

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: HER THEMES, IMAGES, AND LANGUAGE

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## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: HER THEMES, IMAGES, AND LANGUAGE

Christina Rossetti has inspired little critical attention, and what she has inspired has been directed almost entirely to biography. The predominance of unfulfilled love in her work has caused widespread speculation, and women in particular have been interested in tying the life of this devout spinster (who reportedly withdrew from both of her engagements for religious reasons) to her poetry. Christina apparently expected such a reaction to her work for in her early autobiographical novel, Maude, she comments on such idle curiosity:

Touching these same verses, it was the amazement of everyone what could make her poetry so broken-hearted as was mostly the case. Some pronounced that she wrote very foolishly about things she could not possibly understand; some wondered if she really had any secret source of uneasiness; while some simply set her down as affected.<sup>1</sup>

Although her first biographer was a male acquaintance (Mackenzie Bell), most of the subsequent studies have been written by women who have done little more than rework his material. Among these female biographers are Georgina Battiscombe, Margaret Sawtell, Fredegond Shove, Eleanor Thomas, and Marya Zaturenska. But there is one biography which is like no other: this is the interesting and controversial book by Lona Mosk Packer, Christina Rossetti (1963). Packer draws on Bell's biography and William Rossetti's "Memoir," but she also works with numerous letters and unpublished material, providing the reader with a broader basis on which to judge Christina and her works. Packer's controversial theory concerns Christina's love affairs. With the aid of letters and biographical readings of the

poems, Packer asserts that Christina never loved the two men to whom she was engaged, but rather she loved a minor painter and poet, William Bell Scott. Because Scott was married, Christina's love was destined to be unfulfilled and guilt-ridden. However questionable some of her assumptions are, Packer has done readers a service by removing Christina from her saintly pedestal.

In addition to the biographical material, several general studies of Christina have been done. Lionel Stevenson includes a chapter on her in The Pre-Raphaelite Poets (1972). Stevenson obviously does not agree with Packer's romantic theory; he believes Christina remained single because she preferred to, or (and this would have some bearing on the frustration evident in her poetry) because she was afraid of sexual relations.<sup>2</sup> Stevenson comments on some of her most interesting and most neglected poems:

Christina Rossetti's poetry comes closer to the pure lyric mode than that of any other Victorian, male or female, for the obvious reason that it contains a minimum of intellectual substance. Though she was equipped with a normally keen mind, it was firmly suppressed by several forces.

He lists these forces as the Victorian stereotype of women, the social isolation of the Rossetti household, a self-conscious detachment from social theorizing, and the religious faith that kept her from material concerns and rational doubt.<sup>3</sup> C.M. Bowra likewise devotes a chapter to Christina in The Romantic Imagination (1949). Bowra's comments take into consideration a broad range of ideas, including some interesting views on her use of love and death:

In her the idea of love turned inexorably to the idea of death, and in this association we can

surely see her instinctive shrinking from the surrender which love demands....In Christina love released a melancholy desire for death, and for a kind of death not closely connected with her usual ideas of an afterworld.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of this unusual element in the woman and her work, Bowra praises her "command of a rippling meter and the fresh conversational simplicity of her language"<sup>5</sup> and labels her one of the best English religious poets. He sees her as a "poet whose naturally romantic tendencies were turned into a different channel by the intensity of her religious faith."<sup>6</sup> Because she was so completely devoted to god, she was a great religious poet.

The consideration of Christina as a religious poet has been the center of several studies, and not all are as favorable as Bowra's. Hoxie N. Fairchild in the fourth volume of Religious Trends in English Poetry (1957) says that Christina is the most accomplished orthodox Christian writer of authentic poetry between Vaughan and Hopkins.<sup>7</sup> But he also points out that much of her official religious verse is mechanical and unimaginative and that she too often sees death as a blessed oblivion rather than as a blessed gateway. It is this point that Molly Mahood in Poetry and Humanism (1950) also criticizes. In addition to noting the difference between George Herbert's and Christina's religious security, she criticizes Christina's view of heaven as compensation (rather than reward) and her view of death. According to Mahood, this "predominance, to the point of an obsession, of the death-wish prevents Christina Rossetti from being a great religious poet."<sup>8</sup> Lona Mosk Packer has published two articles on Christina's religion: "Swin-



burne and Christina Rossetti: Atheist and Anglican" and "The Protestant Existentialism of Christina Rossetti." In the latter she discusses the need for total commitment to religion and the relationship between personal identity and faith. She concludes by observing that once a poet can establish the relationship of the individual "I am" to the greater "I AM" through voluntary abnegation of the self, he receives a freshening through faith of the poetic impulse.<sup>9</sup>

Several other interesting studies have been done. In Four in Exile (1948), Nesca Robb praises Christina Rossetti for her perceptive ear, her vivid consciousness, and her imagination. But the interesting aspect of this analysis is the focus on Eden and the Fall:

Perhaps it was some sense of her completeness  
in childhood, and of a falling off as adult  
life began, that made Christina's mind dwell  
so often and so intensely on the thought of  
Eden and of man's loss of it.<sup>10</sup>

Robb sees maturity as paradise doubly lost; the real Eden and the ideal existence of childhood are both sacrificed to change and death. In contrast to the praise given by Robb is the extensive criticism offered by Stuart Curran in "The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti." He gives her credit for being a serious and introspective craftsman and for having the gift of music and ease, but condemns the shallow mind behind "Goblin Market"<sup>11</sup> and the tired sentimentality of many of her lyrics. Gisela Hönnighausen, in "Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti,"<sup>12</sup> points out the importance of detail in many of Christina's works. In her prose she is inclined to use emblems for saints, and in her poetry she uses the language of flowers, a popular interest of Victorians, to achieve emblematic significance.

