

Female voices in Christina Rossetti's narrative poems

Simon Mold argues that despite living the life of a Victorian lady, Christina Rossetti wrote poems that give vibrant voice to the female experience and extend the use of poetic form.

Christina Rossetti (1830-94) was destined to spend her entire adult life in the Victorian era, when women were often idealised as angels of mercy and goddesses of hearth and home whilst simultaneously being denied the economic and social freedoms enjoyed by men. It was therefore perhaps inevitable that her flamboyant brother Dante Gabriel, along with the rest of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood (brotherhood, note), should occupy the public limelight for a while; nonetheless, Christina's talents in the field of poetry - one area where women were permitted to shine - were sufficiently noteworthy to bring her deserved approval in her lifetime. Inevitably influenced by earlier writers (as most mid-Victorians were) she nevertheless created at times an original voice - and it is the voices of her female, perhaps feminist, narrators and the poet's various storytelling techniques that I wish to look at, by considering aspects of some of the poems chosen by AQA and OCR for their new AS Specifications.

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Poetry

Writers A-Z

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'Maude Clare'

'Maude Clare', as published, is a terse ballad: Maude, Lord Thomas's former lover, turns up at his wedding to Lady Nell, who nonetheless rebuffs Maude's jealous gibes with pledges of devotion for her husband-to-be. Rossetti's earlier version of the poem was a longer, probing affair

which presented the motives of both young women more ambiguously; in the final version, however, Maude is a largely unsympathetic figure. In the opening stanza:

*Out of the church she followed them
With a lofty step and mien:
His bride was like a village maid,
Maude Clare was like a queen.*

the poet achieves her effects in typical ballad fashion: the tale begins in medias res (that is, in the middle of the story) with no preamble, employing pronouns as if we have already met the protagonists; there's immediately some tension (why the haughtiness?), a contrast (maid/queen) with a touch of literariness in the use of assonance (bride/like) and alliteration (Clare/queen). Most of the rest of the poem consists of dialogue, so a remarkably modern, journalistic effect comes across, although the 'why' beloved of copywriters is only gradually revealed. The climax of the ballad, if one can call it that, is not, however, a sensationalist last-minute calling-off of the wedding, but a reaffirmation of the power of love. In a twist, the tall-is-handsome motif of many a fairy-tale is rejected in favour of a bride who, in conventional terms, is less attractive. Is Rossetti comforting herself by such means, or her lovelorn female readership who could rarely live up to the ideal of womanhood that patriarchal literature tended to present? It is interesting that the names Maude, Clare and Nell (monosyllabic names in keeping with the ballad idiom) had all had recent fictional histories: the eponymous heroine of Tennyson's 'Maud' (1855) dies during the poem's narrative; Ada Clare in Dickens' Bleak House (1852-3) is left a young widow, for all her beauty, at the end of the novel; and the

death of Little Nell in the same author's *The Old Curiosity Shop* moved the nation to tears in 1841. Perhaps Rossetti is imagining that true love can have a happy ending?

'Cousin Kate'

In 'Maude Clare' Rossetti seems keen to 'become' the characters as soon as she can: in 'Cousin Kate' her first-person narrator does this job from the outset. The use of double ballad stanzas allows the cottage maiden's tale to move quickly when necessary, while also allowing space for some bitter, wistful reflection upon the contrasting fates of herself - wooed then cast aside by the local lord and left with a child - and that of her cousin, married but childless. Repeated rhetorical questions - 'Why did a great lord find me out?' - suggest the bemusement and possibly resentment of an uneducated innocent; on the other hand more literary touches such as the oxymoron 'a shameless shameful life' and conscious archaisms such as 'Woe's me for joy thereof' and 'Your love was writ in sand' imply hidden concerns. Like many of Rossetti's narrators, the cottage maiden is an ambiguous mixture: a fictional character suffused nonetheless with the sophisticated personality of the poet. This may be an inevitable function of the 'literary' ballad, wherein the educated personalities of the writers cannot be wholly suppressed. Coleridge and Keats come to mind; and there are even faint echoes in 'Cousin Kate' of *The Ancient Mariner* (compare 'I was a cottage maiden' with 'It is an ancient mariner') and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (does 'He lured me to his palace home' owe something to 'She took me to her elfin grot?'). Certainly Rossetti's general interest in supernatural tales and sensuous imagery could have been inspired by such well-known poems as these.

