

Christina Rossetti



Context

Feminism

- Proto-feminist
- Opposed to women's university education and signed petitions against female suffrage
- Her beliefs stem from religion, that women come from and is therefore subject to man and giving women the vote would create false equality
- She did argue for female representation in Parliament and spoke out against the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution
- Women should be prized for their feminine qualities – compassion, morality, support
- Rossetti's speaker demonstrates an awareness and resistance to the social and political expectations which define acceptable roles for women which potentially leave them powerless, *From the Antique* and *In An Artist's Studio* emphasise ways in which women may be trapped and *Maude Clare*, *No, Thank You John* and *Winter: My Secret* reveal a more complex negotiation of power – Simon Avery

Religion

- In the 1840s, the Rossettis shifted from an Evangelical to an Anglo-Catholic orientation, and this outlook influenced virtually all of Christina Rossetti's poetry
- More than half of her poetic output is devotional, and the work of her later years in both poetry and prose are almost exclusively so
- Her doctors speculated that she was mentally ill, suffering from a kind of religious mania
- Tractarianism (Oxford Movement)–Rossetti began attending a church considered to be the leading church of the Tractarian movement, an emphasis on the importance of ritual and ceremony
- Eve West writes that "her experience as a woman of dependence is heightened by her sense of vocation as a Christian, waiting for the return of Christ"

Recurring themes

- The inconstancy of human love, the vanity of earthly pleasures, renunciation, individual unworthiness, and the perfection of divine love are recurring themes in her poetry

Finance

- Family's financial crisis continued, Christina and her mother briefly ran a day school
- Later, her mother gave up teaching and the family lived on William's and Mary's earnings and Frances' modest inherited income

Family & Pre-Raphaelites

- Her biographer Jan Marsh conjectures that there may have been an attempt at paternal incest – her recurring bouts of depression, her lifelong sense of sinfulness, recurring motif of an unnameable secret, Marsh suggests, could be indications of suppressed sexual trauma
- Morbidity of her poetry attributable to her ill health and the ever-present prospect of an early death
- Her poetry has been described as "pre-Raphaelite", rich precise natural detail, use of symbol, poignancy, deliberate medievalism
- Recent critics say that the pre-Raphaelite elements in Rossetti's work have been overemphasized at the expense of proper notice of the Tractarian influences
- James Collinson proposed to her, but she refused on the grounds that he was Catholic. He converted to Protestant and was accepted but then converted back to Catholicism

Humanitarian work

- Rossetti has often been depicted as shrinking from worldly concerns, but in fact, she did engage in humanitarian work. She volunteered to join Florence Nightingale's nurses but was turned down
- Rossetti began volunteering at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, a charity for the reclamation of "fallen" women
- Poems written by Rossetti before 1859, such as *Maude Clare*, indicate her prior interest in the 'fallen woman'. Her later poetry, including *Cousin Kate* and *Goblin Market*, which engage with themes of sisterhood and prohibited love, reveals the enduring influence of her firsthand experiences at Highgate.
- Renounced desire, weariness with this life, the "vanity of vanities" refrain, God's love for the unworthy suppliant
- Interest in this topic reflects the Victorian concern about prostitution as a social evil

Song (when I am dead, my dearest)



Themes:

- Death & afterlife
- Sadness
- Memory
- Natural imagery
- Love

In this poem the speaker tries to comfort and reassure their lover after the s/he has died. It mirrors Rossetti's *Remember*, which also deals with comforting a bereaved lover.

Rossetti weaves in a range of ideas; memory, after-life, the human spirit, hope, patience and reassurance. She also conveys the importance of the connection between the living and the dead, how the wishes of the one who has passed away impacts on the lives of those left mourning them.

An important feature is the trope of binary opposites, where the speaker and her lover are suspended between alternatives. These remain unresolved, yet despite this there is no tension in the poem. Instead she creates a mood of acceptance and peace.

