

# On the Religious Emotion Revealed in the Poetry of Puritanical Christina Georgina Rossetti

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## ABSTRACT

Christina Georgina Rossetti is one of the most talented poetesses in English literary history. The devout religious beliefs made her poems overflow with very biblical colors. Rossetti enjoyed revealing her strong religious emotions in almost all her single poems. Her puritanical religious emotion was related with her growing social environment and family atmosphere. This paper aims to analyze Rossetti's religious emotions and the reasons to convert her from secular happiness to religion.

**Keywords** *Christina Georgina Rossetti, poetry, religious emotion*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Christina Georgina Rossetti was a famous English poetess in the Victorian era. She has a very high position in the history of English literature and is regarded as one of the most talented female poets in the English literary world. [1] Her poetry was influenced by pre-Raphaelite aesthetic art style founded by his brother Dante Rossetti: featured with plainness and simplicity, sincerity and delicacy, deep sadness enveloping a kind of mysterious and dreamy atmosphere. [2] As Christina was a devout British Christian, whose devout religious faith makes her poetry filled with a strong religious color. In addition, her religious poetry is permeated with love, which is infused with religion. Religion and love are the two spiritual lines running through Christina's life. Christina is so fanatical to religion that she can abandon love at all costs, which makes most of her works full of strong and deep religious feelings.

## 2. The MAIN REFLECTION OF THE STRONG RELIGIOUS FEELING IN ROSSETTI'S POEMS

First of all, Christina tends to choose religion and death as subjects for her poems. She began to write poetry when she was a little girl, she was fascinated by the relationship between the soul and God, and later she became a devout religious person. Therefore, religion and poetry became the important pillars in her life and she combined them into one: the devotion to religion was written into her poems so that her poems were full of strong religious feelings. "Goblin Market" is her most famous poem, and it is not only a narrative poem by using the folk rhymes, but also a profound allegory with a strong mysterious religious emotions. This poem describes the different attitudes of

Lizzie and Laura when they are in face of the temptation of "forbidden fruit". The younger sister Laura couldn't resist the temptation of the little goblin's selling fruit and gets the fruits with a roll of golden hair, thus losing the most precious virginity of girl's. And her sister Lizzie is like a stately maiden city, she resisted the temptation and saving Laura from her stray way. As the ideal woman in Victorian literature, Lizzie has a girl's purity which is required by Rossetti as well as a passion for standing out for her sister in time of danger. Lizzie is also, in a way, the spokesmen for Christina's self-integrity. Christina explicitly expressed in the poetry of the religious theme: all the people in the world have the sense of passion and the sense of reason, if flesh can lead to death, then rationality is the way to salvation. To some extent, rationality results from the faith, god gives people more victory over the power of the flesh, in order that they are happy to get to the other side of the world. The religious themes presented in Christina's poems are undoubtedly rooted in her strong religious feelings.

Secondly, the use of symbolic expression to express religious feelings can be seen in almost every single poem of Christina. In *Ash Wednesday*, the poem begins with the question: "Jesus, do I love Thee? / Thou art far above me, / Seated out of sight / hid in heavenly light/ Of most highest height." [3] which expresses the poet Christina's infinite admiration for the sacredness and grandeur of Christianity. The phrase "far out of reach" in the poem indicates the poet's ambivalence of longing for heaven but fearing that she is not qualified to enter it after her death. Because of her infinite longing for God and heaven, the poet repeats "heaven" in her poems, hoping that she could go to heaven to see God after death, which was a way for her to release her religious feelings. The symbolism is particularly evident in the long poem "Threshold of a Monastery". "ladder" and "golden ladder" in the poem "Threshold of a Monastery" symbolize "the way to the heaven", "glass city" and "glass sea" in this poem mean "heaven", "distant grand city", "water-washed earth", and "stars" symbolizes "the other shore" and "heaven" which haunted in the

poet's mind, "lily" and "red earth" stand for love of the poet. Although the poet sometimes yearns for "love" in her heart, she still regards it as "stain" and "sin". The poet believes that only by washing her soul and extinguishing the fire of lust can she choose the "road to heaven" and reach the "heaven" he longs for. Obviously, Christina chose "the threshold of the monastery" as a symbol to express her ambivalence about whether to choose to convert to God or choose to convert to love in her final destination, and to express the inner conflict about whether to cut love off or stay in love with her lovers forever. In the end, the lyric lingers at the monastery gate, singing and chanting, but forsaking the threshold of entrance, taking the heaven where God dwells as the place of reunion for lovers. The lyric's final choice at the convent is a mirror which reflects Christina's life: though yearning for love, she twice rejects the marriage proposal of a lover of different religions, undoubtedly, she loves God more than herself. Thus, both the themes in Christina's poems and the emotional choices she made throughout her life are powerful testimony to the purity and nobility of her religious sentiments.

