

Ghosts of Loss: Christina Rossetti's Haunted Poetry

Edited by Ruth Weller-Passman, Mackenzie Fluharty, & Ashley Starling

This critical edition presents Christina Rossetti's ghostly poetry, analyzing its overall cultural impact and influence. In addition to her poetry, we have included contextual documents pertaining to mourning, widowhood, and poetic expression. As a whole, this edition gives insight into how and why poetry can be an appropriate method for women to express grief in the Victorian era.

General Introduction | A Time to Change, A Time to Mourn

Christina Rossetti was a Victorian British poet best known for her fantastical work "Goblin Market" (1862). However, this poem, recounting the whimsical tale of two sisters and their magical goblin encounter, does not say as much about Rossetti's life as some of her other works. Rossetti dealt with substantial personal losses in her lifetime, losses that are expressed in her ghostly poetry. By looking into these poems, especially "The Ghost's Petition" (1866), it is possible to gain insight not only into Rossetti's losses but also into the mourning practices common in the Victorian era itself.

Rossetti lived at an age filled with political and social changes, both in her native England and around the world. The Victorian era was a time of transition in many walks of life, a time of expanding enlightenment and an increased interest in unfamiliar cultures and ideologies. These sweeping changes affected many details of day-to-day life for citizens, but for Rossetti in particular the biggest and most threatening change was public opinion about religion. This was one of the first moments in history when religious doubt became socially acceptable and believers were encouraged to question and examine their faith. Rossetti's increasingly religious writings may have been a reaction to this new environment of religious skepticism, a way of fighting back against what she perceived as religious backsliding (D'amico).

For deeply religious individuals such as Christina

Rossetti, this backsliding was nothing short of terrifying. Rossetti faced a great deal of uncertainty throughout her life, including failing health, numerous deaths in the family, and unsatisfied love. Her Protestantism was the one constant in her life, and the climate of religious doubt threatened the only certainty she had. This doubt also lends itself well to the concepts of ghosts and hauntings, as Rossetti likely felt very isolated and alone in her steadfast faith. Both of her poems that are included in this edition feature a profound sense of loneliness, suggesting that Rossetti's life was similar to the "life" of a ghost frozen in the middle of a transition and isolated even in the company of others.

Rossetti certainly was not alone in enduring multiple deaths in the family. One particularly telling death was the probable suicide of her older brother Gabriel's romantic interest, Elizabeth Siddal. He had led her on for years, promising to marry her but never following through with a proposal, until her failing health guilted him into marrying her on the spot. When their first child was born dead, it sent Lizzie into a tailspin of depression and psychosis. She died within the year under mysterious circumstances that could easily have pointed to suicide, though all evidence that might have proved it so was destroyed. Guilt-ridden and distraught, Gabriel buried an irreplaceable collection of poems he had been working on with her (though he later had her coffin secretly exhumed so that he could retrieve the manuscript). Later in his life as his health failed him, he became convinced that he had been visited by her spirit. Whether this was

the result of a guilty conscience, a deterioration of mental health, or a true posthumous visitation, Gabriel’s conviction may have struck a chord with Rossetti and inspired her to include ghosts and spirits in her own writing.¹

Victorian society need not look to fiction such as Rossetti’s works to find death and its influence. Losing a loved one and having to perform the standard mourning rituals was an eventual experience. For the poor in society, death meant being tossed into a large pit and buried with other nameless souls (Strange 110). For the middle and upper classes, however, death took on a graceful etiquette. The well-to-do were “sent off” with beautiful funerals and elaborate burials. Cassell’s *Household Guide*, a London publication for Victorian women, describes various funeral packages that could be purchased, the most grandiose of which included spectacles such as a hearse with four horses, ostrich feather plumes, and fourteen men to serve as pages and coachmen (66). Additionally, those who had lost a loved one donned all black and wore these mourning clothes for a year or more. Widows were even expected to arrive late for social functions, including church. Generally, mourning became not only an emotion but a complete lifestyle for those left behind. At the surface, these mourning practices seem to be a remarkable way in which to honor the dead. All that this etiquette serves to do, however, is to prolong the grieving process.

