

Christian Faith of Christina Rossetti: Focusing on “From House to Home”

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INTRODUCTION

Christina Rossetti (1830-1893) was a woman poet who lived in Victorian England. Diane D'Amico remarks, “For the first generation of critics, those of the late Victorian period and early decades of the twentieth century, Rossetti is viewed as a woman for great humility whose poetry reveals the invisible world of her Christian faith.”¹ Her first image was that of highly respected writer of poetry. In the first half of the twentieth century, her reputation decreased and “For those writing during the mid-twentieth century, she is either the repressed morbid woman whose poetry is mostly reveals sexual frustration or an intellectual woman whose poetry is mostly sweet sound without sense.”² Since 1980 Rossetti has been regaining her critical stature, studies of Rossetti are growing recently, and her critical significance in English literature might be transformed into various aspects.

She belonged to the Church of England and lived her whole life as an eager Christian. About one-third of her entire life's works are regarded as devotional poetry, and some of her works, such as religious poetry and other prose, were published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in later years. Christina Rossetti is widely recognized as a poet of sincere Christian faith. There are many quotations from the King James Version of the Bible in them in her works.

As a female poet Rossetti wrote many works at a time in which it was considered desirable for a woman to be a domestic angel, and to get married and make a home. She was a woman poet who had a rich sensitivity and delicate spirit. In her era it was very difficult for a woman to keep her talent and express her own ideas. How did she express her inner thoughts in her poetry? The author will examine the relationship between the artistic features of her work and her faith through examining one of her early works, “From House to Home” from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862).

On November 19 she produced in “From House to Home” (originally called ‘Sorrow not as those who have no hope’) one of the most important poems of her career. This arresting poem has always been a particular favorite of the Rossetti family. “I have always regarded this poem as one of my sister's most manifest masterpieces,” said William.³

She was a high church Anglican and a disciple of Tractarianism of the Oxford Movement. Christina Rossetti's writings reflect her deep religious devotion. Was her Christian faith

expanded into her works? What is the relationship between the Victorian Age and her Christian faith revealed in this poem, "From House to Home"? The author is going to discuss her Christian faith and this poetry.

1 . Christianity and Great Britain of Rossetti's Time

A key influence on Christina Rossetti's poetry was the Oxford Movement. When she was about thirteen, she began attending Christ Church with her mother and sister Maria. The minister, William Dodsworth, was one of leaders of the Oxford Movement and an eager supporter of Edward Pusey, who preached at the church her family attended. She was significantly influenced by these preachers particularly. People active in the Oxford Movement are described as follows:

Their best-known leaders were John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Edward Pusey, and their preferred method was a series of publications they began in 1833 called "tracts"; hence they were known as the Tractarians (also as the Oxford Movement). These argumentative pieces attacked what the high churchmen regarded as the prevailing weaknesses of the church, and in particular the assault by what they called "liberalism."⁴

The purpose of the movement was seen as follows :

. . . The Oxford Movement, or Tractarianism, as it is also called, . . . sought to revitalize the spiritual life of the Church of England and had about it a strong ascetic element.⁵

Ministers preached in sermons that "the Church had in these later ages been gradually growing imperfect and languid in her discharge of both her duties . . . "⁶ That age did not provide a stable environment for religion. A variety of reform movements in the church were taking place in England. The Church of England in the 19th century was not prosperous enough to play a central role in the culture or government. People in England did not frequently attend worship on Sunday.

As a result of efforts of the Oxford Movement, many other reformed movements appeared. For people to go back to the Bible and traditional Christian Faith, it was seen as necessary to reform the organization of the Church of England.

Rossetti's participation in the movement impacted her poetry. G. B. Tennyson remarks, that Rossetti's poetry grows out of the act of worship and that her work is frequently tied to established forms of worship and liturgical observance.⁷ She worshipped as a member of the Church of England and kept her Christian faith throughout her life.

The minister William Dodsworth, who preached at the church Rossetti's family attended delivered a series of sermons concerning the premillennial end of the world. She had written several poems about Christ's Second Coming and would compose many more in her life.

According to John O. Waller's remarks, Dodsworth preached "that Christians ought always to be watching for the fulfillment of that great prediction of our Lord, that He will come again to judge the world in righteousness."⁸ In his sermons, Dodsworth repeated that Christ's prophecy from Matthew 24. In this era, from current events, it might be important effectively in the sermons to be watching for the fulfillment of that great prediction of the Lord on the face of the earth in its physical, political, or moral and religious aspect. In that era, a number of devout Anglicans and Nonconformists lived in a state of continuous excitement concerning the end of time. That era's circumstances both the faith of Church of England and Dodsworth's sermons might have influenced on Rossetti. How her spiritual life help shape her poetry?