Perhaps the most interesting recent study is Winston Weathers' "Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self." According to Weathers, Christina created in her poetry a myth of the inner being in order to discuss psychological realities.<sup>13</sup> In her works she shows the quest for psychological integration by having sisters represent various aspects of the personality which debate and struggle in an attempt to avoid permanent fragmentation. In his discussion he cites such poems as "Goblin Market," "Noble Sisters," "A Triad," "The Ghost's Petition," "Queen of Hearts," "Sister Maude," and "Maiden-Song" as embodiments of this myth. The theory is workable, and by applying it Weathers is able to give a good reading of "Goblin Market," one of Christina's most controversial poems.

"Goblin Market" was undoubtedly an inspiration behind Weathers' article, and this poem has caused more critical comment than the rest of Christina's work combined. Marya Zaturenska comments:

The mingling of the grotesque and the terrible, the sense of the trembling innocence that hovers on the abyss of the unnamable and the repulsive makes this strange little poem one of the masterpieces of English literature as well as a Pre-Raphaelite showpiece.<sup>14</sup>

The sources and meaning of this showpiece are intriguing to scholars. B. Ifor Evans' "The Sources of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'"<sup>15</sup> considers some of the books which might have spurred Christina's imagination to such a creation. He mentions a mythology book by Thomas Keightly, the fairy element in Shakespeare's works and The Arabian Nights as possible influences. In "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market" Lona Packer sees Lizzie and

Laura as different aspects of the same maiden--perhaps as sacred and profane love.<sup>16</sup> Predictably, Packer uses quotations from William Rossetti and from Christina's prose works to justify a biographical reading of the poem. According to Packer (and William), Maria Rossetti must have acted as Lizzie at a critical moment in order to save the wayward sister (Christina).<sup>17</sup> In "Goblin Market; Fairy Tale and Reality" A.A. DeVitis states that the poem may be an allegory of the creative process, involving the artist's search for experience and his appreciation of the ultimate meaning of that experience:

The artist must confront the reality, appreciate the power of evil and its destructive potential before he can create anything of true beauty and lasting power, something that is to have meaning for the greater part of humanity.<sup>18</sup>

DeVitis sees Lizzie's self-sacrifice as a type of vicarious experience--Lizzie understands and appreciates without succumbing. Like Packer and Weathers, DeVitis believes the two girls represent two sides of the same individual:

Laura is the passionate artist who would drink too deep and too fully from the fountain of experience; Lizzie is the obedient maiden who fears to venture far from the safe anchorage of hearth, home and religion.<sup>19</sup>

Marion Shalkhauser takes quite a different view of the poem in "The Feminine Christ":

"Goblin Market" sets forth Christina Rossetti's beliefs in original sin and in the sacrificial nature of Christ's death through her creation of a Christian fairy tale in which a feminine Christ redeems a feminine mankind from a masculine Satan.<sup>20</sup>

Shalkhauser comments on the forbidden fruit, the burden of sin, Laura's fall from innocence, Lizzie's behavior with the goblins and Lizzie's great love for her sister as allegorical elements in this Christian fairy tale. Warren Herendeen also sees this poem as a fairy tale but one which has more in common with Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream than with the story of Christ. In "The Midsummer Eves of Shakespeare and Christina Rossetti" Herendeen points out similarities between the play and the poem, including the setting (midsummer eves), the use of supernatural beings and magical juices, and the ending (marriage for all girls).<sup>21</sup> In contrast to these critics, C.M. Bowra believes Christina was honest when she commented that she meant nothing in particular by the poem:

She differs from him [Dante Gabriel Rossetti] in not making her word-pictures symbols of something else, being content to exploit them for their own sake. They reflect her love for the humbler and less exciting denizens of the animal world, for mice and wombats and other small furry creatures.<sup>22</sup>

Although "Goblin Market" has inspired a variety of criticism, most of Christina's other works have gone unnoticed. Richard D. Lynde, in "A Note on the Imagery in Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday,'" comments on the use of religious imagery in a poem which is said to deal with earthly love. In "'Up-Hill' and 'Down-' by Christina Rossetti" Eugene J. Brzenk argues that "Up-Hill" and "Amor Mundi" should be printed and read as companion poems. He gives a comparative reading of the two poems and then places them in a larger context:

"Up-Hill" and "Amor Mundi," in fact, epitomise the contrasting themes of duty and temptation,

the two main roads which provide the tension and substance of many of her major works.<sup>23</sup>

Christopher Ricks has shown that Christina may have been a source for one of Auden's poems in "'O Where Are You Going?' W.H. Auden and Christina Rossetti." Ricks points out that Christina's "Amor Mundi" and Auden's Epilogue to The Orators share not only the striking first line, but also elements of imagery and language.<sup>24</sup>

It seems odd that some of Christina's poems have attracted no critical response, that a few poems provide the bases for scattered comments, and that one poem inspires numerous interpretations--some radically different. This critical disagreement is significant because it suggests Christina's work is more complex than was originally believed.

If there is one thing critics agree on, regardless of their special interests, it is the limited scope of Christina Rossetti's themes. According to Hoxie Fairchild, she has very few things to say and she says them over and over again.<sup>25</sup> Fairchild is perhaps unnecessarily harsh here; it is to Christina's credit that she did not attempt to write beyond her own actual and imaginative experience. The purpose of the discussion that follows is to identify some previously unobserved patterns in her themes and in the imagery and language she employs to develop those themes.