Thirdly, Christina used a lot of religious expressions and negative words in her poems, which also showed her sincere, unique and affectionate religious feelings. Cassius Langnos, a famous linguist, when talking about the interrelationship between language and thought, he said, "The choice of appropriate and magnificent words can have astonishing effects...As if to give these works an interpretive meaning." [4] The words such as "Jesus", "Heavenly", "Martyre", "Seraphs", "Angles", "Archangels", and other religion-related words are included in the opening few sentences of "Ash Wednesday". These expressions throughout the poem discloses the poet's devout religious feelings of looking up to Jesus and her deep belief in Jesus. In the sonnet "Stay", the religion-related word "soul" appears repeatedly four times, and "paradise", "glory" and "spirit" these words appear successively. The poet cleverly uses and collocates the beautiful words, musical rhyme, alliteration, even consonants or vowels to express the meaning, so that the themes of religion, death and love, beauty and peace, reflect the aesthetic characteristics of Pre-Raphaelites poetry. In the poem of "Threshold of monastery", the religion-related words throughout the poem include "ode", "ascension", "cherub", "blazing angel", "cross", etc., from these words, the poet's wishing to become an angel and ascend to heaven is clearly stated.

In addition to using the religion-related words, the poet also likes to use the words related to nature and some negative words to help express her religious feelings. Such words include flowers, leaves, birds, sheave, tardy sand, etc. These flowers, green leaves and birds create a beautiful, life-colored and spiritual background for death, which blurs the boundary between life and death, with a certain religious and mysterious color. In Christina's poems, negative words such as nor, not and no are also frequently used. In "Song", "not" appears three times and "nor" and "no" appear twice each. It is self-evident that "nor", "not" and "no" are synonyms. The poet's repetition

of these synonyms shrouds the whole poem in an atmosphere of rejection and denial, showing the poet's struggle and contradictory psychology in the face of death. The repeated use of negative words also expresses the poet's recognition of peace and tranquility after death. To some extent, the poet is not afraid of death, but often thinks of love and death as something beautiful and sublime, which can be strongly felt in her poems "Love and Death", "Love has a Name of death", "Song", "Heaven" and other poems.

### **3. The ROOT OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S RELIGIOUS MOOD IN POEMS**

First of all, the reason why Christina's poems show such strong religious feelings is closely related to the family environment in which she grew up. Christina's mother Francis seems to have a more lasting influence on her than her father. A devout English Catholic with a generous heart and a quiet Stoic personality, Francis's perfect moral idealism left a deep imprint on Christina and her brothers and sisters, which made them often feel intense moral anxiety in the face of earthly life. This influence is most evident on her two daughters, the eldest Maria and the second daughter Christina. Her sister Marie had excelled in Dante studies, but ended up devoting herself to religion and going to a convent. Under the influence of her mother and sister, Marie eventually became a devout Catholic in England and she never married all her life. Although devout religious faith will make the path of life clear and concise, but it is also often become an unbearable burden. By the standards of heaven, all worldly pleasures and happiness are undoubtedly questionable, even insignificant. It is this harsh skepticism that has twice shut Christina out of the door of love, and she will not sacrifice her religious beliefs for worldly happiness. For Christina, Love between a man and a woman may seem sweet and overwhelming, but it eventually resulted in a crushing shame and humiliation, which can never rival the love of God. Her love for God is holy and eternal, and this holy love is like a firm hand or a bright flower, which guides the poet to heaven. Although Christina lived in London for most her life, in fact her soul had been living in heaven, receiving the judgment of God.

Secondly, the low status of women in Victorian era was also an important factor for Rossetti to feel depressed about reality and turn to religion. "Victorian women" refers to the middle class women of the Victorian era in England. They were once regarded as the most perfect and holy women in the world, and they were "the angle in the house" [4]. Rossetti is one of them. That a woman should stay at the home is a popular social concept in the Victorian era, which restricts the scope of women's activities to the limited domain of the family. It is widely believed that "the duty of a woman is to be a good wife and good mother" [4]. The role of women as housewives has been constantly beautified and idealized. Superficially, they did live a decent, well-fed life and were respected in their families,

but the actual status of women at that time was very low. Economically, they are completely dependent on men and they are the property of their husband; in law, they have no independent personality, and they have been deprived of marriage autonomy, property rights, and the right to choose a career; spiritually, they lack confidence and self-esteem, and hence they lived in emptiness — they are confined to a small family, in a state of legal servitude. Such a life for a girl like Rossetti who is unwilling to be a canary and suffered the failure of love as well, is no doubt like chronic suicide. In order to adapt to the society, she had to play the traditional role that people expected. However, her heart was so eager for independence and freedom that she was severely depressed in spirit. Disillusioned with secular life, the church offered an outlet for Rossetti's anguish and repression — they preached equality and freedom: "God is on the side of the weak, the poor, the women and the disenfranchised...God is there for women to live and establish their values." [4] Religion opened a new door for Rossetti, who turned her hope for life to the pursuit of the love of God.

The church advocates that women should dedicate their bodies and hearts to God and not indulge in worldly desires. Moreover, in Rossetti's persistent pursuit of the love of God, the Oxford movement, which emphasized the concept of human original sin, made Rossetti live a humble and self-controlled life, thus she followed her religious belief further.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Religion gives us a sense of mystery and coldness, but the unique religious thoughts contained in Rossetti's poems reflect her unique emotional appeal and charm. Rossetti lived in full compliance with Victorian moral standards and religious requirements, so that "Rossetti's ears listened to nature, and she heard the most innocent voices, and her poetry was as natural as nature itself." [5] Because of this, her religious poems are not completely detached from the secular world. She is still full of enthusiasm for life within the narrow confines of religion, which is also the reason why Rossetti's poems are loved by most people beyond the boundaries of religion.

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