In order to deal with their grief, many women turned to their diaries. However, poetry was also a common outlet for grief and sorrow because of its personal nature. Between the feelings of loss and the general desire for the dead to somehow remain, it was only natural for these grief poems to eventually feature ghostly figures.

In this critical edition, we will examine the connection between grief and ghost poetry in the primary text, Christina Rossetti’s “The Ghost’s Petition.” Additionally, a deeper look into Rossetti herself, the culture of the time period, and the experience of a Victorian widow will be featured in the contextual documents.

Poem Introduction | Petitions, Promises, and Protestantism

Ghosts are often associated with the terror of the undead: beings that have somehow cheated death to remain on Earth for some nefarious or vengeful purpose. Yet

there is another style of ghost that is often forgotten in the wake of horror stories and haunted houses: the ghost that remains tethered to the mortal world by grief instead of anger. This is the type of ghost to be found in Christina Rossetti’s poem “The Ghost’s Petition.” Published in her 1866 anthology *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems*, the poem opens on a recently widowed woman sitting up with her sister and watching for her husband. The bereft wife is convinced that her husband “must keep his word” and return to her from death, and after her skeptical sister has gone to bed for the night, the husband does indeed make a posthumous appearance. It becomes apparent that the wife is inadvertently binding her husband to life: her grief itself is keeping him from peaceful rest.

The format of the poem itself bears some analysis. While the version presented here has the poem arranged into triplets, there are some versions of the poem where the stanzas are longer and less broken up. This version is in this edition because its format seems more appropriate for its topic. The triplets allow for the repetitions to stand out, as in the repeated reference to one sleeping and one weeping in stanzas 7, 8 and 17. There is also something to be said for the power of threes: the number three is often associated with mysticism and magic, and additionally the poem features three characters (the wife, her sister Jane, and her husband Robin). The shorter stanzas also call the reader’s attention to the rhyme structure. Lines one and three of each stanza are rhymed, and there is an internal rhyme within the second line of each stanza. This hasty resolution of rhyme structure compels the reader to pick up speed as the poem progresses, giving the poem an urgency that is mirrored by Robin’s urgency in pleading for his wife’s help.

One of the most noteworthy features of this poem is its lack of narration. Only four brief stanzas bridge the dialogue between the sisters and the dialogue between husband and wife. The rest of the piece is conversation—conversation, in fact, that is not even broken up to identify the speakers. The reader is left to deduce what line has been spoken by which character. This, coupled with the fact that the wife’s name is never mentioned, renders the language of the poem as ghostly as the story itself. Perhaps Rossetti intentionally left the characters unidentified so that readers could imagine themselves within the world of the poem, but she also endowed them with hauntingly familiar themes: the pain of loss, the devotion

Notes

1. See Jones (107-112) for a more detailed account of Elizabeth Siddal’s death.

of love. The characters are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, abstract and literal, and even material and spectral. The husband is unable to hold his wife, as he states in lines 38 and 39. But he cannot be entirely immaterial, as he references lying in his grave multiple times (lines 44 and 48). Rossetti could have been implying that Robin is still partially bound to his corpse that lies in the grave, despite his spirit’s ability to walk abroad and interact with his living wife. In the 16th stanza he also describes the horror of being unable to shut his ears against his wife’s ceaseless crying. To be bound to life after death as a specter is horrible enough, but to remain tethered to a rotting corpse submerged in the Earth is even more ghastly. The reader certainly cannot fault Robin for seeking an end to that torment.

The imagery of the poem is evocative of ghosts and spectrality. In the first stanza, the sister, looking out the window at her sibling’s request, notes the falling leaves and the howling wind. The season is autumn, then—an appropriately liminal setting for a poem about hauntings. The trees are beginning to retreat into a kind of living death for the winter, but have not yet dropped all their leaves. Robin also states in line 42 that “no tree can stand” on the hill where he is buried. Perhaps he means that the bloom of life may not grow near the tombs of the half-dead, as they are firmly alive while Robin is neither wholly dead nor alive. The wind, too, has a spectrality to it: an incorporeal manifestation, it nonetheless has a very physical presence, pulling leaves off the trees and casting a chill over anyone it catches. Both these images continue to haunt the narrative: when Robin is ascending the staircase and preparing to enter the house, he shakes the door “like a puff of air” (line 27). Robin, like the wind, is both present and absent: he can shake the door, but he cannot embrace his wife. Later he describes the dead as “trees that have shed their leaves” (line 43). Like a tree in autumn, the spirits of the dead have not been exterminated altogether—they remain partially alive, in spite of their physical forms’ demise. Something, whether it be the “tender hand” (line 67) of God or the grief of a mourning loved one, keeps them tethered to life in death.