Christina's primary themes are closely related to the secluded, directed life she led. Many of them, of course, can be incorporated into the religious framework that was such a vital part of her life. Christina produced a vast quantity of work which concerns itself exclusively with religious and moral matters. Spiritual

understanding and edification are the bases for her non-fiction prose works such as Annus Domini (1874), Seek and Find (1879), and Time Flies (1885); for several of her short stories, most notably "Pros and Cons" and "A Safe Investment"; and for a large portion of her verse.

To reach her religious conclusions Christina uses several themes: love, death, renunciation, temptation and guilt, and vanity. In her works, human, earthly love is often unsatisfactory, if not improper. It is only in the ordained union of marriage that a man and a woman can find happiness in earthly love. But, of course, for Christina the only pure love is heavenly love--soul for soul and man for Christ. One poem that expresses this is "From House to Home":

Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,  
Double against each other, filled, sufficed:  
All loving, loved of all; but loving best  
And best beloved of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

And the only reliable gateway to heavenly love is death: "These were the new-begotten from the dead/ Whom the great birth day bore"(p.25). Thus, death is often seen as a positive force in Christina's work; it is the means to a glorious end. Renunciation is the act which makes the attainment of that end possible. Renunciation can be seen in several different ways in Christina's work. It can be the right-minded renunciation of material goods and social position seen in "A Safe Investment"; it can be denial of personal, earthly pleasures as it is in the early poem "A Portrait":

She gave up beauty in her tender youth,

Gave all her hope and joy and pleasant ways;  
 She covered up her eyes lest they should gaze  
 On vanity, and chose the bitter truth...  
 ...her own self learned she to forsake,  
 Counting all earthly gain but hurt and loss.  
 So with calm will she chose and bore the cross  
 And hated all for love of Jesus Christ (p.286).

But most common is the renunciation of human love for the vision of heavenly love. In "Twice" the speaker gives her heart to God after it has been broken by a lover. The companion poems "Amor Mundi" and "Up-Hill" show the two possible roads of life and the renunciation that is necessary in order to follow the path to heaven. Two longer poems also portray both worlds while presenting the persona's attempt to renounce her sinful life. In her discussion of one of these poems ("From House to Home"), Eleanor Thomas comments:

The vein of renouncement of human love and pleasure sometimes deepened until it became the discipline and denial of the ascetic... at times...she seems to feel that in order to exercise ourselves unto godliness, we must see the world as evil and so regard the enjoyment of earthly gifts as incompatible with the contemplation of the divine and the attainment of union with God.<sup>27</sup>

In "Convent Threshold," as in several other poems, the persona turns her back on earthly love in favor of eternal happiness; but ultimately she plans to enjoy the best of both worlds: the speaker's final vision shows her and her lover in heaven where they meet "and love with old familiar love." (p.342).

But in spite of this vision, renunciation is not easy; de-



cisions are complicated by guilt and temptation. The speaker of "The Convent Threshold" is burdened by feelings of guilt:

My lily feet are soiled with mud,  
 With scarlet mud which tells a tale  
 Of hope that was, of guilt that was,  
 Of love that shall not yet avail;  
 Alas, my heart, if I could bare  
 My heart, this selfsame stain is there:  
 I seek the sea of glass and fire  
 To wash the spot, to burn the snare...(p.340).

"Amor Mundi" is one of many poems showing the ever-present temptations in this life, and two short stories ("Hero" and "Nick") present characters who wrestle with temptation and guilt.

Temptations are not always allurements to sensual pleasure and carnal sin; there are also the snares of vanity and pride. The hero of "Nick" is tempted by vanity and jealousy to destroy the prosperity of others, but after his spiritual awakening he repents his error and pays for the damage he has caused. The central figure of "Hero" is also tempted by vanity, but her spiritual experience leads her to the knowledge that love is supreme. Vanity is one of the most serious sins in Christina's opinion, and she admitted that "Vanity of vanities" had an almost hypnotic effect on her.<sup>28</sup> The concept is the basic theme of many of her religious works.

But these themes are not always limited to her religious works. The themes of love and death pervade her secular verse. As was mentioned earlier, earthly love is often unsatisfactory: it may be unrequited as it is in "Cannot Sweeten" and "After Death"; it may be unfulfilled as in "The Prince's Progress" and in a number of ghost poems; and it may be improper as in "Under the Rose," "A Nightmare" and the first part of "Goblin Market." Love is impor-



tant in many of the sister poems mentioned earlier as well as in the verse which deals with romantic love. Death is not always seen as a means to heaven; in some of her secular works Christina sees death as an end in itself. Many poems show a yearning for death, for a rest from the weariness of life, and for an end of pain:

A sigh because the days are long!  
 Long long these days that pass in sighing,  
 A burden saddens every song.  
 While time lags which should be flying,  
 We live who would be dying ("A Smile and a Sigh," p.381).

These two themes, love and death, are the ones which dominate the secular works, but the other themes are also present. The theme of temptation is never more vividly expressed than in "Goblin Market," but Christina devotes another lengthy poem to the exploration of this theme: the misguided hero of "The Prince's Progress" succumbs to many temptations on the way to his wedding. Guilt is important in several of the ghost poems, and the speaker of "Cannot Sweeten" (with her black hands and bloody feet) feels extreme guilt about her treatment of her lover. Although Hero and Nick experience spiritual renewal, their vanity has its roots in non-spiritual matters. And in Maude, the young writer is guilty of being vain about her poetry. These themes, then, appear throughout Christina's works.

