

Rossetti in brief

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Christina Georgina Rossetti, one of the most important women poets of the 19th Century, was born in December 1830, into a family of poets and artists. Devoutly religious, she refused two offers of marriage because of religious differences. Much of her poetry is religious, though she wrote some passionate love-poetry and much which celebrates the joy of the natural world. She also wrote a book of rhymes for very young children. She was close to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and was linked through him with the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art. After his death, she lived a secluded life. She died of cancer in December 1894.

Detailed biography

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Christina Rossetti was the youngest of four children of Gabriele Rossetti, an Italian patriot who came to London in 1824. Born on 5 December 1830, she had one sister, Maria, and two brothers, Dante Gabriel and William. Christina and her sister were mainly educated at home by their mother, and brought up as devout Anglo-Catholics. Christina's elder sister Maria eventually became an Anglican nun.

Rossetti's brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, went to Kings College School in London, and were founder members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This group of artists, poets and critics approached art by studying nature in close detail and by choosing subjects that they thought were morally uplifting. They chose the name of their group to indicate that they thought all art since Raphael (an Italian painter who lived from 1483 to 1520) was degenerate. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a painter and poet. William later acted as Christina's editor.

Although some of Christina Rossetti's earliest verse was published in *The Germ*, a magazine produced for a short time by the Pre-Raphaelites, and she sat as a model for several of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, she was not a member of the movement. By modern standards, their poetry seems rich and cloying; hers is more sensitive.

In sketches made by her brother Dante, the young Christina seems attractive. In 1848 she became engaged to James Collinson, a member of her brother's Pre-Raphaelite circle. However, she broke it off when he became a Roman Catholic. Later, in her early thirties, she fell in love with Charles Cayley. Again she broke it off because of religious differences. Her brother William later said; *she enquired into his creed and found he was not a Christian*. Rossetti's definition of Christianity was narrower and more evangelical than most people's.

Like many unmarried middle-class women of that period, Rossetti did not have any paid employment, except for about a year when she and her mother tried to run a day school after failing health and eyesight forced her father to retire in 1853. However, she mixed with many celebrated artists and men of letters of her day, such as Whistler, Swinburne, and the Reverend Charles Dodgson (author of *Alice in Wonderland* under the name of Lewis Carroll) who were friends of her brothers. Christina Rossetti's religious views were so strong that she would only read Swinburne's long narrative poem *Atalanta in Calydon* after she had stuck strips of paper over what she considered the anti-religious parts. After that she was able to enjoy the poem very much. She continued to write poetry throughout her life, and in the 1870s she worked on a voluntary basis for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Christina Rossetti's family was very important to her. Although she loved two different men, and it is clear from her poetry that she could express feelings of love and the heartbreak of losing love, she never married or broke away from home. Her brothers and sister were central to her emotions and she was deeply upset by Dante Gabriel's nervous breakdown in 1872. After he died in 1882, she lived as a recluse at home, concentrating on her religious life. After a period of ill health Christina Rossetti died of cancer on 29 December 1894.

Much of Rossetti's poetry was inspired by her religion. Many poems, such as *When I am Dead, My Dearest*, *Remember* and *Up-Hill*, are concerned with the nearness of death and the renunciation of earthly love. Her love of God is passionately expressed in *Long Barren*, and her poem *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* is well known as a Christmas carol. However, she is also a poet who demonstrates in her work a love of nature. *Another Spring* and *Spring Quiet* show an exactness of observation which her Pre-Raphaelite brothers would have undoubtedly appreciated.

Although she is thought of as a somewhat melancholy poet, and indeed much of her writing can be sad, or even morbid by today's standards, she can also express the lighter side of life. Her poem *A Birthday* is a rapturous expression of delight in love. She also shows a malicious appreciation of sisterly jealousies in her poem *Two Noble Sisters*. Among her works is *Sing-Song, A Nursery Rhyme Book*, published in 1872, which contains lyrics for young children.

Many people consider that her best work is *Goblin Market* (1862), the longest of her poems. Because goblins sound as if they belong in a fairy story, it is often put in collections for young children. However, it is really a short epic poem for adults. The most obvious quality of the writing is the exactness and sensuousness of her descriptions of the fruit sold by the goblins. The nearest comparison in English poetry to this must be the description of the feast in Keats' *The Eve of St Agnes*. The most striking thing about the subject matter is its eeriness. Two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, see goblin merchants going to market with mouth-wateringly tempting fruit to sell. Lizzie resists because she remembers the fate of Jeanie, another girl who bought fruit from the goblins, but Laura buys the fruit with one of her golden curls. When it is gone she pines for more, but can no longer hear the call of the goblins. She sickens and nearly dies, but her sister braves the temptations of the fruit to bring back juices which the goblins have squeezed onto her clothes in their efforts to force her to eat. By offering herself in this way, she redeems her sister.

Some people have seen this poem as an allegory, in which the fruits offered by the goblins stand for the pleasures of the world, though according to Christina's brother William she denied that it was anything more than 'a fairy story'. However, many modern readers may make a connection with the temptations and effects of narcotic drugs. This may not be a connection that Rossetti intended, but the description of Laura yielding to temptation and her subsequent illness would have been familiar to such families as the Brontës, whose brother Branwell died of an addiction to drink and drugs, and to Coleridge, who suffered from a lifelong addiction to opium. The redemption of Laura by Lizzie's self-sacrifice is one that fits well with Rossetti's devout Christianity.