When I am dead, my dearest, sing so sad songs for me

rejects showy, sentimental funerals that become popular during Victorian era, move on, there is no need to remember me

Be the green grass above me with showers and dewdrops wet

Use of "showers" and "dewdrops", moisture generates new life. Green grass as metaphor for enduring and moving on with life

Haply I may remember, and haply may forget

Uncertainty in death, the world will continue nonetheless

Context

- Shortly before poem's publication, Rossetti experienced a crisis of faith that arose from a bout of depression, this poem was likely written as a means to comfort herself

From the Antique



Themes:

- desire for death
- despair
- natural imagery
- women's entrapment - something that the speaker seems to want to eradicate

Rossetti's poem explores the difficulties of women in the Victorian era, struggling to find a place where they are valued for themselves and what they can offer in a world where – sometimes – men seem to have all the power. Bleakly she asks the question: would anyone notice if I were gone? It's a heart-breaking lyrical poem which speaks to the misery that seems to have haunted Rossetti for a good part of her life.

It's a weary life, it is, she said: doubly blank in a woman's lot

"doubly blank" suggests absolute, this is an experience for all women, whether it is middle class woman like her or working-class women such as those she worked with at Highgate. Is the voice, "she" referring to all women?

Still the seasons go and come

Life would carry on the same with or without her

Context:

Link to *In An Artist's studio* – criticism of the male gaze and objectification of women "he feeds upon her face by day and night" – like a vampire draining the life of the model – says Simon Avery. Her brother Dante Gabriel was a painter and Elizabeth Siddal was one of his muses. The artist's model was made to dress up and pose as different types of women in order to fulfil the male fantasy of women as pure saints, virginal angels or seductive queens.

In The Round Tower At Jhansi



Themes:

- death
- sacrifice
- despair
- dramatic situation
- love

Not a hope in the world remained

hopelessness

I wish I could bear the pang alone

Sacrifice for a loved one. The same sort of sacrifice that Nora expected from Torvald

One kiss more.'—'And yet one again.'—

'Good-bye.'—'Good-bye.'

Although they both die, they die loving each other

- Both man and woman have equal power, comfort each other yet both are powerless to prevent their own deaths although the man does have the gun.

Context

- Rossetti appended a footnote in 1875 saying that she knew the poem was not historically accurate
- romanticised incident (unlike *A Doll's House*)

Interpretations

- Suzanne Williams argues that the “husband is protector and the wife is infantilised” because she asks “Will it hurt much?” – showing she is afraid, but is this really the case?
- Post-colonial reading – Indians are described as “wretches” like the goblins in goblin market. The poem ignores that it is in fact the British who are the aliens. The Indians are presented as “howling” like wild animals and “swarming” like flies.

No, Thank You, John

Themes:

- love (or rather, the lack of love)
- women’s voice (assertive and direct)

I never said I loved you, John

Direct, blunt, opposes Victorian feminine ideal of meek and submissive

John as a representation of all men?

I have no heart?—Perhaps I have not



Similar to A Doll’s House where Torvald says, “to desert your home, your husband and your children”

Let us strike hands as hearty friends



Similar to A Doll’s House when Torvald says, “but can’t we live here like brother and sister -?”
– breakdown of the relationship

Rise above quibbles



“Quibbles” seems childish, much like when Torvald is being “petty” for being offended at Krogstad for calling him by his first name

Context

Rossetti rejected 2 proposals. She was engaged to Pre-Raphaelite artist James Collinson but broke off engagement in 1850 because he converted to Roman Catholicism. In 1866, she rejected a proposal from Charles Bagot Cayley because he was an agnostic. The poem could also allude to a romance with painter John Brett. In 1875, Christina told her brother that there was no risk of emotional exposure because ‘John’ never existed. But around 1890, in a new edition, she pencilled in “the original John was obnoxious”. It is believed that Brett was interested in Christina and perhaps led Christina to believe that Brett would propose to her, but this did not happen.

Winter: My Secret

Themes:

- natural imagery
- women's voice – playful, flirtatious?



Perhaps some day, who knows?