In developing these themes Christina works with imagery which is surprisingly sexual. One such image equates feasting with fulfillment--a fulfillment which often has passionate and sexual overtones. This is seen in many poems. In one of her earliest works, "The Dead City" (written when she was only seventeen), Christina

shows her fascination with feast imagery. A large part of this "strange dream of hope and fear" is devoted to describing the "splendid banquet":

Grapes were hanging overhead,  
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;  
And in panniers all around  
Yellow melons shone, fresh found,  
With the dew upon them spread.

And the apricot and pear  
And the pulpy fig were there,  
Cherries and dark mulberries,  
Bunchy currants, strawberries,  
And the lemon wan and fair:

And unnumbered others too,  
Fruits of every size and hue,  
Juicy in their ripe perfection,  
Cool beneath the cool reflection  
Of the curtains' skyey blue (p.101).

The feast is well attended, but the "splendid revelry" has become a gathering of feasters "turned to stone." These "statue-cold" figures frighten the speaker into prayer; the banqueters have obviously been punished for their overindulgence and the speaker fears the same. In a later poem, "From House to Home," the speaker enjoys an earthly paradise with "one like an angel" who fulfills her desire: "This only can I tell: that hour by hour/ I waxed more feastful, lifted up and glad" (p.22). When the lover deserts her, she shows her loss "with a cry like famine." The speaker of "Cannot Sweeten" has experienced the same type of feast and it has been misguided and destructive:

Yet I loved him not for his loving,

While I played with his love and truth,  
Not loving him for his loving,  
Wasting his joy, wasting his youth.

I ate his life as a banquet,  
I drank his life as new wine,  
I fattened upon his leanness,  
Mine to flourish and his to pine (p.382).

Feasting is seen throughout Christina's work as a sign of life, of vitality, of fulfilled existence. People who are not feasting are probably dead as in "At Home":

When I was dead, my spirit turned  
To seek the much-frequented house.  
I passed the door, and saw my friends  
Feasting beneath green orange-boughs;  
From hand to hand they pushed the wine,  
They sucked the pulp of plum and peach;  
They sang, they jested, and they laughed,  
For each was loved of each (p.339).

Or the non-feasters may be dying as the woman in "Wife to Husband" who contrasts her situation to her husband's: "You can drink wine, and eat" (p.351), or they may be "blue with famine after love" (p.329). Even those who intentionally deprive themselves of earthly feasts, as do the speakers of "The Convent Threshold" and "They Desire a Better Country," see heaven as the breaking of a long fast--a beginning to a new life.

Feasting is one of the temptations the dallying prince succumbs to in "The Prince's Progress":

So light his step, so merry his smile,  
A milkmaid loitered beside a stile,  
Set down her pail and rested awhile,  
A wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white;

The Prince, who had journeyed at least a mile,  
Grew athirst at the sight.

'Will you give me a morning draught?'--  
'You're kindly welcome,' she said, and laughed.  
He lifted the pail, new milk he quaffed;  
Then wiping his curly black beard like silk:  
'Whitest cow that ever was calved  
Surely gave you this milk.'

Was it milk now, or was it cream?  
Was she a maid, or an evil dream?  
Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;  
He would have gone, but he stayed instead...(p.27).

In this poem as well as in "Cannot Sweeten" the feasting is enjoyed at the expense of another; while the Prince indulges his appetites, the Princess is alone, "her heart...starving all this while." On this poem Packer comments:

Just as Laura in Goblin Market was tempted by fruit, so in this poem the prince is tempted by milk, of which the symbolic significance is at once apparent. In both poems evil is disguised as life-giving nourishment. Love is still the poison-cup.<sup>29</sup>

Another poem which contains feasting imagery is the intriguing "My Dream." Here Christina portrays a group of crocodiles dominated by one with a "kingly crown." With his "execrable appetite"

He batted on them, crunched, and sucked them in.  
He knew no law, he feared no binding law,  
But ground them with inexorable jaw.  
The luscious fat distilled upon his chin,  
Exuded from his nostrils and his eyes,  
While still like hungry death he fed his maw;  
Till, every minor crocodile being dead

And buried too, himself gorged to the full,  
He slept with breath oppressed and unstrung claw (p.315).

This is one of the most vivid feasting passages in Christina's work, and on it Packer comments:

Read symbolically, the lines reveal their sexual significance, for what Christina is doing here is substituting one sort of appetite for another, a common form of displacement in dreams. In a later ballad ["Cannot Sweeten"] she boldly uses gastro-metabolic imagery of this sort to describe a love relationship.<sup>30</sup>

The best example of feasting as a symbol of illicit passions is in the famous poem, "Goblin Market." Here Laura falls victim to a sinful passion: lust for the "forbidden fruit," fruit remarkably like the fatal feast of "The Dead City":

She never tasted such before,  
How should it cloy with length of use?  
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more  
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;  
She sucked until her lips were sore...  
"...I ate and ate my fill,  
Yet my mouth waters still...  
You cannot think what figs  
My teeth have met in,  
What melons icy-cold..." (pp.2-3).

Unlike the revelers in "The Dead City" she does not immediately die, but she constantly craves more. When she cannot satisfy this lust, she slowly begins dying. One girl, Jeanie, is already dead as the result of a similar sin:

She [Lizzie] thought of Jeanie in her grave,  
Who should have been a bride;

But who for joys brides hope to have  
Fell sick and died... (p.5).

Daisies, the symbol of innocence, will not grow on Jeanie's grave. There is, however, a feast to counteract the effects of the poison fruit, and Lizzie is able to save her sister from a similar fate by providing her with this antidote: "Eat me, drink me, love me" (p.7).

