

## The Depiction Of Human Life And Its Vanity In The Poems Of Christina Rossetti

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### Abstract

Today Christina Rossetti is primarily remembered for her few poems such as “Goblin Market”, but the range of her work is broad: from love lyrics to sonnets, ballads to religious poetry. Therefore, in order to evaluate her true power as a poet we need to look at the various poetical forms and genres in which she wrote. Although she has written works on a variety of themes, critical attention has remained limited to her lyrical works, which are marked with a refined tone and a flawless finish. But Rossetti also produced a good amount of poetry which are melancholic in tone, and which deal with the themes of uncertainty and the vanity of human life. This paper is concerned with a critical analysis and study of the poems of Christina Rossetti which deals with the theme of vanity and unfulfilled hopes with special reference to “A Testimony”, “The One Certainty”, “A Better Resurrection” and “Sweet Death”.

**Keywords:** Afterlife, Christina Rossetti, Hope, Religious poetry, Vanity.

Christina Georgina Rossetti, one of the most important women poets of the Victorian age, was born in December 1830, into a family of poets and artists. She was the youngest child of Gabriel Rossetti, an Italian scholar, and was the sister to the poet and artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Over her career Christina Rossetti produced poetry in a wide range of styles and themes. She was a lyrical poet who wrote about beauty of nature. She produced a significant amount of religious poetry, and also wrote poems for children. All her works are simple, easy to understand and straightforward, employing a bare minimum of words, but “they possess an intellectual depth which shows Rossetti to be an astute questioner and analyst of her contemporary world” (Avery).

Although many of her works demonstrate a love of nature, Rossetti is a somewhat melancholy poet, and indeed much of her writing can be considered sad or even morbid by contemporary standards. Typically, Rossetti’s poems evince a concern with individual salvation rather than social reform. One could argue that the major theme in many of her poems such as “Beauty is Vain”, “Gone for Ever”, “Vanity of Vanities”, “The One Certainty” is that human life on this earth is temporary, that this world and its concerns are perishable, unreliable, illusory and passing evanescent. “Implicitly contrasted with the fleeting quality of

this life is the permanence of God and the heavenly reward” (“Christina Rossetti”). On the one hand, Rossetti depicts a world full of temptation, struggle, pain, weariness and emptiness, but on the other she gives the reader hope by emphasising that salvation and spiritual fulfilment can take us beyond the struggle, doubt and anxiety which are characteristic of this world.

In her poem “A Testimony” the speaker of the poem starts with a declaration that everything is vanity in earth, that there is no profit here. There is no tranquillity in the life of man, and man cannot escape this, as it keeps reappearing. Next Christina Rossetti discusses the wealth which man stores up for himself. This stored wealth can provide nothing for him, and it might get stolen or frittered away. “Our treasures moth and rust corrupt, or thieves break through and steal”. (“Christina Georgina” 55) Even if man is merry, his mirth is short-lived, because he does not know what may happen next. In the next stanza Rossetti tells us that there is no difference between the death of the rich and the poor, since both die in the same way, and their bodies decay and worms feed on them. “The rich man dies; and the poor dies: The worm feeds sweetly on the dead”. (“Christina Georgina” 55) Whether rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, everything comes to an end, and the human body is no exception, from dust it is made and to dust it returns “All in the end shall have but dust” (“Christina Georgina” 55). Human life is no different from a leaf or a blade of grass. And just as a leaf doesn’t give shade, so does its existence is insignificant. Still, man hopes and plans for his future.

In the next stanza Rossetti highlights the perennially unsatisfied human nature. Man is never satisfied, his eyes, ears and heart are never filled and he always desires more and more. Man builds a house, then widens its boundaries, gathers wealth, but doesn’t know who will inherit it. Still, he rises early, goes to work, to struggle and earn, and then to rest a little. But, then again all the labour is in vain. Rossetti repeatedly uses the word ‘vain’ to stress its importance regarding the theme of the poem. Next, she talks about the harvest or the reward of all of man’s labour, and she says “we sow wind; and we shall reap the whirlwind, verily” (“Christina Georgina” 56) stating that since we sowed nothing, we gain nothing.

It does not matter whether we have plenty or little because we are taking nothing with us from here. Every generation comes and goes; nothing is permanent here. Finally, the poetess says, now that she knows the truth about their life on earth, the maidens have stopped singing, the men are sad, vain is their struggle and mournful is their harvesting, because “Vanity is the lot of all.” (“Christina Georgina” 56)

In the poem, “The One Certainty” Rossetti once again explores the theme of vanity. All things are vanity, she says, in the hands of fate man is tossed to and fro. There are few moments of joy which are, in any case, random and short-lived. There is nothing new in this world; today is just same as yesterday and tomorrow will be same as well. We grow old with pain and growl; each day is same as any other with its struggle, pain and bitterness.

