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THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

The article describes the history and uniqueness of Christina Rossetti's poem «A Birthday» and comments on different interpretation of its images.

Key words: Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, religious intensity, an octave, the melodiousness of the images, a poetic method.

Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894) was an English poet whose poetry underwent the influence of her life and also by the time, the second half of the nineteenth century, she was living.

Christina was the youngest child of Gabriel Rossetti, and Italian political refugee, who came to England in 1824. Her brothers were artistic people – a poet and a painter. Christina Rossetti was a deeply religious Anglo-Catholic and she was also associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina's brother. She shared the Pre-Raphaelite taste for beautiful but sad and rather languish imagery but her diction is remarkable for its simplicity.

Her poetry has a very depressing and rather a somber tone. She is thought of as a somewhat melancholy poet. Much of her writing is sad and even morbid. The ideas of the nearness of death and the abandonment of earthly life are the motifs of her poems «When I am Dead», «After Death», and «Weary in Well-Doing».

Much of Christina Rossetti's poetry was inspired by her religion. Her poem «In the Bleak Mid-Winter» is her passionate expression of her love of God. However she also demonstrates a love of nature in her work as in her poem «Spring», and the lighter side of life as in her poem «A Birthday», which is a rapturous expression of delight in love.

A Birthday

*My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree*

*Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these,
Because my love is come to me.*

*Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me [Cited by 9, 1].*

Christina Rossetti's poem «A Birthday» first appeared in «Macmillan's Magazine» in April, 1861. «Macmillan's Magazine» was a monthly British magazine from 1859 to 1907 published by Alexander Macmillan. The magazine was a literary periodical that published fiction and non-fiction works from primarily British authors. Then the poem was reissued the following year in the collection «Goblin Market».

«A Birthday» is one of the Christina Rossetti's most popular poem, one of her best-known and most-often-quoted one. Its critics consider this poem to be a declaration of love and the author's greatest expression of full joy. The poem is, in the subject matter and tone, a departure from most of her other work, which are concerned with failed love, a morbid sense of impending death, and a lover who will not or cannot return the speaker's feelings.

Elizabeth Judd in her essay for «Poetry for students» wrote: «A Birthday» is such an unexpected work from Rossetti – who was known for her reserved, serious demeanor and religious intensity – that its first line inspired a cartoon by the writer and artist Max Beerbohm. In that cartoon, Beerbohm depicts Christina Rossetti,

dressed all in black and wearing a large dark hat that conceals most of her downturned face, being questioned by her more flamboyant brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who asks, «Well, Christina, your heart may be like a singing bird, but why do you dress like a pew-opener?» [1].

Christina Rossetti's poetry is characterized by its meter, its breathless and unforgettable rhythms. The construction of the poem is careful, consisting of two octaves (stanzas) of eight lines each. The repetition of the first three words «My heart is» in the first, third, fifth and seven lines in the first octave gives the impression that the poet is seeking for a simile or a comparison to describe her happiness.

The second octave (stanza) confirms the point that language can't fully capture the thrill of her senses suggesting that concrete actions should be taken. As a whole «A Birthday» shows the power of poetry to express strong feeling and to put it into a stable form through the music of the words. Let's comment on some examples of the melodiousness of the images created by the poet.

Vocal expression to a 'singing bird' is as natural as breathing. Christina Rossetti indicates that her song forms a natural part of herself and is an overflow of her identity. The image of the singing bird is often used in Romantic poetry, by William Wordsworth in particular. Christina's heart, 'a singing bird', has its nest in a 'watered shoot', the place where one can live and rest. The word 'shoot' reminds of the first stages of growth of a plant as it emerges from the ground. By describing a shoot as 'well watered', the poem conveys ideas of lushness and fertility and at the same time a place of fragility.

Many critics consider that the image of the 'apple tree' recalls the imagery in Keats' *Ode to Autumn*. This begins by describing fruit ripe and ready on apple trees:

*Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round he thatch-eves run;*

*To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core* [Cited by 6].

By speaking of her heart as a 'rainbow shell' Christina Rossetti provides an image of exuberant colour drifting at ease in tranquil waters. This reminds the image of the rainbow which refers to the fulfilment of God's promises. For English readers, the phrase 'halcyon days' was associated with ideas of joy, prosperity and tranquillity so the poet uses the image of the halcyon sea to indicate the deep comfort and rest she has found.

By ending the first stanza with the declaration that her 'heart is gladder than all these', the speaker indicates that descriptions of the natural world are incapable of fully expressing her exuberant emotional state.

Giving emotions to the 'apple tree' full of fruit and the 'rainbow shell' Christina Rossetti uses a kind of personification, the technique of pathetic fallacy. The term 'pathetic fallacy', which was coined by the British cultural critic John Ruskin in 1856, is a literary term for the attributing of human emotion and conduct to all aspects within nature [7].

Christina Rossetti's brother, William Michael Rossetti, supposed «A Birthday» to have corresponded to his sister's emotion at the time, a renaissance of her old love for James Collinson and her new passion for Charles Cayley. Christina herself provided no clues to the poem's composition.