Another frequent image with sexual overtones is the sterility/fertility contrast. Sterility is often used to describe the unfulfilled life, and Christina's favorite symbol for this sterility is the barren tree or vine which is incapable of producing the fruit for passionate life-giving feasts. The speaker of "Introspective" sees her life as one of pain and emptiness: "On my boughs neither leaf nor fruit,/ No sap in my uttermost root" (p.331). And the melancholy speaker of "L.E.L.," whose "heart is breaking for a little love," cries: "I feel no spring" (p.344).

On the other hand, the fulfilled women feel spring and its effect on their lives. In the second sonnet of the Monna Innominata series, the speaker refers to her first encounter with her lover as "the budding of my tree" (p.59), and the successful sister in "The Lowest Room" "thrives like a vine full of fruit" (p.20). If, therefore, a barren tree symbolizes sterility, a fruit-laden tree (particularly an apple or a fig tree) symbolizes fertility. The girls who have the fruit in "An Apple Gathering" are the ones who have the men, and in one of Christina's happiest poems she sings: "My heart is like an apple-tree/ Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit" (p.335). In "The Prince's Progress" the milkmaid, whose associations with feasting imagery make her tempting enough, asks

for payment for the milk--a payment which involves the symbolic apple tree:

She laughed, 'You may give the full moon to me,  
Or else sit under this apple-tree  
Here for one idle day by my side;  
After that I'll let you go free,  
And the world is wide.'

Loth to stay, yet to leave her slack,  
He half turned away, then he quite turned back...

So he stretched his length in the apple-tree shade,  
Lay and laughed and talked to the maid,  
Who twisted her hair in a cunning braid  
And writhed it in shining serpent-coils,  
And held him a day and a night fast laid  
In her subtle toils (p.27).

Each of these women, then, is as fruitful as the tree she is associated with as long as the love relationship lasts.

But more common in Christina's poetry are the sterile women like L.E.L. and the speaker of "Introspective." These unfulfilled women often desire to serve a non-romantic function--to bring forth fruit in this life, in death, or in the afterlife. Most of the women are able to overcome the terrible pessimism of the persona in "To-day and To-morrow," who complains:

I wish I were dead, my foe,  
My friend, I wish I were dead,  
With a stone at my tired feet  
And a stone at my tired head.

In the pleasant April days  
Half the world will stir and sing,  
But half the world will slug and rot  
For all the sap of Spring (p.340).

In "Looking Forward," the speaker sees her present life as fruitless, but sees hope for fulfilling some function in death:

Have patience with me, friends, a little while:  
For soon, where you shall dance and sing and smile,  
My quickened dust may blossom at your feet.

Sweet thought that I may yet live and grow green,  
That leaves may yet spring from the withered root,  
And buds and flowers and berries half unseen.  
Then, if you haply muse upon the past,  
Say this: Poor child, she has her wish at last;  
Barren through life, but in death bearing fruit (p.294).

Often the fertility desired is for the speaker's spiritual benefit rather than for others' physical benefit. The poem "Long Barren" concerns itself with this matter and ends with this appeal:

Thou Rose of Sharon, Cedar of broad roots,  
Vine of sweet fruits,  
Thou Lily of the vale with fadeless leaf,  
Of thousands Chief,  
Feed Thou my feeble shoots (p.244).

The despair of sterility and the desire for fertility are also shown in "A Better Resurrection":

My life is like a faded leaf,  
My harvest dwindled to a husk:  
Truly my life is void and brief  
And tedious in the barren dusk;  
My life is like a frozen thing  
No bud nor greenness can I see... (p.191).

In addition to (and often in conjunction with) these images of feasting and fertility, Christina uses language which is sexually suggestive. In "Goblin Market," when Lizzie refuses to participate in the illicit, passionate feast, the vengeful goblins



...cuffed and caught her,  
 Coaxed and fought her,  
 Bullied and besought her,  
 Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,  
 Kicked and knocked her,  
 Mauled and mocked her... (p.7).

The goblins' cruelty, with its sexual implications, is paralleled by the actions and the description of the kingly crocodile from "My Dream":

But special burnishment adorned his mail  
 And special terror weighed upon his frown;  
 His punier brethren quaked before his tail,  
 Broad as a rafter, potent as a flail (p.315).

Christina often invests her dream poems with this erotic language. A better example is the fragment "A Nightmare" as it appears in Christina's manuscript:<sup>31</sup>

I have a love in ghostland--  
 Early found, ah me how early lost!--  
 Blood-red seaweeds drip along that coastland  
 By the strong sea wrenched and tost.

If I wake he rides me like a nightmare:  
 I feel my hair stand up, my body creep:  
 Without light I see a blasted sight there,  
 See a secret I must keep (p.333).

Again, in another dream sequence, Christina uses suggestive wording; here the speaker is relating a dream she had while struggling with the decision to enter a convent:

I tell you what I dreamed last night.  
 It was not dark, it was not light,  
 Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair  
 Through clay; you came to seek me there,  
 And 'Do you dream of me?' you said.

My heart was dust that used to leap  
 To you; I answered half asleep:  
 'My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,  
 There's a leaden tester to my bed:  
 Find you a warmer playfellow,  
 A warmer pillow for your head,  
 A kinder love to love than mine.'  
 You wrung your hands: while I, like lead,  
 Crushed downwards through the sodden earth... (p.342).

The life this speaker leaves is "loathsome and foul" although it  
 "woos me, soft, exceeding fair" (p.182). "The World" personifies  
 this "monster void of love and prayer" as a being much like the  
 goblins and the crocodile:

By day she stands a lie: by night she stands  
 In all the naked horror of the truth  
 With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands (p.182).

