

Chapter & Verse

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PAST LAND AND SEA: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830 -1894)

Christina Rossetti was born in London, her parents were Italian. She was the youngest of four children. One of her brothers was the poet and Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christiana posed for a number of his paintings -she was the model for the Virgin Mary in his first oil painting. Christiana was educated entirely at home and had a happy childhood.

However, in the 1840's, her family had to endure considerable financial hardship due to the serious physical and mental ill-health of her father who had to give up his teaching post as he struggled against increasing blindness and manic depression. Christina's mother had to begin teaching and her sister, Maria became a live-in governess, rather like Charlotte Brontë. Christina had a dread of becoming a governess and was fortunate to narrowly avoid this fate. With her mother and siblings away from home, she became much more isolated and she suffered a nervous breakdown and endured bouts of depression and illness for years afterwards. She took great solace in the Anglo-Catholic movement which had recently developed in the Church of England and religious devotion came to play a dominant role in her life which continued until her death. Although she never married, she had three serious relationships but her engagement to the painter James

Collison in her late teens was ended due to religious differences. As the following poem suggests, Christina was searching for an ideal love which no mere man could live up to.

Echo

Come to me in the silence of the
night;
Come in the speaking silence of a
dream;
Come with soft rounded cheeks
and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream;
Come back in tears,
O memory, hope, love of finished
years.

Oh dream how sweet, too sweet,
too bitter sweet,
Whose wakening should have
been in Paradise,
Where souls brimfull of love
abide and meet;
Where thirsting longing eyes
Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out
no more.

Yet come to me in dreams, that I
may live
My very life again tho' cold in
death:
Come back to me in dreams, that
I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:
Speak low, lean low,
As long ago, my love, how long
ago.

Christina began writing poetry at an early age and soon began experimenting with sonnets, hymns

and ballads, often drawing on narratives from the Bible. Her collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* published in 1861 was remarkably well received. It's thought that her experience of working as a volunteer in the St. Mary Magdalene refuge for former prostitutes, who the Victorians called *fallen women*, had an influence in the title poem. Christina was passionately against the widespread exploitation of under-age girls in the London of her time.



The popularity of her long narrative poem, *Goblin Market* has now been overtaken by her shorter poems, particularly her sonnets. Perhaps not surprisingly given her Italian ancestry, she was much more drawn to the Petrarchan sonnet than to the Shakespearian. Her best known sonnet is often read at funerals, even when the deceased had no particular liking for poetry. Like many of her finest poems, it broods on love and loss with a wonderful subtlety and delicacy of feeling and simple diction.

Remember

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you planned:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

In the later years of her life, Christiana suffered from Graves Disease, a serious disorder of the thyroid which led to the swelling of her neck and the protrusion of her eyes. In the 1870's, this disease became so serious that she came very close to death. She also suffered from a crisis of faith and so suffered from physical, psychological and spiritual turmoil. In one of the most beautiful and moving of all her poems, she writes of that longing for some indefinable otherness, beyond all the pain and loneliness, a place in which she will at last feel completely at home and not be a stranger in this world.

1893, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and although the tumour was somehow removed, the cancer returned and she died the following year. It's reported that neighbours heard her screams of agony day after day before the blessed release of death. As she lay dying, one of Christiana's principal concerns was who would look after her beloved companion,

Somewhere or Other

Somewhere or other there must
surely be
The face not seen, the voice not
heard,
The heart that not yet -
never yet - ah me!
Made answer to my word.

Somewhere or other, may be near
or far;
Past land and sea, clean out of
sight;
Beyond the wandering moon,
beyond the star
That tracks her night by night.

Somewhere or other, may be far
or near;
With just a wall, a hedge, between;
With just the last leaves of the
dying year
Fallen on a turf grown green.

her cat called Muff. One senses that she felt closer to cats with their mysterious ways than she ever did to a human.

In another lovely poem, simply called *Song*, she writes with great fondness of death, a condition in which it no longer seems to matter whether she is remembered or

forgotten now that she is part of the great wheel of the natural world.

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops
wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the
twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

[Eye Arts Festival SPS](#) [Open Mic](#)

As part of the **Eye Arts Festival** there will be a Suffolk Poetry Society Open Mic event on

Saturday August 29th from
3.30 to 4.30

at

**The Bank Arts Centre, Eye
2, Castle Street, Eye,
IP23 7AN**

bring a poem to read
(no charge but donations
towards the upkeep of the
Centre would be
appreciated)

Contact Beth Soule if you
plan to come on

vicechair@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk