and "dengan diam-diam" (quietly), Sapardi conveys a love that is subtle yet profound. This kind of love is passive on the surface, but emotionally strong, suggesting that true love is not always loud, but can be deeply felt in silence. His theme reflects a contemplative and accepting form of love, one that asks for nothing in return and exists without conditions.

In contrast, *How Do I Love Thee?* presents love with passion and emotional intensity. Browning explicitly lists the many ways she loves her beloved, from "the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach" to loving him "with my life" and even "after death." Love in this poem is described as a total, all-consuming force that encompasses the poet's entire being emotionally, morally, and spiritually. The repeated rhetorical question "How do I love thee?" allows her to explore love in multiple dimensions. The theme here is active and devotional, showing love as a form of spiritual connection, almost religious in its intensity.

Although the tone and emotional expression differ, both poems highlight the same essential idea: love is unconditional and limitless. Sapardi's quiet and selfless love contrasts with Browning's bold and expressive devotion, but both reflect a deep sincerity. These differences also reflect cultural contrast. Sapardi, coming from an Eastern tradition, values subtlety and emotional restraint, while Browning, from a Western context, is more direct and open in expressing personal feelings. Thus, love in both poems becomes a meeting point between differing literary and cultural traditions. While their approaches vary, the poets affirm that love is a universal human experience, expressed beautifully in unique yet equally meaningful ways.

IV. Language and Style

Language and style are essential elements in poetry, as they serve as the primary tools for conveying emotions, meanings, and aesthetic beauty. In *Aku Mencintaimu*, Sapardi Djoko Damono adopts a minimalist yet deeply expressive style. He uses simple and everyday diction such as "sederhana" (simple) and "diam-diam" (quietly), which reflect the nature of love he wishes to portray, a love that does not need grand declarations, yet remains powerful and sincere. Sapardi also uses subtle repetition to emphasize the continuity and sincerity of emotion. The poem is written in free verse, without any fixed rhyme or meter, highlighting its modern lyrical form. This open structure allows for personal reflection and emotional intimacy, a characteristic feature of modern Indonesian poetry.

Moreover, Sapardi makes use of enjambment line breaks that do not end with punctuation, which creates a gentle and flowing rhythm, mirroring the quiet and unending nature of love. There are no complex metaphors or difficult symbols in the poem. In fact, its simplicity becomes its strength, as readers can immediately feel the depth of love without the need for elaborate interpretation.

In contrast, Elizabeth Barrett Browning employs a more elaborate and intense style in *How Do I Love Thee?*. She uses elevated diction and grand imagery, with words such as "depth," "breadth," "height," and "soul" to describe the vastness of her love. Her language is rich in metaphor and uses hyperbole to express the overwhelming nature of her feelings. A notable stylistic feature is her use of rhetorical repetition, especially in the opening question "How do I love thee?" which sets the tone for the passionate and detailed enumeration that follows. The question is not meant to be answered, but to introduce a growing list of emotional affirmations.

Browning adheres strictly to the structure of a traditional sonnet, following the classic 14-line form and a clear rhyme scheme, composed in iambic pentameter. This poetic structure reflects the literary discipline of the Victorian era and lends the poem a musical and elegant quality. The sonnet form gives the impression that her love is not only deep but also ordered and steadfast, as if love itself has form and stability.

Thus, Sapardi and Browning present two contrasting approaches to expressing love: Sapardi through silence and simplicity, and Browning through passion and structured intensity. Their

different styles and poetic forms not only reflect their individual personalities but also the cultural and literary traditions that shaped their works. In the end, both poets successfully convey genuine love through their distinctive and effective uses of language and style.

V. Structural Comparison

The structure of a poem is very important in shaping how its message and emotions are delivered. Through structure, readers not only understand what the poem says but also feel how the emotions flow or are emphasized. In the case of *Aku Mencintaimu* by Sapardi Djoko Damono and *How Do I Love Thee?* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, their very different structures show not only a difference in poetic style but also a deeper cultural approach to expressing love.

Aku Mencintaimu is written in free verse. This means it does not follow any fixed rules of rhyme, rhythm, or line length. There are no traditional poetic patterns like sonnets or rhyme schemes. This free form gives Sapardi the freedom to express love in a personal and quiet way. The simple structure matches the message of the poem: love does not need to be loud or showy, but can be felt deeply in silence and simplicity. The poem flows naturally, as if love itself is calm and unforced. This structure also reflects the cultural values in Indonesian and Eastern traditions, where emotions like love are often expressed in subtle, gentle ways rather than openly.

In contrast, *How Do I Love Thee?* is a classic sonnet, a traditional form of poetry in English literature. It has 14 lines, a clear rhyme scheme, and follows a regular rhythm called iambic pentameter, which means each line has ten syllables with a da-da rhythm. This form is strict and elegant, and was very popular during the Victorian period. Browning chose this form not only to follow tradition, but also to give strong structure to her powerful emotions. The sonnet allows her to build her message step by step, starting with the question “How do I love thee?” and then listing all the ways she loves, including beyond life and into death. The structure of the sonnet helps to show that Browning’s love is not only emotional, but also thoughtful and spiritual. In Western literary tradition, especially in the 19th century, love was often expressed through careful, organized writing. This shows that her love is serious and deep, not just romantic but also moral and eternal.

When we compare the two poems, we see how structure reflects different views of love. Sapardi shows love as free, calm, and natural — like something that lives quietly in everyday life. Browning presents love as strong, passionate, and organized — something grand and lasting. These different forms also reflect the poets' cultural backgrounds: Eastern poetry often values quiet beauty, while Western poetry values form and intensity.

VI. Conclusion

Through the comparison of themes, language, and structure, this article has shown that *Aku Mencintaimu* by Sapardi Djoko Damono and *How Do I Love Thee?* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning are two very different love poems in terms of form, language, and cultural background — yet both express deep and sincere love. Although the poets come from different times, places, and traditions, they both succeed in presenting love as a powerful and universal human emotion. Sapardi presents love in a quiet and simple way, using free verse and everyday words. His poem reflects the idea that true love does not need to be loud or dramatic, it can live in silence and be just as meaningful. On the other hand, Browning expresses love with strong passion and devotion. She uses the sonnet form, full of structure and rhythm, to show that love can be organized, deep, and lasting. The different forms and styles used by each poet help readers experience different sides of love, one calm and reflective, the other strong and expressive.

This comparison shows us that there is no single way to express love in poetry. Love can be quiet or bold, free or structured. What matters is the sincerity and emotional truth behind the words. Both Sapardi and Browning, in their own unique ways, are able to create a connection between the poet and the reader, allowing the feeling of love to be felt clearly, no matter the language or form. In the end, this study helps us understand not only two important poems, but also the beauty of diversity in world literature. The differences in culture, language, and structure do not divide the meaning of love instead, they enrich it. These two poems remind us that love, in any shape or form, remains one of the most powerful and timeless themes in poetry.

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