

Christina Rossetti (1)



Rossetti was writing at the high point of the Victorian Anglican revival and her religion permeates the poetry to an extent that a 21st century student may well find extraordinary- and off-putting. (Similar difficulties can occur when teaching Gerald Manley Hopkins.) The social and cultural roots of this religiosity are complex. Why did this happen at that time? Was it a reaction to the developing scepticism and scientific discoveries of the period, or to a period of excess prior to Victoria's accession? The poetry of the Romantic period which precedes it and that of the early 20th century which follows stand as remarkable contrasts.

There is, in much of Victorian culture, an obsession with death. It was in this period that mourning took on enormous importance and acquired layer upon layer of etiquette and custom. Society seemed to revel in melancholy and loss and it is, unsurprisingly, reflected in the output of the writers and artists of the period.

Though Rossetti had a privileged upbringing, a reading of her biography reveals that she had plenty to be melancholy about or that she chose to be melancholy about. I cannot help feeling that she found something satisfying in renouncing the love of two suitors - both for religious reasons. In earlier times, perhaps she would have become a nun but for various reasons, including her strong attachment to her family, for a significant part of her life, she immersed herself in good works instead.

Her unhappy love-affairs 'seem only to have tempted her to an even greater melancholy of temper. ... Over all her work ... lie this sense of something lost' says Elizabeth Jennings in her introduction to *A Choice of Christina Rossetti's Verse*. The human love she writes of is seldom requited; perhaps it could never quite match up to the religious passions she felt.

Other writers to compare: Emily Dickinson; Elizabeth Barratt Browning, the Bronte sisters. See also the pre-Raphaelites with their strange recurring themes.

Christina Rossetti (2)

As one way into Rossetti's work, I would recommend a study of her first lines. It's quite revealing. Here is the Index of first lines from Elizabeth Jennings' collection:

A smile because the nights are short!	Morning and evening
Ah, woe is me for pleasure that is vain	My heart is like a singing bird
Am I a stone and not a sheep	My sun has set, I dwell
By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair	'Now did you mark a falcon
Chide not; let me breathe a little	O happy rose-bud blooming
Come to me in the silence of the night	Oh roses for the flush of youth
Consider	Once in a dream (for once I dreamed of you)
Does the road wind up-hill all the way?	Once in a dream I saw the flowers
Downstairs I laugh, I sport and jest with all	Out of the church she followed them
Frost-locked all the winter	Pardon the faults in me
Give me the lowest place: not that I dare	Remember me when I am gone away
Gone were but the Winter	Shall I forget on this side of the grave?
Hear now a curious dream I dreamed last night	She gave up beauty in her tender youth
I cannot tell you how it was	Somewhere or other there must surely be
I did not chide him, though I knew	Sound the deep waters
I have no wit, no words, no tears	Summer is gone with all its roses
I looked for that which is not, nor can be	'Sweet, thou art pale.'
I love and love not: Lord, it breaks my heart	The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
I loved my love from green of Spring	The sweetest blossoms die
I nursed it in my bosom while it lived	There's blood between us, love, my love
I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree	Thou who didst hang upon a barren tree
I took my heart in my hand	Three sang of love together: one with lips
I was a cottage maiden	Two doves upon the selfsame branch
I watched a rosebud very long	Underneath the growing grass
I will accept thy will to do and be	Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith
I will tell you when they met	What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me through
I wonder if the sap is stirring yet	When I am dead, my dearest
I would have gone; God bade me stay	When I was dead, my spirit turned
I would not if I could undo my past	Where sunless rivers weep
If I might only love my God and die!	While roses are so red
If I might see another Spring	Who told my mother of my shame
Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet	Young Love lies sleeping
Live all thy sweet life thro'	
Love, strong as Death, is dead	

Christina Rossetti (3)

Rossetti's language

A cursory read of half a dozen of Christina Rossetti's poems will provide one with a pretty good idea of her themes and attitudes, not to mention her style. I wanted to see if my initial hypotheses about her writing were reflected in her choice of language. To do this, I collected electronic copies of her poems from bartleby.com and pasted the whole 2,445 words into a word frequency application.

Some results confirmed my initial views, others made me pause. God does not appear once in this collection, though *dead/death/die/died/dies* come up 8 times and *blood* 4. *Love*, as expected, is prevalent at 23. This may not seem very much out of two and a half thousand words, but bear in mind that apart from the most common words in the language (*and with that in etc etc*) most other words do not crop up more than a couple of times. I was struck by the high incidence of *I, me* and *my* (and also of *you / yours*) but there were comparatively few third person pronouns.