2. Features of the Poem "From House to Home"

Features of the poem "From House to Home" include romantic love and the suffering of the narrator, who speaks in the first person. The key feature of the second part is the salvation of the narrator. Love in a relationship with Christ is a key theme of Rossetti's poetry. She was apparently eager to seek eternal love in a romantic relationship, but in fact found those hopes unfulfilled. Therefore she suffered in love, and her suffering led her to seek the divine. How did she try to discover eternal love, and where did she find her salvation?

2 – 1 Earthly Joy and Suffering in the First Vision

In the poetry of "From House to Home", two visions are described by the narrator. In the first, beautiful nature and lovely animals are vividly described. Christina Rossetti seems to have liked little animals such as swift squirrels, leaping lambs and singing birds, as well as plants and trees. Other creatures appear in this poem, also. In the summer days, you can see little creatures in such expressions as "lizards," "Frogs," "fat toads," "caterpillars," "The burrowing mole." These living things, which are abundant in nature, may represent the Paradise of Eden. Creatures are described such as birds in the sky, animals running around, and insects crawling on the earth. They help populate an earthly paradise which exists in the poem. The following stanzas reveal its beauty.

It was a pleasure-place within my soul;
An earthly paradise supremely fair (6-7)

All singing-birds rejoicing in those trees
Fulfilled their careless life. (23-24)

In the next stanza, the scene is one of lovers spending a happy time together. The narrator and "one like an angel" are enjoying themselves.

Ofttimes one like an angel walked with me,

With spirit-discerning eyes like flames of fire, (45-46)

This image of “one like an angel” suggests Christ, as in Revelation 1:14, “. . . his eyes were as a flame of fire.”⁹

I felt no thorn-prick when I plucked a flower,
Felt not my friend was sad. (63-64)

The woman is not able to foresee the bitter disappointment approaching. The vision of happiness suddenly ends. Her beloved has left her swiftly.

Until my heart broke and my spirit broke:
Upon the frost-bound floor I stumbled, fell,
And moaned: “It is enough: withhold the stroke.
Farewell, O love, farewell.” (105-109)

The woman suddenly loses her delight. One night, her lover disappears from her. Day after day she searches for the one she loved. Her deep sadness and suffering are described in heart-rending detail.

In many ways Rossetti’s actual life, including her physical and emotional suffering, impacted the poetry she wrote. She spent most of her life in gloomy houses in London. However, she occasionally spent considerable time with her grandfather in the country, where she had time to be exposed to nature and the wilderness in her childhood. She was healthy as a child but was often ill during adolescence. She suffered a serious breakdown herself at fourteen and became retiring, self-critical, and morbid in her teenage years.

In this period, together with her sister, mother, she came under the powerful influence of the nascent Anglo-Catholic movement in the Church of England led by Edward Pusey. . . .¹⁰

Rossetti became engaged to James Collinson, a young painter and member of the Pre-Raphaelite brothers in 1848. He was a converted Roman Catholic and joined Christina’s Anglican Christ Church. The engagement was broken off when Collinson returned to Catholicism in late 1849, she terminated the engagement. In 1866, at the age of thirty-five, Christina received a second proposal of marriage from Charles Bagot Cayley, a translator of Dante. But she declined his proposal because of religious incompatibility. After suffering from sickness and refusing this proposal, the religious devotion became her dominant interest.

The quiet years which followed included one remarkable event. When a war was declared by Britain and France against Russia, beginning the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale led a nursing team to Scutari, Turkey. In 1854, Rossetti signed up to join Nightingale’s forces at

the Crimean front, but was rejected because of her youth.¹¹ She was deeply impressed by Florence Nightingale's way of life, which gave Rossetti an energetic feeling in spite of her sickness. Over the course of her life, her rejection of two fiancés, for whatever reason, was the cause of great suffering for her. Her poetry in general contains much writing in which love and sadness is the theme. She had a deep insight into the human spirit, in addition to an enduring Christian faith. The strength of her convictions is reflected in the fact that it was because of religious discord that she declined the proposals of two men. In her poetry her lament and sufferings were changed into her religious attitudes, and she strongly described her faith in God. Her Christian faith was the key formative influence on her devotional poetry.