Playful tone

Only my secret's mine, and I won't tell

Pride in one's secret

Today's a nipping day, a biting day

In which one wants a shawl

Winter presented as a dangerous season (like GM?) Or like Krogstad who brings with him the cold?

Shawl is the protection from the cold, a disguise like Nora

Behind this playful tone is an intriguing study in the manipulation of power. Speaker denies the reader to know the secret, leaves the reader guessing, maybe there is no secret after all, "only just my fun"

Context:

- Biographer Jan Marsh suggests that the secret could be incest?
- Tractarianism - Critic Emma Mason argues that the narrator of the poem can be associated with God himself, declaring to the belief that he may have secrets that are yet to be revealed
- Eve West writes that "through secrets, Rossetti asserts her own independence and integrity"

Sœur Louise De La Misericorde



Themes :

- desire
- Despair
- Nature
- Religion

Summary:

This poem explores the historical narrative of Louise La Vallière who was a French duchess and a mistress of Louis XIV in the 17th century. She had several children with him, but she found herself losing favour in the royal courts, with Louis spending time with other mistresses. She later converted to Catholicism and became a nun. Rossetti uses this poem to explore the nature of desire, vanity and aging.

I have desired, and I have been desired

Abrupt opening, pride in having been desired at one point?

Where is the hire for which my life was hired?

She prostituted herself but what was the return for this? She is questioning the purpose of life

Love's deathbed

Loss of love

Context:

- Working with fallen women, Rossetti would have seen the destruction caused by unbridled desire
- When she wrote this, Rossetti would have been in her 50s

Twice

Themes :

- Religion and religious devotion
- Love, lack of love, love for God
- nature

Summary:

Female speaker offers her heart to her beloved but he does not appreciate the gesture/ does not believe she is ready for such a commitment or he himself is not ready. She feels her heart breaking and brings her bruised heart to God. She becomes depressed and asks God to judge her accurately and perfect her love, knowing that her heart will be secure in his hands. Aware of her acceptance by God, with a renewed sense of optimism, the speaker commits her whole life to him.

I took my heart in my hand



A confession, vulnerability because she is exposing herself to rejection

Yet a woman's words are weak: You should speak, not I



Conforming to social norm that men have power over women, bitter tone? Accepts prevailing attitude

With a friendly smile, with a critical eye you scanned



If a smile is false, it does not meet the eyes. The man appears to be kind when in fact, he is coldly analysing her heart.

It is still unripe



Could suggest that man does not perceive her to be emotionally developed. Or could mean that she is unsuited for commitment to something worldly like a relationship with man and marriage and that she belongs to God.

(O my love) --> O my God



Devoting herself to God, asking God to judge her instead, removal of brackets suggest that she is now longer trapped

As you set it down it broke, broke, but I did not wince



Shows she is strong for she does not "wince". Inverts expectation of Victorian society where women were said to be feeble and emotional. The speaker is self-controlled.

Context:

A lot of Rossetti's poems are about forsaken (abandoned) women e.g. Soeur Louise. By highlighting the weaknesses that can be identified in many males, Rossetti points to the fact that women are not wholly to blame for relational difficulties and challenges the double standard towards women.

Good Friday



Themes:

- Religious devotion

Poem about Rossetti's struggle to feel close to Christ and teachings of Christianity and to weep for the sacrifice he made.

Am I a stone and not a sheep



Could mean that she is not like the sheep that follow God as part of his flock but rather like a 'stone' meaning her heart is hard like stone and cannot weep for the sacrifice that Christ made

Context

surprising poem considering Rossetti's strong religious beliefs. In the early 1840s, became under the influence of the Oxford Movement which placed an emphasis on rituals such as confession and communion. She also turned down James Collinson and Charles Bagot Cayley's proposal on the grounds of their religion.

Up-hill

Themes:

- Religion
- death

Summary: A poem depicting the theme of death and struggle in life, drawing upon the metaphor of "uphill battle"

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end



Life is a struggle to the very end. The reply is calming, omniscient – godlike?

Beds for all who come



Powerful statement. No doubt that there is a place in heaven for everyone.

