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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
A STUDY

by
FREDEGOND SHOVE



*I will not look unto the sun
Which setteth night by night:
In the untrodden courts of heaven
My crown shall be more bright.
Lo in the New Jerusalem
Founded and built aright
My very feet shall tread on light.*

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the following short study in no way pretends to be a life of Christina Rossetti, it is a matter of regret to me that it was finished before the recent biography by Miss Sandars appeared. It has therefore not been possible for me to profit by her researches as I should like to have done.

I most gratefully acknowledge the courtesy shown me by Messrs Macmillan & Co., also by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, in kindly permitting me to quote from works of which they hold the copyright, and all of which are now embodied in Messrs Macmillan's edition of Christina Rossetti's Poetical Works.

F. S.

October 1930

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A FOREWORD

Christina Rossetti—the name is like a song itself. Whilst my pen traces the letters that form the notes of the tuneful name the snow falls fast.

Cold the day and cold the drifted snow,
 Dim the day until the cold dark night—

words that form the opening of January's speech about the robin in her pageant of the months—seem aptly to describe the afternoon.

I am tempted to read on and on. February will soon take up the theme:

Brother, joy to you!
 I've brought some snowdrops; only just a few,
 But quite enough to prove the world awake,
 Cheerful and hopeful in the frosty dew
 And for the pale sun's sake.

Later April cries:

What beaks you have, you funny things,
 What voices shrill and weak;
 Who'd think that anything that sings
 Could sing through such a beak?
 Yet you'll be nightingales one day,
 And charm the country side,
 When I'm away and far away
 And May is queen and bride.

'A Pageant', think I, as my gaze travels once more from the fragrance of these printed treasures to the snowy grass and then upwards towards the thick, light sky of a late January afternoon.

But all her poems are part of a pageant, she brings up the birds, beasts, blossoms and sounds of nature, she evokes the scents and colours of the seasons, her heart keeps tune and time with winds and waves and snowfalls, as simply as she breathes, as quietly as she sings.

Perhaps the greatest of her qualities as a poet is this extremely natural, spontaneous, heartfelt and deep resource of music.

There seems no art in the arrangement of the changeful cadences, because the art is intuitive—imagination caused it—is the tool of the highest power and therefore invisible.

It works in her soul, refining, spiritualising, crystallising and blowing ever lovelier shapes of flame or dew or frost into an ever-sweeter and intenser being:

Like the blowing of a windbringing dew.

The impulse to write poetry wrought in her fervent mind sweetly and beneficently. Her brother has suggested to us that while she certainly worked at her poems, she did not always much revise her work. Very often she wrote straight from her thought with success and without much, if any, premeditation.

It would often seem as though her desire to express something were the longing not only of a writer but of a painter and musician, mystic and lover combined.

She saw and possessed the snowdrops, lambs and

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showers, transposed the liquid bird notes, at-oned all beauty with 'God our home' and loved the whole of innocent creation, plants, animals, souls, or star systems with a quite stintless rapture, even with jubilant and saintly joy akin to that of Saint Francis of Assisi or Saint Catherine of Genoa.

But she loved God supremely and her love of nature was always a sparkling tributary to that boundless stiller love, so real and so personal, which was offered in every action of her difficult, suffering life to the Author of all goodness and all beauty.

To admire Christina Rossetti's poetry whilst remaining chill to her passionate Christianity is, I suppose, possible, in a sense in which perhaps it might not be possible to admire Francis Thompson or George Herbert whilst objecting to or remaining uninterested by their religion.

But I think that all such admirers of Christina Rossetti's work are bound to lose more than half of her message, not only of the sense but of the full beauty and rhythmic life in it.

When sick of life and all the world—
 How sick of all desire but Thee!—
 I lift mine eyes up to the hills,
 Eyes of my heart that see,
 I see beyond all death and ills
 Refreshing green for heart and eyes,
 The golden streets and gateways pearled,
 The trees of Paradise.

These melodious lines run ever parallel to the harmony in the thought, keeping tune and time with her pleasant Christian hope.

Likewise do these:

EASTER DAY

Words cannot utter
 Christ His returning:
 Mankind, keep jubilee,
 Strip off your mourning,
 Crown you with garlands,
 Set your lamps burning.

