'Remember' - Language, tone and structure

The term ‘remember' runs, like a refrain, throughout the sonnet. However, its power seems to decrease through the poem, rather as if the voice and memory of the speaker is fading from life:

•The first two imperative verbs are placed at the start rather than the end of the first and fifth lines

•In the middle of the seventh, the strength of the request is modified by the word ‘Only' on its third appearance

•It is further qualified in adverbial sub-clauses by ‘And afterwards' and ‘Better .. you / Than .. you' in the sestet, losing its association with ‘me'.

Further repetition with variation is seen in:

•‘gone away / Gone far away', which reinforces the distance that is growing between the speaker and her lover and emphasises the boundary that exists between life and death

•‘if you should forget / Better … you should forget', which turns the possibility of forgetfulness into an imperative.

Tone

The voice of the speaker is controlled but increasingly tentative, revealing as well as concealing meaning. The certainties of being able to remain with the beloved (l.4), of audible advice and prayer (l.8) are replaced by vestiges of memory amidst increasing forgetfulness. The speaker even changes the message s/he wants to give to the beloved. The command to remember is replaced by the suggestion s/he is happy for the beloved to forget.

Questions:

•What indications are there that the speaker's statement (that it would be better for the beloved to forget than to remember and be sad l.13-14) is genuine?

•How would you describe the tone of the speaker?

◦Can you identify any places where the tone changes?

•What is the effect of using direct and simple language?

Structure and versification

Turning

The act of turning forms a key structural pattern in Remember. In the first line, the speaker asks the beloved to remember the speaker once s/he has ‘gone away'. It is not until the mention of the ‘silent land' in the second line that it appears this is a euphemism for death. S/he recalls how, in previous meetings, there was reluctance to turn away from the beloved, yet this is now a necessity that they both must deal with. Alternatively, the idea of ‘staying' can be seen as a reference to remaining in the memory of the beloved.

The volta

In line 9, the volta (or turning point of the Petrarchan sonnet), the speaker's tone changes. Turning from the instruction to remember, s/he suddenly chooses to accept that s/he may be forgotten and declares that it would be far better that the beloved forgot and was happy than remembered and was sad. At the same time, the assumed happy past of the lovers is perhaps shaken by the idea that the thoughts the speaker ‘once ... had' should be forgotten because they were not entirely positive.

More on the volta: A volta is a term that is used to describe the shift in ideas as a sonnet moves from the octave to the sestet. Often, the six line sestet presents an answer or a solution to the problem outlined in the eight line octave.

Metre

The traditional metre of a sonnet is iambic pentameter. Used here, the regularity of the iambic beat reinforces the sense of control the speaker attempts to establish over the matter of death and the beloved's reaction to this, something s/he suggests s/he has little control over. The inversion of the first foot in l. 2, 7 and 13 hints at the passion which is fighting for expression. However, the strict pentameter lines convey the enclosure and restraint of the speaker as s/he suggests that s/he has more to express but cannot find the appropriate words in which to do so.

The iamb is a rising foot and its consistent use emphasises the progressive movement of the speaker's thoughts as s/he comes to a realisation that s/he may be forgotten. Throughout Remember, Rossetti combines the repetition of words with the effect of the metre to highlight several important movements. For instance, whereas the pronoun ‘I' is stressed twice in the octave (lines 1, 3), it remains unstressed in the sestet and the word ‘had' is stressed in its place, highlighting the passing of a particular identity (line 12).

Rhyme

The rhyme scheme of the octave consists of two enclosed quatrains: abba, abba. The enclosure of the rhyme scheme reflects the retention of a person's ‘thoughts' that the speaker describes as existing in the memory of the beloved.

The rhyme scheme of the sestet runs cddece. By beginning with a cdd rhyme and then breaking into a different pattern, it emphases the shift of the speaker's thoughts. The disruption of the expected pattern may also hint at the intrusion of uncomfortable ‘thoughts' of the speaker (proceeding from a ‘dark' place), the memory of which would sadden the beloved.

By joining ‘had' and ‘sad' (lines 12, 14), Rossetti structurally highlights the disjunction between remembering and forgetting.

Questions:

•Note that the word ‘if' is stressed twice in the sestet. What is the effect of this?

•Consider the words that are rhymed. How can they be linked to create another level of meaning?

'Remember' - Imagery, symbolism and themes

Imagery and symbolism

Themes

The role of women

Grief

Prayer

The hand - The speaker anticipates a time when her lover will no longer be able to ‘hold' her ‘by the hand' (line 3). The image of holding hands is one which is employed throughout the poetry of Rossetti's brother, Dante Gabriel, and is often used to indicate the first manifestations of love between a man and woman. By using the image of hand-holding in Remember, Rossetti suggests a kind of possession. By indicating that her lover will no longer be able to hold her by the hand the speaker suggests that he will no longer have any part in her or be able to possess her in the same way as he was perhaps used to.