There is another specter that haunts this poem: the specter of religious duty. Though it isn’t explicitly referenced, a profound belief in the afterlife drives this poem. “Tender hand hath made our nest” (line 67), Robin tells his wife. It is hard to imagine that this “tender hand” belongs to anyone but God. The only description of the afterlife that the

husband offers is that it is a place where mortal fears vanish and only hope remains. In fact, the wife is almost prepared to give up her life and join her husband in the pleasures of death. Yet it is clear that this notion is never truly entertained by either Robin or his wife: though she is desperately lonely and hungry for the comforting rest of death, the wife knows that her place is on Earth. Suicide is a sin, after all, and perhaps the wife knows that she could jeopardize her place in the afterlife if she followed Robin so prematurely into the grave. This choice between religious duty and love would no doubt have been a familiar one to Christina Rossetti’s audience—and Rossetti herself. Twice Rossetti turned down marriage proposals because of her suitors’ religious affiliations first from a Catholic, and then from an atheist. Though she mourned the losses of love and feared a life of solitude, her Protestant beliefs were more important to her.² Just as Robin’s wife never truly considers following her husband, Rossetti would never have truly considered giving up her religious principles for marriage. In a way, “The Ghost’s Petition” is as much about Rossetti’s ghosts as it is about the ghost of Robin.

The poem also begins and ends with a promise, which is an immaterial specter of sorts whose presence nonetheless can be felt and relied upon. In the third stanza, the wife alludes to a promise that her husband made her to always come home, regardless of the circumstances. The strength of that promise is enough to lift Robin from his grave, enough to keep him from whatever pleasures await him beyond death. One could even argue that his promise haunts him in the same way that he is now haunting his wife. By the end of the poem, however, the story comes full circle: though the wife is desperate to rejoin her husband and tempted by the pleasures of the afterlife, she promises to cease her grieving and move on with her life so that her husband may rest in peace. That promise will continue to haunt the wife as she goes about her days, missing her husband but careful not to miss him too deeply for fear of yanking him back from the grave yet again.

Through a choice use of language, evocative imagery, the employment of religious undertones, and the theme of a promise, Christina Rossetti creates ghosts that haunt not only the characters of the poem itself, but the poem’s readers (and even its own author).

The poem is just as much a ghost as Robin is, haunting all those who come into contact with it.

Notes

2. See Jones 2(9-30) and (34-47) for a thorough discussion of Rossetti’s first proposal of marriage.

**“The Ghost’s Petition”³
by Christina Rossetti**

‘There’s a footstep coming: look out and see,’
‘The leaves are falling, the wind is calling;
No one cometh across the lea.’—⁴

‘There’s a footstep coming; O sister, look.’—
‘The ripple flashes, the white foam dashes;
No one cometh across the brook.’—

‘But he promised that he would come:
To-night, to-morrow, in joy or sorrow,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

‘For he promised that he would come:
His word was given; from earth or heaven,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

‘Go to sleep, my sweet sister Jane;⁵
You can slumber, who need not number
Hour after hour, in doubt and pain.

‘I shall sit here awhile, and watch;
Listening, hoping, for one hand groping
In deep shadow to find the latch.’

After the dark, and before the light,
One lay sleeping; and one sat weeping,
Who had watched and wept the weary night.

After the night, and before the day,
One lay sleeping; and one sat weeping—
Watching, weeping for one away.

There came a footstep climbing the stair;
Some one standing out on the landing⁶
Shook the door like a puff of air—
Shook the door, and in he passed.
Did he enter? In the room centre
Stood her husband: the door shut fast.

