

*The
Connell Guide
to*

Christina Rossetti

by Anna Barton

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Introduction: Who is Christina Rossetti?

Christina Rossetti is one of the most significant and enduring poets of the 19th century. Best known as the author of intriguing, haunting and sometimes troubling lyric poetry, she published three collections of verse during her lifetime and contributed poetry to some of the most popular literary journals of the period. As well as poetry, she also published two collections of short stories, a collection of rhymes for children and six works of religious devotional literature.

Born in London in 1830, seven years before Queen Victoria ascended the throne, Christina was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti, an Italian immigrant who worked as a scholar and teacher of Italian, and Frances Polidori, the daughter of an Italian father and an English mother, who also worked as a teacher. She had three siblings: a sister, Maria, and two brothers, the editor and critic, William Michael and the artist and poet, Dante Gabriel. Her brothers were founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a loose association of artists and writers, who produced work that was both morally and stylistically controversial and hugely influential.

Rossetti did not marry and for most of her adult life she lived at home with her mother (her father died in 1854), her sister and her elder brother,

William Michael. It is therefore easy to make the mistake of viewing her life as one of domestic confinement and limitation. However, although Christina's family was not wealthy (indeed, Christina's work as a poet made a necessary contribution to the household finances), its connections to various cultural and scholarly networks and circles of influence meant that she lived her life in a rich literary and artistic environment where she was encouraged to develop and exert her creative talents. She had access to her father's extensive library; her grandfather paid for the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Verses: Dedicated to my Mother*, when she was just seventeen; and both her brothers encouraged her to contribute to their publishing endeavours.

Intertwined with the joint influences of literature and family, the other main source of authority and inspiration in Rossetti's life was her religious faith. She, her mother and her sister all attended Christ Church, Albany Street and were devotees of the Oxford Movement, which aimed to revive the Catholic tradition within Anglicanism.

Rossetti suffered from poor physical health and bouts of mental illness throughout her life. She died of breast cancer in 1894.

Although the facts of Christina's life are easy to come by, her identity and character remain somewhat mysterious to readers of her work, which does not reveal much about her opinions or emotions. Alison Chapman describes this quality of

Rossetti's poetry as a "resistance to inscribing the personal" and argues that it is a deliberate aspect of Rossetti's style, one that "dramatises both the impossibility of Victorian femininity and the impossibility of the woman poet caught within the sentimental tradition and the conflicted ideology of the Victorian literary marketplace". In other words, Rossetti avoids the personal in order to resist being reduced to a narrow, incomplete version of herself by a masculine literary tradition and a male-dominated marketplace.

Descriptions of Rossetti written by friends and family and Rossetti's own letters together present a sequence of contradictions that can be summed up by two pictures of Rossetti, both done by her brother, Dante Gabriel. The first, a pencil portrait done in 1866, represents the poet in a contemplative pose, her head resting on her hands, her hair tied neatly back from her face, looking into the middle distance (fig. 1)*. This is Christina as she was often memorialised: reserved, demure, studious and thoughtful.

The second, a private sketch that Dante sent to Christina in around 1865, is called "Christina Rossetti in a tantrum" and depicts the poet storming around her room, breaking mirrors, windows and furniture (fig. 2). The sketch is an affectionate joke that nevertheless gives us a glimpse of a different side to the poet's character, one whose extreme

* See pages 21-22 for all figure images.

passion places the domestic tranquillity of her surroundings at risk. It is difficult to know which of the two sketches is the more accurate representation; but together they suggest the complexity of Rossetti's character as one that is not easily reduced to a particular stereotype of Victorian femininity.

What is her poetry about?

In one sense, Rossetti's poetry is about all sorts of things. During her lifetime she wrote about love, death, social mores, religious faith, contemporary politics and the natural world. In another sense, however, it is often hard to grasp exactly what she is saying about any one of these topics. As a result, the reader can be left feeling wrong-footed or dissatisfied. In an early poem called "My Dream", a surreal fantasy featuring a fratricidal crocodile king, she suggests that the reason for this interpretive trickiness is that even she does not know what she means:

*What can it mean? You ask. I answer not
For meaning, but myself must echo, What?
And tell it as I saw it on the spot.*

Rossetti's answer to a direct question from an imagined interlocutor about the meaning of her dream is ambiguous. She uses the line break to play with the transitive and intransitive meanings of

“answer”. At first it looks as though she is going to refuse to answer the question at all (“I answer not”). But then she seems to relent, as, reading across the line break, the phrase becomes, “I answer not / For meaning”. But this is still a kind of non-answer, because it states that the poet cannot, or will not, take responsibility for the way her dream might be interpreted. She can, she says, only repeat the question back to the reader, giving interpretive responsibility over to us. Her role is to “tell it as I saw it”, a phrase that implies openness and honesty, while actually giving nothing away. The poet protests her own ignorance and innocence; but the way she manipulates form and language in these lines suggests that she knows rather more than she is letting on.

Richard Cronin describes Rossetti’s evasions as an “aesthetics of modesty”, one that “finds its proper expression in the production of brief lyrics”. A lyric can be briefly defined as the expression of a single idea or emotion as it happens. It often features an anonymous, first-person speaker, who addresses the reader directly and intimately. Sonnets are a kind of lyric, as are elegies; whereas narrative poems generally are not. When John Stuart Mill, writing in an essay entitled “What is poetry?” (1833), defined poetry as “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude”, he was writing about lyric poetry. Likewise, when Wordsworth defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” in his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), it is lyric

poetry that he has in mind. Lyric poetry became the focus of a new kind of critical attention in the 19th century. Because it was associated with emotional sincerity and direct expression, writers and critics saw lyric poetry as an opportunity to, quoting Wordsworth again, “see into the life of things” (“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey”) – to gain radical new perspectives on different aspects of individual and social life.