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Door imagery, similar to A Doll's House except the door will be open.

Shut Out

Themes:

- religion
- despair
- isolation

Summary: A deeply emotional poem where the speaker is shut out from a garden. She observes the birds moving from tree to tree and the insects from flower to flower and laments that this garden had once belonged to her but is now lost. She pleads to the mysterious guard to let her take some flowers to cheer her in her outcast state. The guard doesn't answer. Rossetti then requests a simple twig from one of the shrubs and trees in the garden, so that her garden might remember her until she is able to enter it again, once more the guard doesn't answer. Instead, the guard sets about building a wall to complement the gate which already shuts the speaker out from her garden. Her view is completely obscured. Now she cannot even look at the garden, she sits all alone and cries, but doesn't grieve because now she can't see the garden any longer, there is nothing left worth looking at.

Context:

- refers to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve being shut out from the garden as a punishment for disobedience
- interpretations: being locked out of heaven? Social status of women in Victorian era – garden symbolises a place controlled by men in which women are shut out

A Birthday

Themes:

- love
- joy

My heart is like a singing bird

Not a broken heart like Twice



My love is come to me

Maude Clare

Themes:

- Marriage
- Love
- Women

Summary:

Maude Clare interrupts Sir Thomas and Nell's wedding day. She is Sir Thomas' ex-lover and intends to cause trouble for him and the woman he ended up choosing to marry. Maude Clare is regal and makes Nell look like a peasant in contrast. To quell the chaos, Sir Thomas' mother tells her son that she and Thomas' father once found themselves in a similar predicament. She means to comfort Thomas with this information, but instead, Sir Thomas and Nell's faces become worryingly pale. Maude Clare, meanwhile, gives the couple some wedding gifts, all of which are souvenirs from her love affair with Sir Thomas. She gives them her half of a golden chain that Sir Thomas wore when they were together, as well as dried leaves that they jointly picked. Sir Thomas ends up being too embarrassed to rebuff Maude Clare, and so Maude Clare presents her final gift to Nell. She gives the bride permission to accept what remains of

Thomas' fickle heart. Nell defiantly declares that she loves Thomas for better and worse and one day, he will love her best.

His bride was like a village maid, Maude
Clare was like a queen

My lord was pale with inward strife, And
Nell was pale with pride

Strife suggests conflict/ trouble. Nell may be
conscious of MC's deep resentment

To bless the hearth, to bless the board, to
bless the marriage-bed

Tainting the hearth, the board (family dinner table)
and the marriage bed

And what you spurn, I'll wear

Nell declares that she will take Maude Clare's
place in Thomas' heart

The lilies are budding now

Could suggest that Maude Clare is pregnant with
Thomas' child. Maude Clare is a fallen woman,
cannot recover from this social ruin .

When Thomas cannot respond to Maude Clare, it makes him seem inferior and weak. Maude Clare turns to Nell but with no physical items that would be gifts. She gives the bride symbols of decaying flowers and fruit. "Were it fruit, the bloom were gone"

Context:

- Rossetti could be criticising how marriages were often marriages of convenience at the time. It is insinuated that Maude Clare is of a lower social status than Nell which is why Thomas has chosen to marry Nell. The idea that Thomas' parents also did the same although "he was not so pale as you, nor I so pale as Nell".
- Takes a sympathetic view of the fate of working-class women who succumb to sex before marriage

Goblin Market

Themes:

- Love
- Desire
- Female passivity

Summary:

Set in a fairy tale world and exploring themes of temptation, sacrifice and salvation, *Goblin Market* tells the story of a fraught encounter between sisters Laura and Lizzie and evil goblin merchants. When Laura exchanges a lock of her golden hair for the chance to taste the goblins' enchanted 'fruit forbidden', she deteriorates until she is 'knocking at Death's door'. Her sister Lizzie offers to pay the goblins 'a silver penny' for more of their wares, which she hopes will act as an antidote to Laura's malady. The goblins violently attack Lizzie, smearing their fruits 'against her mouth' in a vain attempt 'to make her eat'. After the goblins are 'worn out by her resistance', Lizzie returns home, and Laura kisses the juices from her sister's face and is restored.