In another poem named “Vanity of Vanities” Rossetti says,

“Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last, Glory that at the last bringeth no gain!” (“Christina Georgina” 439)

Man can have fame and glory, but it is of no use, because at the end there is no gain. And again sorrow is permanent in our life. We strive hard to achieve fame, glory, wealth, happiness, we give out everything, but in the end it brings no gain, just emptiness.

In another poem “The Hearth Knoweth Its Own Bitterness” the title contains a deep meaning in it, namely that, whether it is joy or grief, pain or pleasure a person experiences them to by himself. There is always something that lives in the heart of man that is not accessible for anyone else. Next, in a continuation of the theme of vanity, Rossetti says that, we do a lot to gain something but there is no guarantee of a good result. We do much, but we receive less than we had expected “I have not held and hugged the whole”. Due to this, the product of our efforts and labour is never enough to satisfy our heart. We work hard, strive, and struggle to satisfy our will or to achieve our dream, and still something always remains there, which is unachieved “Much have I paid, yet much is due”. In the last stanza of the poem Rossetti accurately describes this world and its perishable concerns. She says that the world and its short-lived objects can never bring us the true pleasure and satisfaction which our hearts long for. Here, we moan and cry due to pain, failures and ruptures, because this is what the world offers us.

Religious poetry occupies a large portion of Rossetti’s work. Rossetti’s religious belief was a major influence on, and motivation behind her writings. Her religious views however were very austere, as she was a firm believer in Christianity. She turned down two potential marriage proposals because of a difference in religious faith. This strongly-felt religious faith marked her out from most of her contemporaries. In her religious poetry Rossetti expresses a hope of an eternal life in the Christian afterlife, emphasising the notion that our life on earth is temporary, and that the pains and struggles of this world prepare us for our ultimate salvation. In her poem “A Better Resurrection” Rossetti states that now she has become numb towards pain, “My heart within me like a stone” (“Christina Georgina” 12) and that there is no hope that is left. “Look right, look left, I dwell alone” (“Christina Georgina” 12) professes the speaker’s alienation from the world. She looks for relief but is dimmed with grief. Again here she reiterates the theme that life is devoid of meaning and brief. The poem is written in the first person, which suggests that the emotions and feelings expressed are the author’s. At last Rossetti metaphorically compares her life to a broken bowl, that cannot hold one drop of water to nourish her soul, and that is why she asks for it to be cast into the fire. The fire will burn the perishable things, melt and remould it, till it will be made into a royal cup for Him, my King. Here, the fire signifies the ultimate salvation of the human soul after which they will be sanctified to dwell in the presence of God.

The same concept has been used in the poem ‘Sweet Death’. In the poem Rossetti beautifully compares a human life to a flower. The flowers blossom in the churchyard, their fragrance and beauty capture her attention. Sweet is the life of the flower which blossoms, fall and die nourishing the earth. Rossetti says that life may be sweet and lovely with its beauty and youth, but “sweeter death that passeth by” (“Christina Georgina” 361). A time will come when all outer appearances will fade away, youth will die. Why then should we pursue these perishable things? Instead we should search for something better than beauty and youth, a thing which could give us rest, peace and will last forever. The same reference of death is given in “Life and Death”, where Rossetti declares that life is not sweet, but that one day it will be sweet to shut our eyes and die. Although the body will be numb to feel, see, hear or sense, but it will be asleep from risk and pain. Fear, risk, pain, failures are the constant companions of human beings, and the final freedom from all these is death. At last the poetess asks her readers what could be better than the company of God, with His saints and angels before His throne. Rossetti suggests that the company of God is the place where there is eternal rest and ease, which this world can never provide. “Why should we shrink from our

full harvest” (“Christina Georgina” 244) since we have enough struggle and pain in this world, and why should we lose our peace in the afterlife? Rossetti explores similar themes in the poem “After this the judgement”, where again there is a mention of a hidden, mysterious mansion of everlasting peace. It is the place where pilgrims go after death, a place where hope and desire are fulfilled, and peace is not affected by pain.

It is clear that Christina Rossetti has a set image of this world, and that image of the world is melancholic. To her this world is full of struggle, pain, anxiety, failure, heart-breaks and devoid of significance. Her works clearly depicts the message about fruitless human efforts to achieve our goals, which nevertheless always leaves us dissatisfied. Christina Rossetti suffered from a nervous breakdown at the age of fourteen, and in the last decade of her life, in 1892, she was diagnosed with cancer, and after months of acute suffering she died on 29 December, 1894. Christina Rossetti had her portion of suffering and pain, perhaps explains why she turned to religion to seek peace in the afterlife. On the one hand, Rossetti set vanity of human life as a central theme of many of her works, declaring that in this world man can never achieve true tranquillity and rest, which is why humans should abandon all hope of getting this on earth. But on the other hand she says that humans should prepare themselves for life after death, where there is perpetual peace and rest. And that is why her devotional poems trace the yielding of unfulfilled earthly hopes in exchange of the heavenly reward.

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