2 – 2 A Woman Led to Salvation in the Second Vision

The second vision in the poem begins with "a woman" appearing. The narrator, who has fainted because of the sorrow of losing her lover, now dimly sees a vision of a woman, whose identity is never made explicit.

I saw a vision of a woman, where
 Night and new morning strive for domination;
 Incomparably pale, and almost fair,
 And sad beyond expression. (117-120)

But every flower was lifted on a thorn,
 And every thorn shot upright from its sands
 To gall her feet; hoarse laughter pealed in scorn
 With cruel clapping hands. (129-132)

She bled and wept, yet did not shrink; her strength
 Was strung up until daybreak of delight:
 She measured measureless sorrow toward its length,
 And breadth, and depth, and height. (133-136)

Rossetti's portrayal of this character in terms such as "with cruel clapping hands" and "She bled and wept" evokes the image of the crucified Christ, who was derided and mocked. Despite this type of suffering, "the woman" is chained, "anchored fast in heaven," which means she belongs to heaven. Here the woman, who has been disappointed and sorrowed to the point of bleeding, finds her suffering linked with Jesus Christ's experience of suffering and sorrow.

Rossetti's faith and life experience developed in her an understanding of the women of that time who were driven into prostitution. This empathy was found through the experience of doing volunteer work at Highgate House of Charity for "fallen women" from 1860 to 1870. The woman in the poem is a depressed woman who experienced deep suffering, resembling

that of both the crucified Christ and a woman forced into prostitution. Salvation in this context does not refer only to the Christian doctrine of cleansing from sin. Rather, it goes beyond this to a development of a spiritual richness, including peace in times of trouble such as Rossetti's experience in her life.

The discussion can now move to an examination of how the narrator in Rossetti's poem, pierced by suffering and broken by sadness, seeks her salvation in the second vision of the poem.

In the following two stanzas, the narrator, who is in despair, and "the woman," who also bears great pain, hears a voice from heaven. The voice appears to be that of an angel or God.

Then life swooned from me. And I heard the song
 Of spheres and spirits rejoicing over me:
 One cried: "Our sister, she hath suffered long"—
 One answered: "Make her see"— (105-108)

One cried: "Oh blessed she who no more pain,
 Who no more disappointment shall receive"—
 One answered: "Not so: she must live again;
 Strengthen thou her to live." (109-112)

This dialogue takes place among heavenly beings. The voices from heaven effect some change in the lives of the narrator and the "woman," for God's support and relief is given to them. "Who no more pain/ Who no more disappointment shall receive" suggest the words of the Revelation 21:4,

"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain..."

God in Rossetti's work is One who both gives people trials and takes away suffering. In order for her to live again, his voice is necessary. It is something which strengthens them. God gives people trials but also his support. To the ones who have experienced suffering and disappointment, God gives his consolation.

How does she experience salvation? The following stanza describes the process through which this transpires. A cup is sent down and she drinks a liquid from the cup which tastes first bitter, and then only sweet.

I saw a cup sent down and come to her
 Brim full of loathing and of bitterness:
 She drank with livid lips that seemed to stir
 The depth, not make it less. (145-148)

But as she drank I spied a hand distil
 New wine and virgin honey; making it
 First bitter-sweet, then sweet indeed, until
 She tasted only sweet. (149-152)

After drinking the cup, she comes to recover her life again. The meaning of the cup lies in the suffering of Christ in general and the sacrament of the church, communion, in particular.¹²

These words suggest that by drinking this cup, she also drinks the sacrament of Christ. At this point, she who drinks the cup and the narrator who sees her drink the cup sent from above, are linked spiritually. The narrator is also given the grace of the cup, the same as "the woman," who is then refreshed as the following describes.

Her lips and cheeks waxed rosy-fresh and young;
 Drinking she sang: 'my soul shall nothing want; (153-154)

She accepts the grace of God, singing a song which seems to derive from the verse of Psalm 23:1, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."

The preceding has indicated how the characters within the poem experience salvation from the struggles and trials of this life. In the latter part of Rossetti's work it can be seen how salvation in God is described. Special attention will be paid to how the author utilizes quotations from the Bible's book of Revelation.

3. Salvation in God in "From House to Home"

The last part of the poem contains many allusions to the Bible. The following is a discussion of the relationship between biblical passages and the poem, along with the significance of using those in Christina Rossetti's poetry.