Two additional poems ("Introspective" and "The Heart Knoweth its  
 Own Bitterness") provide good examples of this suggestive language.  
 It is significant that they were not published in their original  
 form until after Christina's death. This caution in publication  
 along with the editing of "A Nightmare" suggests that perhaps  
 Christina employed more of this erotic language in other poems  
 which we will never see. Maude also contributes to this idea;  
 this thinly veiled autobiography portrays a friend reading through  
 Maude's (Christina's) poems after her death: "Piece after piece  
 she committed to the flames, fearful lest any should be preserved  
 not intended for general perusal."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps if Agnes had gone  
 through Christina's poems (instead of William) these too would  
 have been destroyed:

I wish it were over the terrible pain,  
 Pang after pang again and again:

First the shattering ruining blow,  
Then the probing steady and slow...

I did not start when the torture stung,  
I did not faint when the torture wrung...

("Introspective," p.331).

I long for one to stir my deep--  
I have had enough of help and gift--  
I long for one to search and sift  
Myself, to take myself and keep.

You scratch my surface with your pin,  
You stroke me smooth with hushing breath:--  
Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,  
Probe my quick core and sound my depth

("The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness," p.192).

The most interesting development in Christina Rossetti's poetry is her fusion of this sexual language and imagery with her religion. "If she could not give herself to a man, she must give herself to God,"<sup>33</sup> and Christina gives herself and her poetry to her God. Her love for God is obvious from the content and quantity of her religious poetry and prose:

Lord, Thou Thyself art Love and only Thou;  
Yet I who am not love would fain love Thee;  
But Thou alone being Love canst furnish me  
With that same love my heart is craving now.  
Allow my plea! for if Thou disallow,  
No second fountain can I find but Thee;  
No second hope or help is left to me,  
No second anything, but only Thou.  
O Love, accept, according to my request;  
O Love, exhaust, fulfilling my desire:  
Uphold me with the strength that cannot tire,  
Nerve me to labour till Thou bid me rest,  
Kindle my fire from Thine unkindled fire,

And charm the willing heart from out my breast

(Later Life, 5, p.74).

Her soul yearns for a heavenly reunion with Jesus: "When will it be/ That I may let alone my toil/ And rest with Thee?" (p.242), and she envisions herself "mounting to Him in love's perpetual fire." But Christina's religious fervor takes on an interesting meaning when it becomes apparent that she takes some of the Bible's figurative language literally. In a poem cited earlier, "A Portrait," Christina shows us a girl who forsakes all for Christ. In the second half of the poem, the girl lies dying: "'Heaven opens; I leave these and go away;/ The Bridegroom calls,--shall the Bride seek to stay?'" (pp.286-87); and this is only one of many references to a literal Bride. The persona of Christina's poems often sees death as a gateway to love. The speaker in "Till To-morrow" shares the anticipation of the persona in the previous poem:

Farewell all shows that fade in showing:

My wish and joy stand over

Until to-morrow; Heaven is glowing

Through cloudy cover;

Beyond all clouds loves me my Heavenly Lover (p.402).

And a similar hope is expressed in "After This the Judgment":

"Brood over me with yearnings of a dove;/ Be Husband, Brother, closest Friend to me" (p.189).

But the idea of Christ as a husband or lover is made much more explicit with the use of imagery. In "From House to Home," Christina puts the fulfillment of feasting in this new context. It still carries sexual connotations, but these are coupled with spiritual connotations:

Her lips and cheeks waxed rosy-fresh and young;  
 Drinking she sang 'My soul shall nothing want';  
 And drank anew...

Each face looked one way like a moon new-lit,  
 Each face looked one way towards its Sun of Love;  
 Drank love and bathed in love and mirrored it  
 And knew no end thereof (pp.24-25).

L.E.L. must have a similar vision because she is told that in heaven "love shall fill thy girth,/ And love make fat thy dearth" (p.345). Those who yearn for Christ "thirst for Thee, full fount and flood" and exclaim "lo Thy love is better than new wine."

One speaker when facing her lord says:

Broken Body, Blood outpoured,  
 These I bring, my God, my Lord;  
 Wine of Life and Living Bread,  
 With these for me Thy board is spread (p.233).

Obviously this stanza brings to mind the eucharist, the Christian sacrament, which gives additional significance to the feasting image. Christina's "After Communion" previews the ultimate feast with Christ:

Why should I call Thee Lord, Who art my God?  
 Why should I call Thee Friend, Who art my Love?  
 Or King, Who art my very Spouse above?  
 Or call Thy Scepter on my heart Thy rod?  
 Lo now Thy banner over me is love,  
 All heaven flies open to me at Thy nod:  
 For Thou hast lit Thy flame in me a clod,  
 Made me a nest for dwelling of Thy Dove.  
 What wilt Thou call me in our home above,  
 Who now hast called me friend? how will it be  
 When Thou for good wine settest forth the best?  
 Now Thou dost bid me come and sup with Thee,  
 Now Thou dost make me lean upon Thy breast:

How will it be with me in time of love? (p.246).

Eleanor Thomas says that this poem

...expresses with more assurance than any other of her poems the mystic's belief in God as friend, love, spouse: all heaven is open to her whom Christ has called His friend...human love so far as she was concerned had been transmuted into love for God, and she must give her heart wholly to Christ.<sup>34</sup>

But if she gives herself to Christ, He certainly gives something in return; Christ is an active participant in the fulfilling feast:

My life is like a broken bowl,  
A broken bowl that cannot hold  
One drop of water for my soul  
Or cordial in the searching cold;  
Cast in the fire the perished thing;  
Melt and remold it, till it be  
A royal cup for Him, my King:  
O Jesus, drink of me

("A Better Resurrection," pp.191-92).

