Lesson 7: CONTEXT: Expression

The Romance of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning

There really is poetry in the romance of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. Both Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) and her husband Robert Browning (1812–1889) are ranked among England’s greatest poets. They are equally famous for their romance, including their elopement; for Elizabeth’s love poems to Robert; published as Sonnets from the Portuguese; and for their sixteen years of marital happiness.

In the following exercises, you will have the opportunity to expand your vocabulary by reading selected thoughts about the romance of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning from various students. Below are ten Vocabulary Words that will be used in these exercises.

aesthetic  cliché  emphatically  paradox  recipient
charisma  conceive  martial  prolific  wan

EXERCISE 1: Wordbusting

Directions: Follow these instructions for this word and the nine words on the next page.

- Figure out the word’s meaning by looking at its context, its structure, and its sound. Fill in at least one of the three CSS boxes. Alternate which boxes you complete.
- Then, look up the word in a dictionary, read all of its meanings, and write the meaning of the word as it is used in the sentence.
- Follow this same process for each of the Vocabulary Words on the next page. You will need to draw your own map for each word. Use a separate sheet of paper.

1.

aesthetic

What I find most appealing about the Brownings is their aesthetic awareness. They both must have been extremely sensitive to beauty in nature and in the arts.

Context:  Structure:  Sound:

Dictionary:
2. charisma
   Robert first fell in love with Elizabeth through her poetry. In her poems she showed a charisma, a special charm, that captured Robert's—as well as the general public's—imagination and devotion.

3. cliché
   It may be a cliché to say that with the Brownings it was "love at first sight," but I think that the expression, though overused, is appropriate.

4. conceive
   I can't conceive how Robert Browning had the nerve to write to Elizabeth Barrett after reading her books of poetry and to say, "I do... love these books with all my heart—and I love you, too." That is just beyond my grasp!

5. emphatically
   I'm glad that Elizabeth and Robert married, even though her father had declared emphatically that none of his twelve children should marry. He had no right to forcefully impose such a rule on his children.

6. martial
   Well, I was disappointed in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* because I don't care for all this romance stuff. I thought the poems were about a Portuguese warrior, but they are far from martial poems!

7. paradox
   "The more things change, the more they stay the same" is a paradox that comes to mind after reading about the Brownings' romance. That seemingly contradictory statement suggests that while the world has changed much since the 1800s, love has not.

8. prolific
   The Brownings had a happy marriage, but they were not prolific parents. They had only one child, Robert Wiedeman Barrett-Browning, who was known as Pennini or Pen.

9. recipient
   After the Brownings had been married three years, Elizabeth gave Robert the manuscript of the sonnets she had written about him. He must have been a proud recipient of those sonnets.

10. wan
    Elizabeth Browning was a semi-invalid and spent a lot of time indoors, where she read and wrote. As a result of not being outdoors much, I imagine that she probably often looked sickly pale, or wan.
**EXERCISE 2**  
**Context Clues**