A life recovered and heaven is depicted as follows:

One cried: "The wounds are faithful of a friend:
 The wilderness shall blossom as a rose"—
 One answered: "Rend the veil, declare the end,
 Strengthen her ere she goes." (156-160)

These lines correspond with Isaiah 35:1, "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." In the phrase "Rend the veil, declare the end," can be seen the world of the kingdom of God. The veil imagery suggests a division between earth and heaven. Rending the veil refers to the hope that in heaven believers will be made able to gain greater understanding of this life. What is confusion and mystery in the present world will become clear. How is heaven, or the kingdom of God, described

in the poem? In the last section, echoes of the Revelation of John are noticeable. Rossetti's writing style provides an example of the influence Scripture has had on culture in general, as the following indicates:

Victorian literature presents an interesting case to those concerned with the influence of the Bible and biblical tradition upon secular culture. . . . Keble's extraordinarily popular *The Christian Year* also makes half a dozen other references to the Apocalypse. . . .¹³

This style of poetry reflects the trends of the time. It is useful to consider further examples of the Revelation of John in "From House to Home." The following stanza is a reference to Revelation 21:1; "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away;"

Then earth and heaven were rolled up like a scroll;
Time and space, change and death, had passed away;
Weight, number, measure, each had reached its whole;
The day had come, that day. (161-164)

Revelation 5:9 is part of a description of a world beyond time and space, where all things are made new. "And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof," incorporates this imagery as follows:

They sang a song, a new song in the height,
Harping with harps to Him Who is Strong and True:
They drank new wine, their eyes saw with new light,
Lo, all things were made new. (169-173)

As the author describes it, people in heaven, like "Multitudes . . . in bliss" (165), "worshipped and rejoiced" (180). These are those who have been invited into the kingdom of God. "They drank new wine" (171) refers to a renewal of life. Thus these blessings of heaven are closely linked with the Revelation of John.

Rossetti's characters are looking forward with great anticipation to meeting Christ at the second coming. How does she conceive of Christ in relation to the second coming? D'Amico suggests it as follows:

Throughout her life, Rossetti accepted the doctrine that after death the soul did not enter into its full heavenly reward but had to wait until the Second Coming of Christ, when all would be judged, the living and the dead, and those chosen would then enter the New Jerusalem.¹⁴

Rossetti at various times heard sermons by the vicar of Christ Church, William Dodsworth, on

the end of the world and the Second Coming. D'Amico notes "Such sermons might easily have encouraged Rossetti to wonder about the time between death and resurrection."¹⁵ This sheds light on how her poetry may have come to deal with the subjects the Second Coming of Christ and the idea of the Apocalypse. John O. Waller mentions the features as follows:

There is much conventional Biblical imagery, which . . . have been derived from the Advent sermons of Dodsworth. Some poems convey joyful expectation, others pray for a speedy Advent, others offer Christ's coming as consolation for earthly sorrow, or exhort to preparation, or evoke the dreadful Judgment scene, or meditate on the passing away of time¹⁶

In her poetry, the imagery of the First Resurrection at the Advent is described.

The subject of salvation in God involves one further key aspect of the role of Christ in the poem: his loving-kindness. The author describes the relationship between him and the faithful in heaven: "All loving, loved of all; / But loving best /And best beloved of Christ." (191-192), Love in Christ is the most important and the best thing. For his saving love Christ is praised highly.

Entering the last section of the poem, the narrator remembers her suffering and now through it, she has come into the salvation of God. Phrases such as "the fallen was lifted up" (196) express how splendid it is being lifted up to salvation.

Finally, it can be seen where the author states that hope to live again may be found and how the narrator prepares to continue her life in the days which follow. After the narrator sees the vision of people in heaven in bliss, she asserts that the woman, "who drank the loathsome cup" (194), has now been "lifted up" (196). The narrator reveals the hope that she believes in the renewal of life.

Rossetti expresses this faith through such hopeful energetic phrases as "my soul shall walk in white, Cast down but not destroyed (203-204), and "Therefore in patience I possess my soul" (205). Each phrase is quoted from the Bible. The first is from 2 Corinthians 6:9, and speaks of the servants of God "As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed;" The second refers to Luke 21:19, which reads: "In your patience possess ye your souls."