The fertility/sterility imagery is also extensively used to show the love relationship between woman and Christ. The female speaker may see herself set "in a barren land" where there are no "shadows of date-bearing tree," and she frequently recognizes that she is just one more "frozen thing" in the wasteland. But she always has faith in Christ's rejuvenating powers: "Yet rise it shall --the sap of Spring;/ O Jesus, rise in me" (p.191). The speaker most often sees herself as Christ's tree, a tree which must have nourishment to bring forth fruit: "Yet, His tree, He feeds my root:/ Yet, His branch, He prunes for fruit" (p.233). In "From

House to Home" the speaker sees her life's purpose in much the same way:

Although to-day He prunes my twigs with pain,  
Yet doth His blood nourish and warm my root:  
To-morrow I shall put forth buds again  
And clothe myself with fruit (p.25).

This idea is, of course, more fully developed in the poem "Long Barren." Here the speaker pleads almost desperately for fertility and fulfillment:

Thou who didst hang upon a barren tree,  
My God, for me;  
Though I till now be barren, now at length,  
Lord, give me strength  
To bring forth fruit to Thee.

Thou who didst bear for me the crown of thorn,  
Spitting and scorn;  
Though I till now have put forth thorns, yet now  
Strengthen me Thou  
That better fruit be borne (p.244).

The poem ends with the appeal quoted earlier (see p.19). But "Ash Wednesday" best demonstrates the use of the fertility/sterility motif in this love relationship. In comparison with those who surround Christ daily, the speaker feels she has nothing to offer. Her lament reveals her humility, but also a hint of jealousy:

I show as a blot  
Blood hath cleansèd not,  
As a barren spot  
In thy fruitful lot;  
I, fig-tree fruit-unbearing,  
Thou, righteous Judge unsparing:  
What canst Thou do more to me  
That shall not more undo me?

Thy Justice hath a sound,  
 'Why cumbereth it the ground?'  
 Thy love with stirrings stronger  
 Pleads, 'Give it one year longer.'  
 Thou giv'st me time: but who  
 Save Thou shall give me dew,  
 Shall feed my root with blood  
 And stir my sap for good?--  
 Oh by Thy gifts that shame me  
 Give more lest they condemn me.  
 Good Lord, I ask much of Thee,  
 But most I ask to love Thee:  
 Kind Lord, be mindful of me,  
 Love me and make me love Thee (p.217).

According to Hoxie Fairchild, Christina in this poem "is asking Jesus to woo her into mystical love of Him not as the final reward of the struggle against the flesh but as a substitute for that struggle."<sup>35</sup>

There is one poem which reveals better than all others Christina's conception of Jesus as a lover: "The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness." The speaker is concerned with satisfaction for suffering on earth--can she get enough satisfaction here or must she look elsewhere? The poem is built around a comparison, and the earthly lover certainly does not give her the fulfillment she craves:

I long to pour myself, my soul,  
 Not to keep back or count or leave,  
 But king with king to give the whole (p.192).

And she tells her earthly lover: "Your vessels are by much too strait:/ Were I to pour, you could not hold." The speaker does not want to be a fountain "sealed through heat and cold"; she scorns the inactivity of her lover:



You call me with a puny call,  
 You talk, you smile, you nothing do:  
 How should I spend my heart on you,  
 My heart that so outweighs you all?

He is ineffectual and unworthy: he only scratches her surface and strokes her. Satisfaction cannot exist without the piercing, digging, and probing (in the passage quoted earlier on page 22). The speaker finally realizes:

Not in this world of hope deferred,  
 This world of perishable stuff:--  
 Eye hath not seen nor ear hath heard  
 Nor heart conceived that full 'enough':  
 Here moans the separating sea,  
 Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart:  
 There God shall join and no man part,  
 I full of Christ and Christ of me (pp.192-93).

In heaven the fountain will again flow freely and the speaker will find a suitable vessel in Christ. No wonder this poem was not published until after Christina's death--it does not share any qualities with the innocent, devout religious verse for which she was admired.

The phrase "hope deferred" is helpful in understanding Christina Rossetti. She saw this world as a temporary, painful existence which could only be set right in heaven. It is probably natural that she would include in her vision of heaven a compensation for her own frustrating love affairs. Marya Zaturenska comments:

She had flung herself on God and received  
 his many rebuffs and silences with patient  
 hope. She waited for that rare moment of  
 rapture when God would speak, would relent

for a silent small moment and approve,  
 when he would forgive all and offer  
 more than she had asked.<sup>36</sup>

Christina is at best a minor poet. Only a few of her lyrics are widely anthologized, and these are often not her best works. Even "The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness," which has moments of intensity and power, ultimately falls short of being a good poem, and its weaknesses are shared by far too many of Christina's works. Because she often uses an easy conversational language, she must incorporate striking imagery to make her lyrics memorable. And this is where she fails. In "The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness" she weakens the forceful feasting and sexual-contact imagery by incorporating a number of diverse images many of which are stale (a moaning sea, a breaking heart, a rough highway).

What is finally interesting about Christina Rossetti is Christina herself. What kind of woman can write an innocent (if dull) religious poem one hour and a passionate appeal to a spiritual lover the next? It soon becomes apparent why so many biographies have been written: although her limited social and intellectual activity restrict her themes, her personal frustrations give an interesting twist to her imagery and language. Her work seems primarily to reflect her need for self-expression and emotional release. This is what has intrigued biographers and critics alike. The mind that could produce "Goblin Market" and could rely so heavily on erotic imagery and language (consciously or not) is worthy of study.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christina Rossetti, Maude: A Story for Girls (London: James Bowden, 1897), pp.7-8.