Darkness and corruption - The speaker foresees a time when, once the ‘darkness and corruption' that are associated with grief and death leave the beloved, only a ‘vestige' or trace of the speaker's presence will remain. S/he does not specify what constitutes this ‘darkness and corruption' but it may refer to the speaker's physical state after death – ‘corruption' was a term often used in the Bible to refer to the physical decay of death as well as moral decline (see Acts 13:36-37, Isaiah 38:17), whilst ‘darkness' was associated with hell (Matthew 8:12). In that sense, there is a cloud cast over the ‘vestige of ... thoughts'. See Darkness.

The word ‘vestige' indicates something (often material) which remains after the destruction or disappearance of the main portion of something. By applying the word to the memory of the speaker's thoughts in the mind of the beloved, the word is given a more abstract meaning. Thoughts and feelings will remain even after the speaker's presence is in ‘darkness' or no longer visible.

The ‘silent land' (l. 2) - The speaker anticipates entering the ‘silent land' which s/he perceives to be ‘far away' from life on earth. As well as indicating physical distance, the phrase ‘far away' is also suggestive of quite obvious differences. It is hinted that the land to which the speaker looks forward to going, is very different from the land the beloved is used to inhabiting. This has echoes of the classical concept of Hades.

The idea of silence can suggest both positive and negative associations:

•Rest, sleep and tranquillity. The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, describes heaven as a place of rest for all who enter (Revelation 14:13)

•Absence of life and communication. It is a place where there can be no more intimacy, talking of future dreams or holding hands.

More on Rossetti's attitude to death:

Questions:

•What do you associate with the phase ‘darkness and corruption'?

◦How can you relate these associations to the meaning of the poem?

•What do think that Rossetti means when speaking of ‘the silent land'?

◦What do you imagine this place to consist of?

Themes

The role of women

Remember can be read as highlighting the passive role expected of women in Victorian society. If the speaker is female, we see her as the recipient of the dominant male's actions, who:

•Holds on to / possesses her

•Talks at her (‘You tell me')

•Lays down what the future is to hold for her (‘our future that you plann'd')

•Advises her (‘counsel') and prays for her (assuming spiritual oversight).

In the light of this, perhaps the speaker's inner thoughts come from a ‘dark' place and are rebellious and resentful of this treatment. They may well trouble the beloved, who can only smile if he ignores them.

Grief

Considering the high mortality rate in Victorian Britain, it is fair to suppose that, like Rossetti herself, most of her early readers would have had some experience of death, whether of a parent, sibling, friend or lover. Although her devotional writings express a firm hope in the promises of heaven and eternal life that the Bible offers, many of Rossetti's non-devotional poems attempt to reconcile this hope with the emotion of grief that is natural when a person loses someone close to them through death.

Prayer

The speaker suggests that, when she is dead, it will be too late to pray for her (line 8). Whilst Roman Catholic tradition teaches that prayers should be offered for people that have died, offering prayers for the dead is not encouraged in the Anglican Church.

By claiming that it will be too late to pray for her once she has ‘gone away', the speaker emphasises the urgency of prayers offered in the present day.

Questions:

•Why do you think that the speaker uses the phrase ‘gone away' (line 1) rather than stating explicitly where she has gone?

◦What effect does this create?

•Why do you think that the speaker changes her mind about being remembered in the last part of the poem?

•Why would or wouldn't you recommend the poem to someone who is struggling with grief?

More on Rossetti's attitude to death:

In many of her poems, Rossetti presents heaven as a place where the righteous can rest after the struggles they have endured on earth. In her poem Up-hill, also included in Goblin Market and Other Poems, she imagines beds for all those in the long journey of life (see The poetry of Christina Rossetti > Up-hill). Rossetti offers some implicit suggestions that after death, instead of going straight to heaven, the righteous enter a place of waiting where they can rest before entering heaven on the Day of Judgement.

In 1836, whilst he was still a Tractarian, John Henry Newman (see Religious / philosophical context > Tractarianism > John Henry Newman) gave a sermon entitled The Intermediate State (for more information on accessing Newman's sermons and other Tractarian sermons, see the Resources page). In this, he argues against the popular yet ‘frightful notion' of purgatory where Christians are ‘kept in fire or other torment, till … they are at length fitted for their glorious kingdom'. Instead, he finds evidence in the Bible that Christians rest ‘in a state of rest' in a ‘paradise' which, although ‘pure and peaceful', is not heaven.

Catholics have traditionally believed that there are three realms that souls can go to after death: heaven, hell and purgatory. They taught that purgatory is a place to which souls go to prepare for heaven and to receive cleansing for their sins.