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## UNIT 40 THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD: DANTE GABRIEL AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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### 40.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- write about the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in art and literature in the nineteenth century.
- understand the work and achievements of two of its practitioners, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister, Christina Rossetti.
- be acquainted with some of their poems.

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### 40.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit will first familiarize you with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement that took place in the nineteenth century. Then it will speak of two poets of the movement, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti, analyzing two of the former's poems and one by the latter.

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### 40.2 THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD :A MOVEMENT IN ART AND LITERATURE

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The Pre-Raphaelite Movement was not a movement confined to literature. In fact, it started with painting. In 1848 a group of young British painters banded together in a reaction to what they conceived as the unimaginative painting of the Royal Academy. They purportedly sought to express a new moral seriousness and sincerity in their works. They were inspired by Italian art of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and their adoption of the name Pre-Raphaelite expressed their admiration for what they saw as the direct and uncomplicated depiction of nature typical of Italian painting before the

High Renaissance and, particularly, before the time of **Raphael**. Although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's active life lasted less than 10 years, its influence on painting in Britain, and ultimately on the decorative arts and interior design, was profound.

Apart from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood comprised Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais. They were all under 25. The painter James Collinson, the painter and critic F.G. Stephens, the sculptor Thomas Woolner, and the critic William Michael Rossetti (Dante Gabriel's brother) joined them by invitation. William Dyce and Ford Madox Brown were also notable practitioners of the Pre-Raphaelite style in painting.

#### Paintings:

The Brotherhood immediately began to produce highly convincing and significant works. Their pictures of religious and medieval subjects emulated the deep religious feeling and naive, unadorned directness of 15th-century Florentine and Sicilian painting. The style that Hunt and Millais evolved featured sharp and brilliant lighting, a clear atmosphere, and a near-photographic reproduction of minute details. They also frequently introduced a private poetic symbolism into their representations of Biblical subjects and medieval literary themes. Vitality and freshness of vision are the most admirable qualities of these early Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

At first the Brotherhood exhibited together anonymously, signing all their paintings with the monogram PRB. When their identity and youth were discovered in 1850, their work was harshly criticized by the novelist Charles Dickens, among others, not only for its disregard of academic ideals of beauty but also for its apparent irreverence in treating religious themes with an uncompromising realism. Nevertheless, the leading art critic of the day, John Ruskin, stoutly defended Pre-Raphaelite art, and the members of the group were never without patrons.

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### 40.3 DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI: INTRODUCTION TO THE POET

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D. G. Rossetti [original name **GABRIEL CHARLES DANTE ROSSETTI**] (1828--1882), was an English painter and poet who helped found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was educated at King's College before he went to "Sass's," an old-fashioned drawing school in Bloomsbury (central London), and thence to the Royal Academy schools, where he became a full student. A voracious reader, he was well read in William Shakespeare, J.W. von Goethe, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott. He was fascinated by Gothic tales of horror and the work of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. In 1847 he discovered the 18th-century English painter-poet William Blake whose diatribes against the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds encouraged Rossetti to attempt lampoons of his own against the triviality of early Victorian paintings.

By the time Rossetti was 20, he had already done a number of translations of Italian poets and had also composed some original verse. Simultaneously, he was in and out of artists' studios and for a short time was, in an informal way, a pupil of the painter Ford Madox Brown. He acquired some of Brown's admiration for the German "Pre-

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**RAPHAEL** (1483-1520) Italian artist, master painter and architect of the Italian High Renaissance. He was a disciple of artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Raphael is best known for his Madonnas and for his large figure compositions in the Vatican in Rome. His work is admired for its clarity of form, ease of composition and for its visual achievement.

- it is the place of Peace, the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed either by husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home: it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by household gods, so far it indicates the name, and fulfills the praise of, home.

Ruskin's diction is significant. The home is a 'vestal temple.' The Victorians valued the purity and chastity of the woman. In stark contrast with these noble aims was the existence in 1850 of eight thousand prostitutes known to the police in London alone. However, people as disparate as Charles Dickens the novelist, William Gladstone the prime minister, and Christina Rossetti the poet, were campaigning with religious zeal to "rescue" them.

Perhaps the best symbol of Puritanism of the Victorian people was their joyless Sunday. In 1837, a Sunday observance Bill was introduced in the Parliament. (It, by the way, was strenuously opposed by Charles Dickens.) Although the bill did not get passed the sober Sunday ritual got established by custom, if not by law.

Although no major Victorian writer was an Evangelical it would be difficult to name even one who was not touched by this Low Church movement within the church of England. George Eliot could be cited as an example of this legacy. After having abandoned Christianity and lived for years with a married man she went on to analyse problems of conscience in her novels. Significantly her first published work was a translation of David Friedrich Strauss's (1808-74) *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-6). Strauss had subjected the gospel accounts of Jesus to close examination and found them based on myth rather than historical facts. Her study of Strauss, confirmed Eliot's break from Christianity.

If on the one hand there was the enlightened opinion of persons such as George Eliot (about whom you would read more in MEG-03) on the other there were "fundamentalist" tendencies, as we would call it, raising its head at Oxford. In 1833 John Keble (1792-1866) the Oxford professor of poetry (1831-41) delivered a sermon on national apostasy. In it he criticized the prevalent Erastian and latitudinarian tendencies of the Anglican Church. (Erastus or Thomas Liebler (1524-83) a Heidelberg physician had opposed the use of excommunication. He was supposed to have held the view that ecclesiastical power should be subordinated by secular.) The Oxford Movement, as it came to be known, sought to defend the Anglican Church (or Church of England) as a divine institution with an independent status and to revive the High Church traditions of the seventeenth century. A High Church person lays emphasis on rituals, the saving grace of the sacraments and the priesthood as opposed to the Low Churchman. Inspired by Keble's sermon John Henry Newman (1801-90), and R.H. Froude (1803-36) launched their series *Tracts for the Times* in 1833. The Oxford Movement thus began to be called the *Tractarian Movement*. The Oxford Movement helped revive interest in mediæval and the seventeenth century church which influenced Tennyson, William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites.