Notes

3. The text of the poem is taken from *The Haunted Hour: An Anthology* (1920), compiled by Margaret Widdemer.

4. A plains, grassland or meadow.

5. The sister being one of only two named characters is significant. Rossetti had three older siblings and remained close with them throughout her lifetime. Additionally, allocating the name of ‘Jane’ to the sister emphasizes the sister’s insignificance to the narrator. ‘Jane Doe’ was used for anonymity since 1855.

6. A landing is a transitory space between sets of stairs, signifying another threshold that Robin has to cross to reach his grieving wife.

Chilled with the night-dew: so lily-white you
Look like a stray lamb from our fold.⁸

‘O Robin, but you are late:
Come and sit near me—sit here and cheer me.’—
(Blue the flame burnt in the grate.)

‘Lay not down your head on my breast:
I cannot hold you, kind wife, nor fold you
In the shelter that you love best.

‘Feel not after my clasping hand:
I am but a shadow, come from the meadow
Where many lie, but no tree can stand.

‘We are trees which have shed their leaves:
Our heads lie low there, but no tears flow there;
Only I grieve for my wife who grieves.

‘I could rest if you would not moan
Hour after hour; I have no power
To shut my ears where I lie alone.

‘I could rest if you would not cry;
But there’s no sleeping while you sit weeping—
Watching, weeping so bitterly.’—

‘Woe’s me! woe’s me! for this I have heard.
Oh night of sorrow!--oh black to-morrow!
Is it thus that you keep your word?

‘O you who used so to shelter me
Warm from the least wind—why, now the east wind⁹
Is warmer than you, whom I quake to see.
‘O my husband of flesh and blood,
For whom my mother I left, and brother,
And all I had, accounting it good,

‘What do you do there, underground,
In the dark hollow?¹⁰ I’m fain¹¹ to follow.
What do you do there?—what have you found?’—

Notes

7. Robins are symbols of spring, a transitory time of year and also a time of rebirth and renewal. Robins are also associated with Christ and sacrifice, which was a significant theme in Rossetti’s life (she frequently made life decisions based on her faith).

8. The lamb has Biblical associations with renewal, growth and even sacrifice—it is seen as the perfect victim for selfless sacrifice for the sake of another, much like the wife’s sacrifice of her grief to allow her husband to move on.

9. The east wind is a Biblical harbinger of destruction. Also, in England, a southwesterly wind would come from the Atlantic and be warm and pleasant; an easterly wind would be coming from the Baltic or Arctic and would thus be cold and bitter.

10. Both a hole or cavity, or to cry out in either anguish or encouragement.

11. To be inclined, willing or desirous.

‘What I do there I must not tell:
But I have plenty: kind wife, content ye:
It is well with us—it is well.

‘Tender hand hath made our nest;
Our fear is ended, our hope is blended
With present pleasure, and we have rest.’—

‘Oh, but Robin, I’m fain to come,
If your present days are so pleasant;
For my days are so wearisome.

‘Yet I’ll dry my tears for your sake:
Why should I tease you, who cannot please you
Any more with the pains I take?’

Contextual Documents

*Excerpts from Lady Cavendish’s Diary:
A Widow’s Grief in Victorian Britain*

“The Ghost’s Petition” tells of an expression of female grief that manifests itself in a ghostly visit. In order to fully understand the mindset of the average mourning widow in the Victorian era, one should consider the writings of Lady Lucy Cavendish. Lady Cavendish kept extensive diaries for the majority of her lifetime, including the duration of her husband’s sudden death and elaborate funeral. These entries not only express her inner mourning but also present the common Victorian funeral practices of her time. Lady Cavendish’s diaries offer a complementary female experience and perspective to that of Rossetti’s narrator.

Lady Cavendish was only married to her husband, Lord Frederick Cavendish, for eighteen years before he was assassinated. Lord Cavendish was appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland on May 6, 1882 but was fatally stabbed that same afternoon by an extreme nationalist group. His wife was informed of her husband’s death via a friend’s telegram. In the following excerpts, we witness Cavendish’s reaction to learning about her husband’s death and the way she interacted with her uncle, the Prime Minister William Gladstone (referred to as “Uncle W” by Lady Cavendish), his wife

Catherine Gladstone (“Auntie Pussy”), and her various close friends. Even after two years had passed and Lord Cavendish’s murderers were punished, her entries show a lingering sadness characteristic to a mourning widow.