'Jessie Cameron'

A supernatural tale of her own is 'Jessie Cameron', a disturbing story of a wilful girl who rejects her lover's advances: as they argue on a beach the tide apparently overwhelms them both, so that none know where the bodies be. Only occasional folk keeping lonely vigil may possibly:

*have caught
Glimpse of a pale gleam here or there...
Which might be hand or hair.*

Rossetti successfully creates an increasingly tense atmosphere by beginning the action near the climax of the lovers' argument, by placing Jessie's speeches of rejection against the backdrop of an evermore menacing sea, by changing tense, voice and perspective when briefly switching the scene to Jessie's mother waiting in vain by her door (shades of 'Sir Patrick Spens' here), and by the use of sibilance to send shivers up the spine towards the end when the sea claims its own. The relationship is an interesting mix of the chivalric world that the pre-Raphaelites so often depicted and the dark side of folk myth: the boy (who is not named):

*had gone through fire and flood
Only to win her smile*

in typically knightly fashion, while on the other hand being

suspected of being a witch's son, recalling such ballads as 'The Demon Lover'. Jessie, by contrast, is occasionally described rather prosaically:

*Kindhearted in the main,
But somewhat heedless with her tongue.*

Is she a modern girl? She won't be forced into a relationship she doesn't want, seeking to go 'Just my own free way'. But then (as a punishment for daring to speak her own mind?) she is crushed by the waves of Victorian morality. Why her lover should die too is never made clear; perhaps, in the tragic way, he is just collateral damage. What is strange is that, for a devoutly Anglican poet, the denouement is entirely devoid of any nod to conventional Victorian Christianity.

'A Birthday'

In case the impression is being given that Rossetti was only interested in failed relationships, one can turn to a lyric like 'A Birthday' to experience the other side of the coin. The opening line 'My heart is like a singing bird' heralds uncomplicated, natural imagery to evoke true happiness, and the thick-set fruit of the apple tree has here none of the Satanic, Garden of Eden connotations that pervade 'Goblin Market'. What we cannot know is whether the poem was written from personal experience, or was merely intense wishful thinking: Rossetti was too good a poet to let on. The lavish, exotic imagery of stanza two is couched in diction that recalls Blake.

*Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes
surely draws inspiration from 'Jerusalem':
Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrows of desire.*

The form of 'A Birthday' (two stanzas in Blake's metre) compounds the impression. Perhaps such a mixture of the homely and the fanciful came close to the ideal in Rossetti's imagination.

'A Royal Princess'

Certainly she appears, in 'A Royal Princess', strongly to reject the limiting role her society imposed upon women of a certain class. In a similarly forceful narrative voice the princess, who also represents well-off but unfulfilled middle-class Victorian women, bewails and exposes her privileged yet barren existence (much as Cousin Kate, albeit now a Lady, remained barren) in a sterile and utterly tedious palace. The only action, undertaken by men, happens beyond its walls, out of the princess's sight. The obvious analogue this time is Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shallot' (1833/1842): like her, Rossetti's princess has to make do with mirrors and spends her time with needlework. The poems' respective climaxes embody essentially the same paradox: the Lady of Shallot escapes from her tower only to be killed by reality, and the princess ends her poem risking death at the hands of the revolutionary peasants to whom she pledges her worldly wealth, which she realises is useless to her. 'A Royal Princess' is a genuine poetic precursor to the Suffragette movement of the 1890s and early twentieth century and particularly its iconic moment of

sacrifice: the death of Emily Davison who threw herself under the King's horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913. A painting by Edmund Blair Leighton in the pre-Raphaelite style entitled 'The Accolade' (1901), reproduced here, which depicts a young man being knighted by a radiant-looking young noblewoman, is worth looking at as an illustration of values that the poet is ultimately rejecting: the golden-haired damsel is centre stage and has the world, in the figure of the young man, at her feet - but she is a passive, remote figure, and her sword is merely symbolic. The real power lies in the sword of the soon-to-be-dubbed knight, who is armed and ready to take his place in the great outdoors where the real decisions are made. Rossetti chose an unusual metrical form for 'A Royal Princess', the only other poems of note employing it being Thomas Hood's Gothic 'Dream of Eugene Aram' (1831), which she got it from, and Lewis Carroll's parody of it, 'The Walrus and the Carpenter'. Rossetti converts stanzas of three rhyming couplets into stanzas of three long rhyming lines, effectively reflecting the princess's apparently untroubled yet ultimately unresolved, dragged-out and purposeless existence.

'Winter: My Secret'

A final glance at 'Winter: My Secret' again provides a contrast in style. The poet has a secret which she may tell us - or she may not; it's her choice. There's a girlish playfulness to the poem, which begins with what is very nearly a limerick! - and the narrator teases the reader all through: what is my secret, shall I tell you, what kind of poem am I writing? Am I the same poet who can protest against the cloying life we Victorian women are forced to lead? If there's a serious undertone it might be this: women

(and especially wives) at the time were so beholden to men that the only thing they could call their own was something as intangible as a secret. It's a defiant little bid for autonomy that Christina Rossetti was able, subtly and with no small skill, to explore in various ways within her wide-ranging poetic oeuvre.