

Case Study: Christina Rossetti

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will gain experience in close reading a poem using an element of analysis you have learned about in this course. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Reading Rossetti's Poem
2. Analyzing Rossetti's Poem

1. Reading Rossetti's Poem

First, read the poem. As you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the poem about?
- How does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

"Love from the North" (1862) by Christina Rossetti

I had a love in soft south land,
Beloved through April far in May;
He waited on my lightest breath,
And never dared to say me nay.

He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.

The wedding hour was come, the aisles
Were flushed with sun and flowers that day;
I pacing balanced in my thoughts:
'It's quite too late to think of nay.' —

My bridegroom answered in his turn,
Myself had almost answered 'yea':
When through the flashing nave I heard
A struggle and resounding 'nay'.

Bridesmaids and bridegroom shrank in fear,
But I stood high who stood at bay:
'And if I answer yea, fair Sir,
What man art thou to bar with nay?'

He was a strong man from the north,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous grey:
'Put yea by for another time
In which I will not say thee nay.'

He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me on his horse away
O'er crag, morass, and hairbreadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.

He made me fast with book and bell,
With links of love he makes me stay;
Till now I've neither heart nor power
Nor will nor wish to say him nay.

(Sisson, 1984, p. 62)

2. Analyzing Rossetti's Poem

"Love From the North" seems to tell a simple story: A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows.

The rhyme scheme also seems very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight four-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is "nay," there is only one rhyme sound throughout. If you read closely though, you'll notice that the same rhyme sound also occurs internally, or within the lines. This gives the poem a steady rhythm, which is maintained throughout each four-line stanza.

This particular structure is called the ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does so only to recount events—part of the convention is that ballads don't go into psychological complexities. Still, it seems that Rossetti's story is hinting at something deeper. It's thus important to look at multiple elements of analysis together in order to try to piece together the meaning.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider the following questions:

- What is the effect of this form and its rhyme scheme?
- Why do you think Rossetti chose to structure the poem this way?
- What can you tell about the speaker's disposition based on her voice?

- Is there a larger metaphor that the story is meant to convey?

It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the recurrence of the word "nay" throughout the poem is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men— the compliant lover and his opposite, the controlling lover. After all, "nay" is the sound which, despite its meaning of negation, gives the poem its striking unity and coherence.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you began by **reading Christina Rossetti's poem "Love from the North."** You then practiced **analyzing Rossetti's poem** by questioning the element of rhyme and its role in the poem.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Approaching Poetry" tutorial.