Her diary entries also give insight into the common Victorian funeral practices, of which some resemble the customs we observe at funerals today. After her husband’s death, Lady Cavendish was not expected to attend her normal social functions and was even allowed to enter church at a later part of the service. Flowers and crosses adorned the coffin and church where the funeral was held and prayers emphasizing the good of Christ were said over the body.

Overall, Lady Cavendish’s diaries paint her with an emotional experience quite similar to that of the narrator in Rossetti’s “The Ghost’s Petition.” Both experience the loss of their husbands in rather sudden ways and both hold on to their grief for an extended period of time. The primary difference, of course, is that while Lady Cavendish was able to handle her grief in a healthy manner, Rossetti’s narrator needs a ghostly apparition to incite her to move on.

Excerpts¹² from Saturday, May 6th, 1882 entry¹³

“It was very near 3.30 before I cd get out, but I went to the Abbey, thinking I shd at all events hear the concluding prayers and cd have a quiet time there for prayer.

Notes

12. These excerpts are quoted from *The Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish* (1927), written by Lucy Cavendish and published by Frederick A. Stokes Company.

13. This entry is dated for May 6th, 1882, but was actually written on February 9th, 1883. As stated in this entry, Lady Cavendish felt she could only record the happenings of that day at a time that she could emotionally handle her grief.

But I got there while they were singing the anthem “In that day”—at the passage “Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.” These words were sung first by one voice, then by another, then a third, then in chorus, with the most lovely harmony and sweetness; and I thought, “O, these are the very words for my Fred”; during the final chorus I knelt down and prayed for him with my whole heart, but not that he might be saved from peril—(a mere idle thought crossed me once—what if the steamer shd go down on the passage?)—that I never thought of—but that he might have wisdom and strength and help...

...I was not left alone till near 12. I sat down at my writing-table and wrote 2 notes, one to the little sisters to ask them to tea on Monday; another to the Byng girls, to propose their coming at 5 on Sunday for some reading. Then I took the paper off a set of beautifully bound little books (his “Gleanings”), which Uncle William had sent over in the course of the day, with a most affectionate little letter to me, begging me to ask Freddy to give them a place on his shelves “in memory—in grateful memory on my part—of what he has been to me these past 2 years.” I was just writing to thank him, and had begun, “Dear Uncle William, I must write one line (though how unnecessary)” when the door opened and Lou came in. No thought of fear struck me at first; I knew she wished for a talk, and I only thought that on her way home from the Admiralty she had looked in so as to find me alone. But as soon as I saw her face, the terror seized me, and I knew something must have happened to my darling. She had the dreadful telegram in her hand—but it said “dangerously wounded,” and I clung to the hope he wd get over it. She could not tell me, but I felt that she did not say a word of hope.

Then Meriel came in, and then the whole anguish fell upon me. All my blessed joy of many years wrecked in the darkness. In the midst of the black storm a confused feeling came over me that it wd kill Uncle W. who had sent him out in such hope—as indeed a “son of his right hand.” But then Uncle W. himself came in with Atie. Pussy—I saw his face, pale, sorrow-stricken, but like a prophet’s in its look of faith and strength. He came up and almost took me in his arms, and his first words were, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Then he said to me, “Be assured it will not be in vain,” and across all my agony there fell a bright ray of hope, and I saw in a vision Ireland at peace, and my darling’s

life-blood accepted as a sacrifice for Christ’s sake, to help to bring this to pass. I write these words at Holker, Feb. 9, 1883, having only been able to write the whole history bit by bit as I could bear it. This my 1st ray of hope has never entirely forsaken me, through all the dark, blank months emptied of joy. I said to him as he was leaving me, “Uncle Wm., you must never blame yourself for sending him.” He said, “O no, there can be no question of that.” Once he said, “Poor Forster!”...