<p>"come buy, come buy"</p> <p>Temptation</p>	<p>"Laura bow'd her head to hear, Lizzie veil'd her blushes"</p> <p>Difference between the sisters, Lizzie is cautious</p>
<p>"Laura reared her glossy head"</p> <p>Glossy/ golden suggests they are untainted by the contamination of sexual desire</p>	<p>"They sounded kind and full of loves"</p> <p>Temptation masks reality. Laura believes the goblins are kind and "full of loves"</p>
<p>"sweeter than honey from the rock"</p> <p>Line from Psalm 81:16, "with honey from the rock I would satisfy you"</p> <p>Saying that the goblin fruit is more delicious than the honey that God can</p>	<p>"her tree of life drooped at the root"</p> <p>An image of decay at the core of her being</p>
<p>"Tender Lizzie could not bear to watch her sister's cankerous care"</p> <p>Sisterhood</p>	<p>"her hair grew thin and gray; she dwindled"</p> <p>What happens to the fallen woman</p>

Context:

- Lizzie's climactic redemption of Laura can be seen as a critique of the Victorian cultural understanding of the fallen woman, for here she is not forever lost but is saved by a sister's intervention
- Eve West writes that "the watching waiting woman is one of the central figures of Rossetti's poetry" Rossetti appears to be concerned with the "helpless passivity of female existence" – link to *From the Antique*, "it's a weary life, it is she said/ doubly blank in a woman's lot"
- Rossetti wrote this poem when volunteering at the St Mary Magdalene Penitentiary for 'fallen women' in Highgate which was dedicated to the reform and rehabilitation of prostitutes
- Society saw prostitutes as a danger to public health through their wanton sexuality

Interpretations:

Feminist

- Depicts a fallen woman being saved by a "sister"- feminist reading
- Lesa Scholl writes that whilst Lizzie remains pure, she is perceived to be unfeminine as she refuses to conform, the goblins call her "proud, cross-grained, uncivil"
- Moral allegory about Jeanie pining away, the grass above Jeanie's grave never grows – tainted even till the grave?
- Sisterhood "Locked together in one nest"
- "there is no friend like a sister"

Marxist

- Marxist critics have pointed to the poem's separation of the domestic and commercial spheres to Lizzie and Laura's attempts to do business in a marketplace designed to make women into goods to be exchanged rather than agents in their own rights

Christian

- Interpreted as a specifically Christian allegory, re-enactment of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, Christ-like offer of redemption through sacrifice – reading encouraged by Eucharistic diction of Lizzie's greeting "Eat me, drink me love me, Laura, make much of me"
- The fruit symbolises the tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from – could the fruit symbolise female education and knowledge? – therefore the poem addresses all forms of female desire says Lesa Scholl
- In the Bible, after Laura has eaten the forbidden fruit, she no longer has access to it

Psychoanalytic

- Psychoanalytic interpretations have regarded the sisters as two aspects of one psyche and have emphasized the sexuality of the poem, noting both its orality and lesbian dynamics

Sexual

- Fruit represent temptations of self-indulgence and pleasure
- "pomegranates full and fine" – pomegranates and its association with Hades, Persephone and the underworld, abundance of seeds, association with fertility
- Suggestion that sensuality of the fruit, its prohibition to maidens, association with nuptial pleasures suggest that Laura's transgression is a sexual one
- But, even though Laura is the fallen woman who becomes socially ruined, she is happily married at the end of the poem
- Laura cutting a lock of her hair and giving it to the goblins signify a loss in innocence

Victorian

- The market is the Victorian marriage market and the goblins are the "suitors who lecherously use their wealth to attract a young wife?" Since marriage was often a financial arrangement – says Oliver Tearle
- "she thought of Jeanie in her grave, who should have been a bride" – women who lost their virginity before marriage could find it very difficult to find a husband, and since women were largely reliant on men for support, this was a bit of an issue