<sup>2</sup>Lionel Stevenson, The Pre-Raphaelite Poets (Chapel Hill: Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1972), p.81.

<sup>3</sup>Stevenson, p.88.

<sup>4</sup>C.M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1949), p.256.

<sup>5</sup>Bowra, p.247.

<sup>6</sup>Bowra, p.269.

<sup>7</sup>Hoxie N. Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, Vol. IV: 1830-1880 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), p.302.

<sup>8</sup>Molly Mahood, Poetry and Humanism (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), p.49.

<sup>9</sup>Lona Mosk Packer, "The Protestant Existentialism of Christina Rossetti," Notes and Queries, 204 (1959), p.215.

<sup>10</sup>Nesca Robb, Four in Exile (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1948), p.96.

<sup>11</sup>Stuart Curran, "The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti," Victorian Poetry, 9 (1971), p.288.

<sup>12</sup>Gisela Hönnighausen, "Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti," Victorian Poetry, 10 (1972), p.1.

<sup>13</sup>Winston Weathers, "Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of

Self," Victorian Poetry, 3 (1965), p.81.

<sup>14</sup>Marya Zaturenska, Christina Rossetti: A Portrait with Background (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), p.77.

<sup>15</sup>B. Ifor Evans, "The Sources of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" Modern Language Review, 28 (1933), p.156. Evans covers a number of possible influences here, but in spite of the numerous sources for fairies, goblins, and pedlar cries he is unable to offer a source for Christina's sensual, erotic treatment of the supernatural.

<sup>16</sup>Lona Mosk Packer, "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market," PMLA, 73 (1958), p.375.

<sup>17</sup>Packer, "Symbol....," p.381.

<sup>18</sup>A.A. DeVitis, "Goblin Market: Fairy Tale and Reality," Journal of Popular Culture, 1 (1968), p.420. DeVitis gives a good discussion of the symbolic elements in the poem, but his argument for the allegory of the artistic experience is ultimately unsuccessful. He is unable to completely justify his reading and remains unconvinced himself.

<sup>19</sup>DeVitis, p.425.

<sup>20</sup>Marian Shalkhauser, "The Feminine Christ," Victorian Newsletter, 10 (1957), p.20. Shalkhauser here takes the redemption theme and distorts it so it no longer represents Christina's intention. Christina is ultimately concerned with temptation--not masculine evil--and Shalkhauser's view of Lizzie as a feminine Christ is flawed as well. After all, Lizzie waits until Laura is nearly dead before she works up the courage to buy her sal-

vation. And a third girl has already died--something which should never happen if the female Christ figure loves all women equally. I believe Shalkhauser really stretches some elements of the poem beyond the breaking point.

<sup>21</sup>Warren Herendeen, "The Midsummer Eves of Shakespeare and Christina Rossetti," Victorian Newsletter, 41 (1972), p.24. Herendeen has taken the idea for this article from Evans' source study and has inadvertently shown that there is no real parallel between the two works. He fails to link Laura permanently with either Hermia or Helena but rather fluctuates between the two. And the common elements he points out could be simply, I believe, coincidental.

<sup>22</sup>Bowra, p.247.

<sup>23</sup>Eugene J. Brzenk, "'Up-Hill' and 'Down-' by Christina Rossetti," Victorian Poetry, 10 (1972), p.371.

<sup>24</sup>Christopher Ricks, "'O Where Are You Going?' W.H. Auden and Christina Rossetti," Notes and Queries, 205 (1960), p.472.

<sup>25</sup>Fairchild, p.302.

<sup>26</sup>William M. Rossetti, ed., The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), p.25. All future references to Christina's poetry will be indicated by page number within the text of this paper.

<sup>27</sup>Eleanor Thomas, Christina Georgina Rossetti (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1931), pp.166-67.

<sup>28</sup>Mahood, p.32.

<sup>29</sup>Lona Mosk Packer, Christina Rossetti (Berkeley and Los

Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1963), p.193.

<sup>30</sup>Packer, Christina Rossetti, p.95.

<sup>31</sup>Packer, Christina Rossetti, p.113.

<sup>32</sup>C. Rossetti, p.78.

<sup>33</sup>Bowra, p.263.

<sup>34</sup>Thomas, p.75.

<sup>35</sup>Fairchild, p.311.

<sup>36</sup>Zaturenska, p.222.

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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: HER THEMES, IMAGES, AND LANGUAGE

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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MASTER OF ARTS

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## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: HER THEMES, IMAGES, AND LANGUAGE

This study attempts to show that some aspects of Christina Rossetti's work have not been fully analyzed; scholars have focused on her life to the exclusion of some of the fascinating trends in her verse. Working within the limitations of the primary themes of love, death, renunciation, guilt and temptation, and vanity, Christina relies on a restricted set of images. Although this study does not attempt to exhaust the images in this group, it does focus on two which are very important in Christina's symbolic view of the world: feasting and fertility. Christina uses eating and drinking imagery as an equivalent of sexual fulfillment, and she uses the fertility/sterility motif--with its corresponding symbols of the apple (or fig) tree and the barren tree--as the reflection of a woman's spiritual and physical fertility or sterility. Accompanying these images is language which often suggests further sexual interpretations. The use of sexual images and erotic language enhances the meaning of Christina's religious poetry. In her religious verse, Christina frequently presents a female speaker in a one-to-one relationship with Jesus--a Jesus who has all the qualities of an earthly lover. This exploration of Christina's religious vision in terms of sexual imagery should show this Victorian woman poet to be more complex and interesting than was formerly believed.