



Women in the Liberal Arts Tradition

with Dr. Fred Putnam

Lecture 11: Christina Rossetti

Outline:

Christina Georgina Rossetti

- Christina Rossetti's family is crucial to understanding the nature of her work, her poetry, and devotional writing.
 - She was born, the youngest of four, on December 5, 1830 (5 days before Emily Dickinson).
 - Christina and her siblings were educated at home, reading Dante and Petrarch.
 - She and her siblings grew up fluent in both English and Italian.
 - Christina and her siblings were encouraged to join the adult conversations about poetry, art, music, literature, and politics.
 - She was a lively, vivacious child with a fierce temper.
 - When she was 10 or 12 she began writing down and dating her poems.
 - When her father fell ill, their family became impoverished.
 - In her early teens, she suffered a nervous breakdown in depression in response to a trauma that remains unknown.
 - At some point in her late teens, she and her mother moved from her evangelical low church to the high church Anglo-Catholic Oxford movement. From that point her Christian faith would lead her to stop writing secular poetry in order to publish works of Christian devotion.
- Rossetti's early poems (1848 through 1861) revealed an understanding of human mortality shaped by the classics and by the Bible.
 - She was a 19th century poet.
 - Death and the threat of death from illness or accident were omnipresent.
- She continued to compose poems, and when she was 16 years old her grandfather published poems on his press.
- Writing under the pseudonym, Ellen Alleyne, she published two poems in the *Athenaeum*, a prestigious literary periodical. She continued to struggle with depression.
- Christina was 23 years old when her father died.
- Rossetti volunteered at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary working with prostitutes alongside her mother for 10 years.
 - A number of her poems were likely inspired by her years at St. Mary Magdalene.
 - *Cousin Kate*



- *The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children*
- *From Sunset to Star Rise*
- *Goblin Market* (possibly)
- Rossetti was outspoken against slavery, especially that in the United States.
- In 1862, when Christina was 32, *Goblin Market* brought her instant critical fame. It immediately established her as the foremost female poet of the day.
- In 1866, she published *The Prince's Progress*, which again brought her accolades and praise.
- Christina almost died from Grave's disease. It took her nearly two years to recover and four years to publish her next work, *Annus Domini* (a book of daily readings for Christians) and *Speaking Likenesses* (a book of children's stories).
- In 1879, she published *Sing-Song*, for children.
- Two years later she published her last secular book.
- Then she went on to publish exclusively works of Christian devotion.
 - *Called to be Saints*
 - *Letter in Spirit*
 - *Time Flies*
- She worked on a 500 page commentary of Revelation, *The Face of the Deep*, 1892.
- In 1893 she reissued *Sing-Song*.
- She died on December 29, 1894.

A few nursery rhymes, two brief lyrics, and an explicitly Christian work:

- *A Toadstool*
 - She had a deep respect for and careful attention to the created order.
 - She was an ardent environmentalist.
 - This poem encourages us pay attention to the things around us.
- *A Diamond or a Coal*
 - Christina Rossetti overturns our view of things.
- *A Birthday*
 - Her vocabulary is overall simple and easy to grasp.
 - Is falling in love like being born again?
- *Monna Innominata*
 - This is written in order to hear the female voice in the room as loudly and clearly as we do the male.
- Twenty eight meditations – the opening poem of the series
 - This sonnet summarizes Rossetti's faith and belief that God always has been and always will be God, and that we are His.

Classical poetic pedagogy

- Three simple steps and a few basic rules:
 - Read the poem aloud, or ask a student to read it.
 - Ask, "What do you observe?"



- Ask, if necessary, “What is this poem about?”
- Rules:
 - Shut up and listen to the students.
 - Ask genuine non-leading questions only.
 - Answer a question as briefly as possible.
 - Do not ask, “What does the poem mean?”
- Waiting in silence tells students that we (teachers) are genuinely interested in what the students notice. If it is in the text, then they cannot be wrong.
- The class is about students learning to read poems.
- “What does this poem mean?” rises naturally out of observing the text.
- When we read poems with students out to be the enjoyment of the poem. They need to learn to relax and enjoy the text.

What makes this poetry classical?

- It is an effective way to realize one of the mottos of classical education, which is, *ad fontes*, or back to the sources.
- We ought to foster in our students a desire to understand the text first, before turning to reference works.

How might Rossetti’s poem become part of the classical curriculum?

- The poetry of Rossetti is ideal for a classical curriculum because she wrote for all ages.
- Her poetry would be a good handmaiden to the study of pre-Raphaelite art.
- A course in rhetoric could study her changes (in poetry written in more than one form), in order to ask how small changes enhance its effect.
- Much of her poetry is explicitly Christian for a classical Christian school.
- Rossetti also wrote many poems that did not reflect any particular faith.
- A caveat about critical studies of Rossetti’s work: her faith in Jesus Christ permeated her life and work.
 - Rossetti was famous as a vibrant, creative, intellectual, theologically aware Christian committed to helping others, speaking up justice in many areas of life.
 - She was also a single woman in Victorian London living for more than two decades in constant pain.
 - If she thought and wrote about death a lot, so did every 19th century poet. Death was a normal part of her life.