Rossetti’s poetry both participates in and subverts this emergent tradition. Some of her most well-known poems are called “songs”, underlining their association with lyric verse. Even more adopt its central characteristics: they are spoken in the first person and the speaker addresses us as if we were a close friend, or a lover (“my dearest”, “my love”); they are brief and hold the promise of intensity and intimacy. Often, however, this promise remains unfulfilled and the speaker refuses to give herself, her thoughts and her feelings, away to her interlocutor. The look and sound of the lyric teases us with the expectation of connection, but the words of the poems work to keep the poet and her meaning hidden.

One of the best examples of Rossetti’s subversive lyricism is “Winter: My Secret”:

*I tell my secret? No indeed, not I;
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows and snows,
And you’re too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:*

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

*Or, after all, perhaps there's none:
Suppose there is no secret after all,
But only just my fun.
Today's a nipping day, a biting day;
In which one wants a shawl,
A veil, a cloak, and other wraps:
I cannot ope to everyone who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling thro' my hall;
Come bounding and surrounding me,
Come buffeting, astounding me,
Nipping and clipping thro' my wraps and all.
I wear my mask for warmth: who ever shows
His nose to Russian snows
To be pecked at by every wind that blows?
You would not peck? I thank you for good will,
Believe, but leave the truth untested still.*

*Spring's an expansive time: yet I don't trust
March with its peck of dust,
Nor April with its rainbow-crowned brief showers,
Nor even May, whose flowers
One frost may wither thro' the sunless hours.
Perhaps some languid summer day,
When drowsy birds sing less and less,
And golden fruit is ripening to excess,
If there's not too much sun nor too much cloud,
And the warm wind is neither still nor loud,
Perhaps my secret I may say,
Or you may guess. (1862)*

This poem is both meta-lyric (a lyric about lyrics) and anti-lyric. It begins with a question that exposes the lyric reader's anticipation of some kind of private revelation. The speaker's (mock) affronted tone makes the reader feel nosy or intrusive, calling the value of lyric communication into doubt. But, after appearing to dismiss the possibility of interaction, the speaker keeps the reader hanging on with the suggestion of some future disclosure. She says that she might tell her secret "some day", but the poem seems to hold that day off, so that the more she talks, or writes, the further we get from the truth.

She even suggests that there may not be a secret at all, "But only just my fun". As such, she is an inversion of the conventional lyric speaker: fickle, insincere, untrustworthy and tight-lipped. Rather than revealing meaning, the poem encourages reflection on the act of reading and interpretation. It casts doubt on the ability of poetic language to express truth. The original title of this poem is "Nonsense", a title that more directly communicates the speaker's deliberate refusal to make sense. Deprived of a clear meaning, the reader is forced to look for a different way to engage with the text.

"Winter: My Secret" is a good introduction to Rossetti's poetry because, like much of her work, it refuses to reveal a simple answer. This is not the same as saying that her poems are meaningless. They are rich with suggestion and allusion that connects them to cultural, political and philosophical debates about gender, religion, politics and

art. In “Winter: My Secret”, for example, the title encourages the reader to consider the connection between secrecy and winter. Is winter a metaphor for something? The nature of her relationship with the reader, perhaps? Does it imply something broader about the human condition, or even about a world waiting for divine redemption?

The allusions to the speaker’s body are especially interesting. The speaker compares divulging her secret to allowing access to her home and to her person, so that the search for the secret appears to be a kind of physical violation. Rossetti’s secrecy therefore raises questions about the identity and role of the woman poet. We are encouraged to consider what might be at stake for a woman expressing herself in the way that the lyric tradition expects. By keeping her secret, the speaker also holds on to her power over the reader.

Which writers influence her work?

The power that Rossetti wields over her reader is partly enabled by her confident engagement with a wide range of authors. She is a knowing participant in the traditions and conventions of women’s poetry. Like many 19th-century poets (male and female), Rossetti was inspired by the archetypal poetess, the ancient Greek poet, Sappho. Sappho’s works, only

recovered as fragments, are a touchstone for a feminine tradition of spontaneous, emotionally charged, tragic love poetry. She is a powerful figure of feminine creativity; but her 19th-century reception risked reducing women's poetry to a matter of unmediated emotional outpouring, denying its intellectual and artistic potential.

Some of Rossetti's earliest poetry sees her negotiating Sappho's legacy and positioning herself alongside her more immediate female contemporaries. Her earliest collection includes a poem called "Sappho" (1847), in which the speaker desires that death put an end to her suffering and longs to be "Unconscious that none weep for me", expressing an interest in the relationship between the dead and the living that runs through much of her later poetry – for example, "After Death" and "Song (When I am Dead my Dearest)" (both 1862) – a connection which suggests that Rossetti's interest in death is not straightforwardly autobiographical, but is instead part of a performance of a certain kind of feminine artistry.

Reflecting on Rossetti's relationship with the Sapphic tradition, Yopie Prins writes that "in troping on the trope [of Sappho] she makes explicit a figural logic that has become the defining feature of women's sentimental lyric in the middle of the 19th century". In other words, Prins suggests that Rossetti's poetry self-consciously reflects on the way Sappho becomes a female "figure", endlessly re-imagined by poets and readers and thereby