...God be thanked for His wonderful teaching, when He sent upon me the terrible blow, that took away the desire of my eyes with a stroke. No word or presentiment of warning was granted me: one minute I was crowned with the fulness of earthly joy and love—my life full to the brim of hope and interest—the next, all lay shattered around me in one dark wreck, and with what circumstances of horror and fear! How was it that reason and faith and nerves did not give way: how was it that I did not sink down into despair?...

...All the attendant circumstances were most tenderly ordered for me, so that I had round me all loving human help, and was at home among his dear ones and mine. Only by an “accident” was I prevented, at the last moment, from keeping an engagement out of town; which would have taken me among comparative strangers. By another “accident” I did not go out that very Saturday evening. It was without my arranging it that dear Lou, and Meriel, and Alfred were all with me at dinner and afterwards. (In the same “chance” way Eddy happened to be with his father at Chatsworth.)

Other things there were to bring me help beforehand; most especially the anthem at Evensong on Saturday at the Abbey. I could only go very late to the service, and only expected to come in for the concluding prayers; but the anthem was being sung as I came in, and the blessed Divine Promise came over and over, in lovely pathetic harmonies. “Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.” Thus in minute and tender ways did He care for me “more than a mother doth.” “He remembereth that we are but dust.”

But now let me turn to the greater miracles of mercy, whereby alone I was saved from sinking in the deep waters. In the first hour of darkness God sent Uncle William with a message straight from Him, which alone at that moment could give me strength, and which still abides with me, though so often I can but feebly cling to it: the assurance that my darling’s life was not given in vain. In

the midst of the storm, the vision was granted me of my darling called to that highest honour, of being allowed to die, guiltless (most guiltless, as regards Ireland), and thereby good to come, and peace, and better days: that thus his death, and my sorrow, might, for CHRIST’s sake, be accepted as a sacrifice, and ascend to GOD in union with the One Great Sacrifice.

Later, I had the thought sent to me how earnestly I ought to try and not spoil my share in the sacrifice by any repining or want of resignation; but offer up my will with the same single heart as my darling did.”

Sunday, May 7th, 1882

“...I sat all day in our dear, dear house, full of familiar things, and thought I realised that all was shattered and gone from me, but did not: hardly yet can I do it. It was about dawn I think that Lou (who never went home all night) came gently into my room where my darling old Meriel had spent the night with me. Lou had a little kind smile on her face, and for one second I thought “she has come to tell me it is not true.” But the hope vanished. Messages had come during the night saying Charlotte and I were not to go to Dublin; that I shd be able to see my Fred’s face placid and beautiful at Chatsworth. My darling Alfred came upstairs soon afterwards, and it was while he was with me that I thought of the victorious sufferings of Christ...”

Monday, May 8th, 1882

“...Lou and I, Nevy and Alfred, went down to Chatsworth together and I went straight to the Duke’s room. He had written me a few words of heartbroken sorrow. Eddy had had to tell him, and said that he fell on his knees. He looked piteously shattered and stricken. I tried to say to him how I hoped he wd never think it had been wrong for him to go; and he said no, he knew it was his duty. He said, “He was the best son, and I do believe the best man.” I sat in Lou’s little room, and masses of beautiful flowers kept arriving.

My own darling was laid in the chapel. His face beautiful and serene and pure, like sleep, only more tranquil: the lines smoothed away. No sign of hurt except a little scratch on the bridge of the nose. His look, as Althorp wrote to me, “as if no shadow of sin or suffering had ever

come near him.” His soft hair falling back from his forehead as it used to do. I put on his breast the little locket with my hair which I gave him in the “golden days.” Mary Gladstone made a long beautiful cross of white flowers and ferns to lay on the coffin, and we covered the floor of the chapel round him with wreaths and crosses. Edward Talbot and Arthur came from Oxford and said prayers with me in my room every day. Nevy or Alfred went out with me a little in the garden. All was lovely, outbreaking spring and bright sunshine, speaking to me of the Eternal Joy and Brightness...