In contrary of the first part of the poem, a positive attitude and solid decision to live again appears here. In the stanza, "Beauty for ashes, oil joy for grief, / Garment of praise for spirit of heaviness:" (217-218), the words of Isaiah 61:3 are brought to mind:

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. . .

The glory of God becomes more recognizable through the words of the prophet. We can understand that Christ is the One as "He" is (221) who nourishes the author as her "root" (222). The support and grace of Christ have a warming effect on her. In the last stanza, we

can see the firm decision of the narrator. Here she reveals the source of her inner strength.

Altho' today I walk in tedious ways,
 Today His staff is turned into a rod,
 Yet will I wait for Him the appointed days
 And stay upon my God. (225-228)

Apparent behind the phrasing, Rossetti employs the poetry of Psalm 23:4,6:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. . . I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

“Thy rod and thy staff” in the Bible perform the functions of both discipline and protection, each as appropriate, the shepherd guiding the sheep in the best way to proceed. The poem concludes that true comfort and rest are with God, and the narrator is looking forward with great anticipation and a true hope to meeting God.

Conclusion

In this poem, Christina Rossetti describes both this world and heaven through two visions. One is the world in which earthly love disappears, sadness is profound, and suffering is deep. In the second vision the process of resurrection and Christ as redeemer are described. Rossetti's suffering characters experience a re-birth through the suffering of Christ on the Cross. In this vision, “a woman” who lost her love, bled, and wept in pain, is able to meet God in heaven, and the narrator, through this woman is also able to experience the salvation of God.

I saw that one, who lost her love in pain,
 Who trod on thorns, who drank the loathsome cup;
 The lost in night, in day was found again;
 The fallen was lifted up. (193-196)

This woman described as “fallen,” reflects the image of Christ, who suffered death on the cross. From the experience of Rossetti's working at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary for “fallen women,” it is apparent that she cared about the salvation of those women. She was not a theologian and did not participate actively in the feminist movement, though her work at Highgate House of Charity did serve to promote the welfare of women. She lived her life quiet writing poetry supported by her family. Sara Choi notes that Rossetti studied a Bible from her childhood, at her Anglican mother's advice. With this strong element evident in her character formation, Rossetti:

produced devotional writings such as *The Face of the Deep*, and her religious prose shows Rossetti as an active reader of Scripture.

. . . Rossetti's exegetical method is evident throughout all the diverse fruit of her own creativity, as the poet actively reads, interprets, and tastes Scripture.¹⁷

In that era, poetry and the Bible were closely connected. To write poetry was to seek the Deity for her. She recognized the depth of women's suffering in that age and sought where true salvation was. Although previous research shows the view point of feminism, the salvation of Christianity is emphasized clearly. With her rich sensibility and deep insight into the human spirit, she wrote devotional poetry, with profound aesthetic expression.

NOTE

- 1 D'Amico, Diane. *Christina Rossetti: Faith Gender and Time*. New York: Louisiana State University Press, 1999, 1.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Lona Mosk Packer. *Christina Rossetti*. University of California Press, 1963. 131. *Rossetti William Michael* was Christina's elder brother, who collected and edited her poems.
- 4 Herbert Schlossber. "The Tractarian Movement religion in Victorian Britain." April 2002
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/herb7.html>>. George P. Landow's Victorian Web, 23 December 2004.
- 5 D'Amico, Diane. 43.
- 6 George P. Landow, "John Keble on Religion", 1992
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/keble.html>>. George P. Landow's Victorian Web, 23 December 2004.
- 7 George. B.Tennyson. *Victorian Devotional Poetry*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. 200.
- 8 Waller, John O. "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist Willam Dodsworth." *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 73(1969):469.
- 9 Scriptural references are from the Authorized (King James) Version.
- 10 Marsh, Jan. *Poems and Prose Christina Rossetti*, London: Everyman, 2001. xix
- 11 Katherine J. Maybenny. *Christina Rossetti and the poetry of discovery*. Louisiana State University Press, 1989. 8.
- 12 1 Corinthians 10:16 "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"
- 13 Mary Wilson Carpenter, & George P. Landow. "The Apocalypse in Victorian Literature." George P. Landow's Victorian Web, 23 December 2004.
<<http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/apocalypse/3.html>>.
- 14 D'Amico, Diane. 34.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Waller, John O. 473.
- 17 Sara Choi. "Christina Rossetti's Dialogical Devotion—" *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 53, No.4 (Summer 2004): 492.

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