Speech is left speechless;
 Set you to singing,
 Fling your hearts open wide,
 Set your bells ringing:
 Christ the Chief Reaper
 Comes, His sheaf bringing.

Earth wakes her song-birds,
 Puts on her flowers,
 Leads out her lambkins,
 Builds up her bowers:
 This is man's spousal day,
 Christ's day and ours.

One who delights in 'Goblin Market', who loves 'A Birthday' and feels that in Christina Rossetti's poems for children she was sometimes most exquisitely successful because most happy, can yet not ignore that noble sequence of sonnets called 'Out of the Deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord', which

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contains some of the best religious poetry in the language, as well as revealing a passionate single-mindedness of devotion, an innocence and strictness of nature which should do much to enhance the reader's sense that Christina Rossetti was not only an artist, but was also a great spirit, a woman whose beautiful soul and high moral character matched all her beauty in prayer as in poetry.

Oh Lord God, hear the silence of each soul.

She utters the words as one well knowing what that silence is, how easy to break, costly to keep and fruitful when sealed with prayer. One surmises that her silences were no less full of spirituality than her songs. With all that she has ever written there breathes the fragrance and the spring-like innocence of a devout Christian. Her religion informed and invigorated all her points of view.

Pity was a ruling sentiment with her. For the cause of animals she wrote a little poem beginning:

Pity the sorrows of a poor old dog.

When she learned that the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge was not (at that time at any rate) definitely antagonistic to vivisection, she refused to give it any further support.

She drew animals with delicate insight, a few slight touches, and cats, dogs, birds (especially the robin), are seen to decorate her gardens and meadows. She could not come to grief over them, and, as a dear friend of mine once said of another friend whose knowledge of birds gave her a charming manner of discoursing upon them, 'she talked as though she made them'.

Hurt no living thing:
 Ladybird, nor butterfly,
 Nor moth with dusty wing,
 Nor cricket chirping cheerily,
 Nor grasshopper so light of leap,
 Nor dancing gnat, nor beetle fat,
 Nor harmless worms that creep.

was as much a part of Christina's working creed as was her loving charity towards all humanity and the whole modest fervour of her inner life. Side by side with her keen pities went her readiness to be amused and enchanted by the play and the drollery of her animal friends. In his admirable biography of her, Mr Mackenzie Bell has told of a conversation he once had with Miss Rossetti when she asked him earnestly whether he were going away into the country 'to kill something'. Upon his answering that he never killed anything, she showed much evident relief and he felt that from that moment the friendship was properly begun upon a stable basis and could hence-

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forth proceed without serious interruption. She afterwards told him many little things about her own cat 'Muff', showing great keenness in observation of all her habits.

Plump housekeeper dormouse has tucked himself neat,
 Just a brown ball in moss with a morsel to eat:
 Armed hedgehog has huddled him into the hedge,
 While frogs scarce miss freezing deep down in the sedge.

But I am elaborating what is to be but a foreword to some other very slight observations, mainly drawn from the deep wells of intimate knowledge provided (in various books and at various times) by the late Mr William Rossetti, and offered as a stimulus to the quickly coming, freshly reading generation of poetry lovers of to-day. My only excuse for these digressions is that when, gazing upon the snowflakes, I began to muse about Christina Rossetti, I had a deep sense of the futility of trying to pin such a lovely thing into a foolish case, where dates and labels could but proclaim the width of the gulf lying between her and other mortals. She was meant for no museum and no 'collection'.

Most living of poets, she lives like light, like water, sound of music, scent of lilacs, lilies and roses, murmur of bees and joy of star-light. Like them, she is

easy of access and free from pomp of human pride, but, like them also, it is hard, and very hard, to describe her: and to round off my foreword to this slight attempt at a recognition of Christina Rossetti's qualities as woman and as poet I cannot do better than quote the opening sentences of Mr Mackenzie Bell's sympathetic study, to which I owe a good deal of my knowledge of her life. 'Never does a writer feel so keenly how weak are words—at the best inadequate makeshifts for expressing conceptions or for conveying impressions—as when he tries to show to others in some measure the sweetness and irresistible fascination of such a personality as Christina Rossetti—a personality whose unique charm is well-nigh untranslatable into words.'