...The way to the church was one great concourse of people ; but there was no disorder. The little half-sisters sent me a wreath of roses with a card “For dear Brother Freddy,” and I took it with me and dropped it into the grave. The Grey-coat Hospital sent a wreath of dark-red roses, with the words, “The Noble army of Martyrs praise Thee,” and this was laid on the coffin, on the transverse of the cross. Edward Talbot read the service beautifully, so as to be heard far round, and said at the end, “Give peace in our time, O Lord...”

October 23rd, 1884

“... The trials lasted through long and terrible weeks. Four were executed: Brady, Kelly, Curley, and Fagan; others were imprisoned for life. People wrote full of sorrow for me, thinking it must “reopen my grief,” but how should that be, when it had never, never for an hour closed. There was no reopening of grief, but it became a long pain to me that my own darling, so gentle and loving-hearted, and so full of faith and hope for Ireland—so tender-hearted for others tho’ so strong to endure hardness himself—should be, with Mr. Burke, the most innocent cause of all this ghastly bloodshed and have his death associated with such terrible wickedness. O, how cd I ever bear it, but for that One Death of Him Who met it at the hands of wicked men...”

“At Home” 1862 | Rossetti’s Ghosts

“The Ghost’s Petition” covers many of the themes and concepts that Christina Rossetti loved to explore in her writing. Rossetti spent a great deal of her life struggling to reconcile her intense religious faithfulness with her desperate loneliness. Twice in her life Rossetti ended romantic relationships because the man in question was

not a Protestant. Although her feelings of isolation frequently manifested in her poetry, her deep-seated religiosity was always more formative in her decision-making.

Both “The Ghost’s Petition” and “At Home” deal with both an unquestioning belief in life after death (in these cases, taking the form of a ghost) and with a sense of isolation and loss. While “The Ghost’s Petition” focuses on a romantic relationship torn asunder by death, “At Home” deals with a ghost looking in on her still-living friends and feeling forgotten. A noteworthy parallel between the two poems is that “The Ghost’s Petition” is written from the perspective of the bereaved wife as she is visited by the ghost of her former husband, while “At Home” is written from the ghost’s point of view. The former was written a decade or so after Rossetti’s first failed engagement, and reflects both a fear of abandonment and a profound belief in and longing for love. Though characters in “The Ghost’s Petition” are separated by the husband’s death, their devotion to each other is so strong that the wife’s grief has actually bound her husband to life, keeping him from the “plenty” that he may receive in the afterlife.

“At Home,” however, was written right around the same time that Rossetti was rejecting her second propos-

al of marriage for religious reasons. Older, unhealthier and perhaps more bitter, Rossetti had watched her three siblings going through their own romantic entanglements. “At Home” illustrates the way that Rossetti’s understanding of ghosts evolved. The “Petition” ghost was tethered to life by love and a sense of duty to his grieving wife. Perhaps it is meant to comfort the grieving by reminding them that their love means something even after they have left this world. The “At Home” ghost remains behind to look for some sign or symptom of this meaning, but instead she finds herself spying on her friends’ merriment and wondering why they are not more saddened by her loss. This is not a ghost meant to comfort. Perhaps this is a ghost meant to warn against finding meaning on earth instead of in Heaven. On their own, the ghosts from both poems provide insight into both the characters in their own narratives and Rossetti herself. But when compared to one another, the progression of Rossetti’s opinions and beliefs truly becomes apparent.

“At Home”¹⁴
by Christina Rossetti

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.

I listened to their honest chat:
Said one: “To-morrow we shall be
Plod plod along the featureless sands,
And coasting miles and miles of sea.”
Said one: “Before the turn of tide
We will achieve the eyrie-seat.”
Said one: “To-morrow shall be like
To-day, but much more sweet.”

Notes

14. The text of the poem was taken from *The Haunted Hour: An Anthology* (1920), compiled by Margaret Widdemer.

“To-morrow,” said they, strong with hope,
And dwelt upon the pleasant way:
“To-morrow,” cried they, one and all,
While no one spoke of yesterday.
Their life stood full at blessed noon;
I, only I, had passed away:
“To-morrow and to-day,” they cried;
I was of yesterday.

