

# Comparing Hardy and Rossetti



Statistics on their own don't mean much; comparisons are much more revealing. I have compared the language of Hardy with that of Rossetti simply in terms of word use. Take the word 'love' for example.

Hardy uses the word *love* six times out of 2,345 words in 15 poems. Is that significant? Let's look at Rossetti. In fifteen poems and 2,956 words, she uses it fifteen times. Allowing for the fact that her poems are longer on average than Hardy's, that is still double the frequency. It's up to you and your students to decide whether this is a useful fact or not.

I like to see how poets use seemingly insignificant words in their writing. How personal is their writing, for example? Hardy uses *I*, *me* and *my* 66 times. Rossetti uses them 171 times. If you adjust that to take account of the higher number of words overall, it equates to 136: more than double Hardy's usage. That, I think, is significant.

Even a brief acquaintance with Hardy's poetry would show us that he tends to write in a very personal, often nostalgic or elegiac manner. We would expect first person pronouns to be common. To find a writer who is twice as great a user of these pronouns is surprising. It must, surely, tell us something very basic about Christina Rossetti? Let your students mull on this. They might, on looking more closely, maintain that this is an unfair comparison because many of the 'I's and 'Me's are used by characters in narratives such as 'Maude Clare'. But doesn't Hardy do the same thing in 'The Ruined Maid'?

If your students can become engaged in this kind of analysis it can only deepen their engagement with the writing and the personalities behind the poems.

Some other comparisons you may like to follow up:

The word 'woman' is used 6 times by Hardy and 'girl' twice. Only girl appears (once) in Rossetti. 'Man' and 'boy' hardly appear in either.

Finally, consider these comparisons of 'tree', 'leaves' etc. Bearing in mind the fact that Hardy frequently writes about nature, what might explain this apparent discrepancy?

(The figure in brackets has been adjusted to take account of the greater number of words analysed in Rossetti's poems.)

	Hardy	Rossetti		Hardy	Rossetti
no not	25	50 (40)	tree	2	10
you your	43	66 (52)	leaves	2	8
he his	21	44 (36)	green	1	8
she her	15	23 (17)	spring	1	7
we us	23	19 (16)	birds	0	6
should	3	10 (8)	willow	0	7