The poem embodies some natural and artificially made objects and their examination provides a fascinating glimpse into the associative method of the poet's mind. The singing bird, the apple tree and the rainbow shell – the three natural objects – appear in their native settings in the first stanza. Christina herself once mentioned that «common things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured» [Cited by 2,261].

In the second stanza the doves and pomegranates, the peacocks, the gold and silver grapes, the leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys do not appear in their natural settings. They are artistic rendering of natural objects. The pomegranates are a

particulization of the fruit of the apple tree, the doves and peacocks may be related to the bird, which appear in the first stanza.

Even though the meaning of the images in the second stanza is secular traditionally the images bear religious meaning and reflect the awareness of traditional Christian art.

Our analysis of the poem shows that Christina was familiar with the natural world and her knowledge of religious symbols. There are two more sources imitating creative imagery in the poem. As R.D.Lynde writes, « the first is in the world of commonplace Victorian representation art. The pomegranate, for example, occupied a prominent position in Georgian architecture, where it figured in fruit and flower mouldings. And the peacock was, in mid-nineteenth-century England, commonly depicted as a modern Indian symbol woven into fabrics imported from that country.

Another connection between the commercial world and the poem is suggested by the tradesmen's signs still found in some places in England, particularly the cities. In the second stanza of «A Birthday» the speaker gives commands to craftsmen who are obviously dyers:

Raise me a dais of silk and down

Hang it with vair and purple dyes» [Cited by 2, 2].

As the painted sign of the dyer in England traditionally included the peacock, the rainbow, and the dove together, and as all of these appear in the short space of the poem, quite possibly the author's observation of such a sign suggested this otherwise random combination» [2, 262].

One more possible source of imagery in Christina Rossetti's poetry is connected with her personal history. «Her elder brother, Marjory A.Bald writes, was an art critic; her first lover was an artist; she drew designs and illustrations for some of her own poems. It came naturally to her to regard everything as the possible foundation of a picture» [Cited by 2, 262].

In her brother's religious works one can see, for example, a lily greatly resembling a series of fleurs-de-lys or a dove representing the Holy Spirit.

There seem to be few other possible themes for this poem apart from the ones identified. The way that the poem is entitled «A Birthday» with the indefinite article rather than «My Birthday» strongly suggests that this poem is not strictly about the speaker's own birthday. Certainly the extremity of emotion and joy she experiences on this day is somewhat incongruous if it were her birthday alone. The lines «*Because the birthday of my life / Is come, my love is come to me*» strongly hint that what the title refers to is not a literal birthday but the day when something was birthed.

The phrase «birthday of my life» indicates that the speaker feels in a very real sense that she has not lived before. She now feels alive and happy and she has never experienced such feelings prior to this important «birthday».

The final line of the poem indicates that this birthday relates to a «love» who has entered the speaker's life. Whether this love is a description of God and is a religious experience, or whether the poem is actually about a more physical and corporeal love is unclear. What is clear is that with the advent of this «love,» the speaker's life will never be the same again, and the description as she tries to capture her emotions and feelings of joy and ecstasy highlight this strongly.

Characterizing Christina Rossetti's manner of writing William Michael Rossetti wrote that her «habits of composing were eminently of the spontaneous kind ... something impelled her feelings, or 'came into her head', and her hand obeyed the dictation» [Cited by 2, 263].

Christina Rossetti's own poetic method, a freely associative one, gave her an opportunity to recreate unique images. These images are remembered from her direct observation, from traditional Christian myth and artistic religious symbolism, from her acquaintance with commercial art of Victorian period in England, and her memories of her artistic family.

By her poem «A Birthday» Christina Rossetti proves a famous statement that any young artist should absorb without selection all sense impressions as they come into the mind.

As her critics underline, of all Victorian women poets, Christina Rossetti's poetry has never disappeared from view. Her reputation suffered a decline in the first half of the twentieth century but it has always been preserved to some degree.

In the 1980s feminist critics undertook a reexamination of Christina Rossetti's poetry. The trends today run toward a spread of critical approaches. Many of these approaches place the poet's work in a different context of Victorian ideas about culture and aesthetics, including her fiction, nonfiction, and children's poetry [8].

Critics continue to study Rossetti's response to and influence in a women writers' tradition. Christina Rossetti's poetry is increasingly being recognized as among the most beautiful, innovative and mysterious of the Victorian period.

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ФИЛИППЬЕВА Т. И.

ТАЙНА КРИСТИНЫ РОССЕТТИ

В статье раскрывается история и уникальность стихотворения Кристины Россетти «День рождения», комментируются различные интерпретации его образов.

Ключевые слова: Прерафаэлитское братство, интенсивность религиозных чувств, восьмистишие, мелодичность выражения, поэтический метод.

ФІЛІП'ЄВА Т. І.

ТАЄМНИЦЯ ХРИСТИНИ РОССЕТТИ

У статті розкривається історія та унікальність вірша Христини Россетти «День народження», коментуються різні інтерпретації його образів.

Ключові слова: Прерафаелістське братство, інтенсивність релігійних почуттів, восьмивірш, мелодійність вираження, поетичний метод.

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