I shivered comfortless, but cast
No chill across the table-cloth;
I, all-forgotten, shivered, sad
To stay, and yet to part how loth:
I passed from the familiar room,
I who from love had passed away,
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarrieth but a day.

“The Dying Widow” (1851) | Gender Issues in Ghost Poetry

This poem, written by Thomas Miller, was published in 1851 in *The London Journal*. It recounts a woman’s grief over her deceased husband and son. Whereas in Rossetti’s poem, the ghost of the husband comes to the narrator to request that she let go of her grief and mourning for him so that he may rest, Miller’s poem fixates on the wife’s mourning and grief being so great that it actually leads to her death. The narrator also seems to see letting herself die as part of her role as a wife, saying “I have faithfully kept my vow/And feel not an accusing sting” (line 51-52). This is a stark contrast to that of Rossetti’s poem that calls for a continuation of life beyond grief and mourning. Rossetti’s more hopeful outlook might be due to her deeply rooted religious beliefs, particularly the aversion of letting a grief becoming so all-consuming that it leads to a death, suicide or otherwise. This is exemplified by Rossetti’s use of the husband in “The Ghost’s Petition” who comes to his grieving wife

and asks for her to grieve for him, yes, but to also move on with her life. Miller, on the other hand, seems to romanticize the concept of the grieving widow. In “The Dying Widow,” we are told that her son had died five months prior to the present of the poem, and also that her husband died one month before; these two people would be viewed as the only reasons that this woman had to be alive. Miller’s poem exemplified the fact that men dictated the patterns of female mourning; he is expressing the ideal of how women should grieve based on the typical male view of female grief in Victorian society. These two poems provide the two different views of how grieving practices should have been viewed. Miller’s representation in the poem may hint at an underlying male perspective that their passing from a woman’s life was meant to be so devastating that women should want to die with, if not shortly after, them. Rossetti, offering a different and decidedly female view, seems to be indicating that men should be grateful for the grieving period women will go through, but that it should not mean the end of the end of women’s lives.

*The Dying Widow*¹⁵
by Thomas Miller

Those cold white curtain-folds displace—
That form I would no longer see:
They have assumed my husband's face,
And all night long it looked at me.
I wished it not to go away,
Yet trembled while it did remain;
I closed my eyes, and tried to pray—
Alas! I tried in vain.
I know my head is very weak;
I've seen what fancy can create;
I long have felt too low to speak:
Oh! I have thought too much of late!
I have a few requests to make—
Just wipe these blinding tears away—
I know your love and for my sake
You will them all obey.

My child has scarce a month been dead,
My husband has been dead but five;
What dreary hours since that have fled!
I wonder I am yet alive.
My child, through him Death aimed the blow,
And from that hour I did decline;
His coffin, when my head lies low,
I would have placed on mine.

Those letters which my husband sent
Before he perished in the deep—
What hours in reading them I've spent!
Whole nights, in which I could not sleep.
Oh! they are worn with many a tear,
Scarce fit for other eyes to see,
But oft, when sad, they did me cheer:
Pray, bury them with me.

This little cap my Henry wore
The very day before he died;
And I shall never kiss it more—
When dead, you'll place it by my side.
I know these thoughts are weak, but, oh!
What will a vacant heart not crave?
And, as none else can love them so,
I'll bear them to my grave.

Notes

15. This text of this poem was taken from the September 16, 1848, issue of *The London Journal*.

The miniature that I still wear,
When dead, I would not have removed:
‘Tis on my heart—oh! leave it there,
To find its way to where I loved!
My husband threw it round my neck,
Long, long before he called me bride;
And I was told, amidst the wreck,
He kissed mine ere he died.

There’s little that I care for now,
Except this simple wedding-ring:
I faithfully have kept my vow,
And feel not an accusing sting.
I never yet have laid it by
A moment, since my bridal day:
Where he first placed it let it lie—
Oh, take it not away!

Now wrap me in my wedding-gown,—
You scarce can think how cold I feel,—
And smooth my ruffled pillow down.
Oh! how my clouded senses reel!
Great God! support me to the last!—
Oh, let more air into the room—
The struggle now is nearly past—
Husband and child, I come!

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