

**FINAL essay due in 27<sup>th</sup>  
March.**

# Look at Rossetti's first lines.

- Underline any words that you can link together – perhaps they have a similar theme – i.e. Death?
- Mind map in your books your initial impressions of this writer. What issues do you think she might tackle in her poetry?

# Christina Rossetti

- She lived from 1830 – 1894.
- She was devoutly religious.
- During her teenage years her family had severe financial problems due to her father's deteriorating health.
- She suffered a mental breakdown at 14.
- From 29 to 40 she worked at a refuge for prostitutes.
- She was engaged twice, but never married.





**Dante (her brother)**

**William (her brother)**

**Christina**

**Frances (her mother)**

"she was opposed to war, slavery (in the American South), cruelty to animals (in the prevalent practice of animal experimentation), the exploitation of girls in under-age prostitution and all forms of military aggression."

*Jan Marsh*

# Her life

**1830:** Born in London, to Gabriele and Frances Rossetti.

**1848:** Engaged to James Collinson, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

**1850:** The engagement is cancelled when James converts to Roman Catholicism. Christina was a fierce follower of the Church of England.

**1853:** Her father retires, due to his failing health. Christina and her mother attempt to start a day school, which they give up within a year.

**1862:** Publishes *Goblin Market and Other Poems*.

**1866:** Publishes *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*. Rejects marriage proposal from Charles Cayley, who "was not a Christian."

**1870:** Publishes *Commonplace and Other Stories*.

**1871:** Publishes *A Pageant and Other Poems*.

**1894:** Dies.

**1896:** *New Poems* published posthumously.

Glue in the biography.  
Highlight 'interesting' parts.  
In particular look at Elizabeth  
Jennings comments.

# Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (c. 1848 – 1870)

A group of artists that included Dante Rossetti. They got their inspiration from Italian artists working before Raphael (1483–1520). They enjoyed painting medieval settings and characters.

William Morris, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Charles Swinburne were leading poets in the movement.





Ophelia

# The Rossetti's were really religious:

“The worst moment for the atheist is when he is really thankful and has nobody to thank.”

*Dante Rossetti*

Jason Isaacs notes that Christina Rossetti "*often found herself caught between the claims of worldly passions and celestial faith*"

What does Isaacs mean?

## Glossary

- **flaxen** (verse 1): fair-haired
- **mean** (verse 3): humble, poor
- **estate** (verse 3): situation
- **coronet** (verse 6): small crown a member of the House of Lords is entitled to wear

## Questions

1. What's happening in the poem?
2. What perspective is the poem told from?  
(1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> person?)
3. How does the narrator feel about her cousin Kate?
4. What *would* the narrator have done differently?

# Highlight and annotate:

1. Highlight any similes or metaphors.
2. Using a different colour underline contrasting images. i.e 'woe' an 'joy' in line 10.
3. Highlight the pronouns (I, he, she – use different colours for each.)

Find the two examples of oxymoron (ordered chaos).

# Venn diagram

Assign each circle a character;

- Great Lord
- Cousin Kate
- Narrator/ cottage maiden

Use the Venn diagram to see where the relationships overlap.

Are there any other elements that could be recorded outside the circles?

# What is Rossetti describing here?

*“He wore me like a golden knot  
He changed me like a glove.”*

Why did she have to be ambiguous?

Think about the Victorian era.

- What is the significance of the word 'dove' (a symbol is something standing for something else such as the Union flag representing Britain or a wedding ring as a sign of marriage)
- What do you notice about the sound pattern in 'So now I moan like an unclean thing'? Look at the vowel sounds. Make sure you know what onomatopoeia is (and that you can spell it!)
- Whom does the narrator blame for her predicament? How does Rossetti convey this?
- Victorian poets often resorted to archaic language and word forms. Are there any examples here and if so why are they used and to what effect?
- The narrator is unnamed. What is the effect of this and how does it affect the reader's response to her? By contrast Kate is named three times in the poem and once in the title.

- Is Rossetti really suggesting, against the grain of conventional Victorian thinking and the belief of her own church, that the narrator is better off than Kate? Do you agree, or is there another message?



- **Christina Rossetti**

- 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 occur when teaching Gerald Manley Hopkins, I find.) 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 (sic)' 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.