

# Spiritual Conflict in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti

Joy and sorrow, piety and guilt, devotion and doubt – these conflicting feelings are at the heart of Rossetti's work and remain unresolved. So argues A Level student, Aline Downey.

Christina Rossetti's conflicted spiritual journey is strongly apparent throughout her poetry. Her work alternates between a tone of serene piety and religious guilt, at times presenting a figure who is wrestling with her faith and depression. While devotion to God seems to fulfil the narrator of poems such as 'Twice' and 'Up-Hill', her guilty doubt is evident in 'Good Friday' and 'Shut Out'. Many elements of Rossetti's life were complex and at odds with themselves, such as her views on women's political freedoms, and the same is true of her spirituality. It is the root of both her strength and sorrow and this seems to be reflected in the poetry.

## Human or Divine Love in 'Twice'

Rossetti's commitment to her religion in her own life should not be understated; much of her poetry is of a devotional nature, showing a deep affection for God and her Anglican faith. God held the most esteemed position in Rossetti's life, so much so that she rejected the proposals of both the painter James Collinson and the linguist Charles Cayley on religious grounds. For her, the love of God eclipsed any mortal, romantic love. This is made apparent in 'Twice', wherein the speaker finds God after having her heart broken. In this poem, religious language is used for both

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the lover and God, planting the idea that, like a nun, the narrator considers herself wedded to Him; for example, the line '(O my love, O my love)' is used twice in the first stanza in reference to her lover, with repetition employed to create a mantra that is almost prayer-like. This is emphasised by the use of 'O', a word typically used in hymns and prayers. Brackets, however, indicate the sentiment does not hold weight or importance for the speaker any longer – that it is almost an aside, an afterthought. Beginning in the past tense, Rossetti has the narration transition into the present tense as the speaker finds God, no longer thinking about her past love. Here, her feelings of devotion are earnest, evidenced by the repetition of 'O my God, O my God' with no brackets around the phrase; it is a genuine prayer now. God has literally taken the place of her 'love' both in the phrase and in her life, just as Rossetti sought a connection with God over that of a husband. Furthermore, the discovery of God comforts the speaker by instilling in her, or helping her regain, an enjoyment of life, as she states:

*I shall not die, but live.*

## An 'Up-Hill' Struggle

That Rossetti finds a comforting, life-affirming aspect to religion is again apparent in 'Up-Hill'. The poem can be interpreted as an allegory; the mysterious 'journey' that the speaker frets over being life, the inn they seek being the afterlife, particularly as it is referred to as a 'resting place', and the respondent being God. The latter concept is reinforced by the use of end stops at the end of each of 'God's' lines that give an impression of finality and certainty

that Rossetti no doubt perceived God to possess. The metaphor of the journey for life on earth and life after death is a long established religious trope, dating from early religious and literary texts, such as John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress'. Notably, Rossetti chooses to depict the 'journey' of life as bleak and difficult, the fact that it 'wind[s] up-hill all the way' suggesting it is a strenuous task, one that makes the speaker 'travel-sore and weak'. The doubts the speaker voices are characteristic of Rossetti, one line reading 'Will there be beds for me and all who seek?', perhaps an allusion to her concern that there will be no place, or 'bed', for her in heaven. Again, for Rossetti it is God that comforts her and gives her the strength to continue onwards, answering her questions and assuaging her fears.

## Questioning God in 'Good Friday'

Ultimately, 'Twice' and 'Up-Hill' both depict a figure who is comforted and driven by their faith in God. The first-person voice in each of them, and in most of Rossetti's poems concerning religion, suggests that she identifies strongly with this sentiment and that as she wrote these poems, she was at a simpler stage of her spiritual journey, where she '[did] not question much'. However, Rossetti's faith and spirituality were not untested or simple, and she did in fact question God. Indeed, the poet was plagued by doubt and suffered at least one religious crisis around 1857. Several of her poems speak to this, such as 'Good Friday', where the speaker is troubled that she is not sufficiently moved by Christ's sacrifice. 'Am I a stone –', frets the speaker in the opening line; here, the imagery of the stone has the negative connotations of a cold, unfeeling person, something she can't bear to be. There is a semantic field of

pain throughout the poem – ‘blood’, ‘weep’, ‘bitterly’, ‘horror’, ‘grief’ – indicating the speaker’s anguish regarding her religious misgivings. As she laments that everyone is moved by Christ’s crucifixion but her, Rossetti uses repetition to create a cumulative effect: ‘Not so those women loved’, ‘Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly’, ‘Not so the thief was moved’, ‘Not so the Sun and Moon’. As a result, the line ‘I, only I.’ that follows soon after stands out in its brevity and simplicity as the speaker confesses her lack of grief. The contrast makes the speaker’s shame all the more palpable.

## Self-doubt – ‘Shut Out’ of God’s Garden

Rossetti continues to struggle with religious self-condemnation in ‘Shut Out’. In this poem, one could interpret the garden from which the speaker finds themselves barred as heaven. This is evidenced by the idyllic imagery used to describe the garden, her ‘delightful land’, ‘pied with all flowers bedewed and green’ and the otherworldly quality lent to it by a

*shadowless spirit at the gate, blank and  
unchanging like the grave.*

In this sense, the speaker perceives herself as not being good enough, or devout enough, for heaven, forever looking between ‘its iron bars’, an image that evokes a prisoner in a cell. Although Rossetti made a conscious effort to be a good Anglican, such as by volunteering for St. Mary Magdalene’s house for ‘fallen women’, it seems she

could not escape feelings of inadequacy regarding her religious faith. She chooses to express this using time-old representations of the closed garden, with its connotations of the Garden of Eden, so perhaps there is also a sense in which she draws on ideas about Eve, Original Sin and the spiritual weakness of women, to explore female religious guilt and inadequacy.

## In Summary – A Complex Journey

That the spiritual journey in Rossetti's poetry is a complex and difficult one is evident in her poetry. Her faith is powerfully demonstrated in 'Twice' and 'Up-Hill'. Yet in poems such as 'Good Friday' and 'Shut Out', she explores anxieties, inadequacy and suffering, examining existential fear and mistrust of her own moral compass.