**Directions.** Scan the definitions in Column A. Then, think about how the boldface words are used in the sentences in Column B. To complete the exercise, match each definition in Column A with the correct Vocabulary Word from Column B. Write the letter of your choice on the line provided; then write the Vocabulary Word on the line preceding the definition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLUMN A</th>
<th>COLUMN B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. word: <strong>adj. military; suggesting war; warlike</strong></td>
<td>(A) The Brownings were prolific authors and created many poems, partly because they both began writing at a very early age.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. word: <strong>n. an overused idea or expression; a trite saying</strong></td>
<td>(B) I wonder how the thirteen-year-old Elizabeth conceived the idea for her epic poem <em>The Battle of Marathon</em>. How could a young girl come up with such an ambitious idea?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. word: <strong>adj. producing a great deal of something; producing many young or much fruit</strong></td>
<td>(C) The poem’s martial title certainly is not in keeping with Elizabeth’s image as a love poet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. word: <strong>adj. sickly pale or faint; colorless</strong></td>
<td>(D) I’m sure you have heard the expression “All’s fair in love and war.” Although a cliché, the expression applies to Elizabeth’s first epic poem.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. word: <strong>adj. artistic; having to do with art or beauty; sensitive to art and beauty</strong></td>
<td>(E) Love, as I’m sure the Brownings discovered, is often full of paradoxes, for emotions can be inconsistent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. word: <strong>n. a special quality of leadership or a special charm that captures the public imagination and inspires devotion</strong></td>
<td>(F) The image of Elizabeth as a wan, or sickly, poet who only read and wrote is not completely accurate. She actually was quite active in social causes.</td>
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<td>17. word: <strong>n. a person who receives something</strong></td>
<td>(G) This woman, famous for her love sonnets, emphatically endorsed women’s issues and protested against slavery.</td>
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<td>18. word: <strong>adv. forcefully; assertively</strong></td>
<td>(H) I envy the Brownings’ aesthetic life in Florence, Italy, where they were surrounded by magnificent paintings and sculptures.</td>
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<td>19. word: <strong>n. a statement that may be true but that seems to say contradictory things</strong></td>
<td>(I) Poets today do not inspire public devotion as they once did. One can only imagine the charisma of a Robert Browning. His appeal would probably be lost on contemporary people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. word: <strong>v. to imagine or develop as an idea; to understand or grasp; to become pregnant with</strong></td>
<td>(J) From what we have read, it sounds as if the Brownings were certainly worthy recipients of all the honors and love bestowed on them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXERCISE 3  Sentence Completion

Directions. For each of the following items, circle the letter of the choice that best completes the meaning of the sentence or sentences.

21. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s line “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways” may be considered a _____ today because it is overused.
   (A) charisma  
   (B) conception  
   (C) paradox  
   (D) recipient  
   (E) cliché

22. In the sonnet that starts with that line, the author _____, or insistently, declares her love.
   (A) aesthetically  
   (B) conceivably  
   (C) emphatically  
   (D) martially  
   (E) prolifically

23. The poet obviously has much love to give, and if you ask me, her beloved was a lucky _____ of her affections.
   (A) recipient  
   (B) cliché  
   (C) paradox  
   (D) emphasis  
   (E) charisma

24. Although some love poems I have read contain contradictory statements, that sonnet doesn’t contain any _____.
   (A) clichés  
   (B) paradoxes  
   (C) postulates  
   (D) recipients  
   (E) mentors

26. Can you possibly suppose, or _____ of, yourself as the _____ of someone’s love sonnets?
   (A) harass . . . recipient  
   (B) conceive . . . paradox  
   (C) repress . . . cliché  
   (D) conceive . . . recipient  
   (E) grimace . . . charisma

27. Some people, such as the Brownings, enjoy _____ lives and artistic pursuits, but I would become colorless and _____ living such a life.
   (A) paradoxical . . . aesthetic  
   (B) wan . . . martial  
   (C) aesthetic . . . wan  
   (D) martial . . . paradoxical  
   (E) conceivable . . . wan

28. In contrast to the Brownings, I _____ state, with all the force in me, that I want an adventurous life. You may see me in _____ garb as an army officer someday.
   (A) aesthetically . . . prolific  
   (B) conceivably . . . emphatic  
   (C) martially . . . clichéd  
   (D) prolifically . . . wan  
   (E) emphatically . . . martial

29. My sister’s goal is to “follow in the footsteps” of the Brownings (forgive the _____) so that she can become a _____ poet with many successful books.
   (A) cliché . . . prolific  
   (B) recipient . . . martial  
   (C) paradox . . . prolific  
   (D) recipient . . . clichéd  
   (E) charisma . . . conceivable

30. In the portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the painter succeeded in capturing that special charm that we call _____ The beautiful background certainly suggests her _____ nature.
   (A) paradox . . . charismatic  
   (B) charisma . . . aesthetic  
   (C) emphasis . . . wan  
   (D) cliché . . . aesthetic  
   (E) recipient . . . prolific