An investigation is always better for some kind of comparison. I thought it might be interesting to look at a poet who is often compared with Rossetti, **Elizabeth Barratt Browning**. I collected from the same source, a similar number of lines of poetry amounting to 2,466 words. I put them through the same processes and was then able to make some comparisons.

I have picked out some of the prominent repetitions and placed them in a table which you can see below.

word	CR	EBB	notes
beloved	0	11	VI
blood	4	0	
dead / dies etc	8	5	QI
garden	1	5	Perhaps a particular poem?
god	0	12	(CR Jesus = 3) expected the ratio to be the other way round. VI
happy	0	6	See 'sweet' below
heart	14	8	QI – see 'love' below
heaven etc		6	See 'god' above
if / but / yet	6/16/11 (=33)	7/15/2 (=24)	QI
joy	4	1	Joy subtly different to happy?

love	23	7	QI
no / not / never	15/22/4 (=45)	10/11/5 (=27)	cannot 4 / 1 VI
now	7	4	taken together with today, tomorrow and yesterday, QI
O	5	10	Writers would now use Oh, if they used it at all.
pray	4	6	More than expected for EBB
repent	6	0	As expected. Probably one particular poem.
river	0	14	Perhaps a particular poem?
rose	4	8	QI
shall	10	4	will = 1/1 QI
sleep	3	6	
sweet	4	10	More positive words in EBB?
today	2	0	See 'now' above
tomorrow	7	0	ditto
yesterday	2	0	Ditto

pronouns	CR	EBB	
I / me / my + myself / mine	63 / 31 / 54 / 3 161	42 / 15 / 21 / 2 80	VI
You / your + yours	47 / 14 61	3 / 1 4	
Thee / thine / thou / thy	2 / 0 / 1 / 3 6	12 / 4 / 7 / 0 23	
<i>Total of previous 2 rows</i>	66	27	VI
We / our + ours	18 / 0 18	5 / 4 9	QI
He / his / him	14 / 14 / 4 32	17 / 26 / 2 45	
She / hers / her	10 / 0 / 23 33	22 / 2 / 17 41	
			VI = very interesting QI = quite interesting

Rossetti's language, continued.

Sometimes it is the small words which are the give-aways. Look at how many times Rossetti uses *no*, *not* or *never* compared to Browning – almost twice as often. And while the *ifs* and *buts* are similar, Rossetti uses *yet* 11 times to Browning's twice; small thing though it may be, that 'yet' has a very forlorn and melancholy feel.

I am also interested in Rossetti's use of *shall*. Does this reveal her concern with the future in this life, or in a life to come?

Pronouns are always good indicators and here we have an amazing difference. Rossetti uses first person pronouns twice as often as Browning (161 to 80). Self-obsessed? You and your students can make your own minds up. For that's the joy of this approach: it is an experiment and you do not know the outcomes.

Of course, this is the beginning of your research. When you spot something interesting, you need to follow it up. Browning uses *thee* and *thou* a lot – is she addressing a friend, a lover or God? Similarly, are her *beloveds* addressed to Robert or a less earthly entity? What about Rossetti's use of *shall*? Now is the time to track these words down and see them in context...

Christina Rossetti (4)

Themes

Another way of looking at Rossetti's poetry might be try to categorise it in some way, e.g. into poems written in the first person and those written in the third person. Those written in the first person tend to be either poems of personal reflection (and often concerned with death and loss) or story poems where the writer adopts the persona of one of the characters. The poems written in the third person subdivide into poetry about nature or related subjects and story poems / ballads; there are also a few poems written in the third person which are also reflective or philosophical. Here is the beginning of a classification:

1 st person reflection	1 st person story	3 rd person nature	3 rd person story	3 rd person reflective
A Birthday Remember After Death My Dream Song A Summer Wish Echo May	Cousin Kate An Apple Gathering Sister Maude	Spring Song	Dreamland Noble Sisters Maude Clare	A triad A portrait

As you (or your students) try to do this, two things become apparent: (a) that categories frequently overlap and (b) there is hardly a poem which does not contain a fairly overt 'message'. I think one of the issues for students to grapple with is the question of whether Rossetti is really a one theme poet and how they might characterise that theme.

How appropriate is this? *Love is wonderful but life is short and we must prepare ourselves for death and heaven.*

Before or after giving that description to students you might ask them to work in pairs to come up with a single sentence summary of Rossetti's take on life. They can use the internet to browse selections of her poetry. Their answers should make interesting reading but you may need to feed them some useful words and phrases.

See also *Uphill & Cousin Kate* and *Comparing Hardy and Rossetti*