You have six units in this block: the first unit will give you a background of the Victorian age. This should help you appreciate its poetry in its proper perspective. In unit 36 we also provide you with models for your own essays that you would be required to write for your examiners. We also give you a model term-paper in this unit.

Besides the introductory unit on the age you will read three units on Robert Browning who was one of the three major poets of his age and one of the great poets of any

Raphaelites." the nickname of the austere Nazarenes." who had sought to bring back into German art a pre-Renaissance purity of style and aim.



D. G. Rossetti

Largely through Rossetti's efforts, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848 with seven members, all Royal Academy students except for William Michael Rossetti. They aimed at "truth to nature," which was to be achieved by minuteness of

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" The Nazarenes (so called because they sported the biblical style of hair and dress) was an association of German painters, formed in 1809, who wished to revive the medieval spirit in art through fresco painting. It was anti-academic movement that reacted against the 18<sup>th</sup> century Neoclassicism. The Nazarenes' belief in the honest expression of deeply felt ideals had an important influence on the English Pre-Raphaelite movement of the mid-nineteenth century.

detail and painting from nature outdoors. This was, more especially, the purpose of the two other principal members. William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. Rossetti expanded the Brotherhood's aims by linking poetry, painting, and social idealism and by interpreting the term Pre-Raphaelite as synonymous with a romanticized medieval past.

### 40.3.1 Early Works

Rossetti's early oil paintings were simple in style but elaborate in symbolism. Some of the same atmosphere is felt in the rich word-painting and emotional force of his poem "**The Blessed Damozel**," published in 1850 in the first issue of *The Germ*,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> the Pre-Raphaelite magazine. When it was exhibited in 1850, his painting "Ecce Ancilla Domini" received severe criticism, which Rossetti could never bear with equanimity. In consequence, he ceased to show in public and gave up oils in favour of watercolours, which he could more easily dispose of to personal acquaintances. He also turned from traditional religious themes to painting scenes from Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and Dante, which allowed more freedom of imaginative treatment.

### 40.3.2 Personal experiences

Much of Rossetti's work has its roots in his personal life. His paintings and poems are based on lived events and experiences and the persons they immortalize are generally intimately connected with his life and work: the public and the personal are not separate. Hence, some awareness of his personal life, and the people he came into close contact with, is essential for a proper understanding of his work.

An important chapter in Rossetti's life began in the 1850s with the introduction into the Pre-Raphaelite circle of the beautiful **Elizabeth Siddal**, who served at first as model for the whole group but was soon attached to Rossetti alone and, in 1860, married him. Many portrait drawings testify to his affection for her. In 1854 Rossetti gained a powerful but exacting patron in the art critic John Ruskin. By then the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was at an end, splintered by the different interests and temperaments of its members. But Rossetti's magnetic personality aroused a fresh wave of enthusiasm. In 1856 he came into contact with the then-Oxford undergraduates Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. With these two young disciples he initiated a second phase of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

From 1860 onward, trials were part of Rossetti's much-disturbed life. His marriage to Elizabeth Siddal, clouded by her constant ill health, ended tragically in 1862 with her death from an overdose of laudanum. He was so stricken with grief and remorse that he buried with her the only complete manuscript of his poems. That he considered his love for his wife similar to Dante's mystical and idealized love for Beatrice is evident from the symbolic "**Beata Beatrix**," painted in 1863 and now in the Tate Gallery.

### 40.3.3 Portrayal of women

Under the influence of new friends --- Algernon Charles Swinburne and the American painter James McNeill Whistler --- Rossetti explored a more aesthetic and sensuous approach to art. In particular, he focused on portrayals of female beauty.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> *The Germ*: A periodical edited by W. M. Rossetti, of which the first issue appeared on Jan 1, 1850. *The Germ* was the spokesman of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but survived only four issues, the last appearing on April 30, 1850. The last two issues of the journal were renamed **Art and Poetry, being Thoughts Towards Nature**. *The Germ* published the poems of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and is believed to have inspired William Morris's *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) which continued the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

such as his mistress, Fanny Cornforth, gorgeously appareled and painted. Among these works is "The Blessed Damozel" (1871-79). The luxuriant colours and rhythmic design of these paintings enhance the effect of their languid, sensuous female subjects, all of whom bear a distinctive "Pre-Raphaelite" facial type. The paintings proved popular with collectors, and Rossetti grew affluent enough to employ studio assistants to make copies and replicas.

#### 40.3.4 Literary Endeavours

Rossetti had enjoyed a modest success in 1861 with his published translations, *The Early Italian Poets*; and toward the end of the 1860s his thoughts turned to poetry again. He began composing new poems and planned the recovery of the manuscript poems buried with his wife in Highgate Cemetery. Carried out in 1869 through the agency of his unconventional man of business, Charles Augustus Howell, the exhumation greatly distressed the superstitious Rossetti. The publication of these poems followed in 1870.

*The Poems* were well enough received until a misdirected, savage onslaught by "Thomas Maitland" (pseudonym of the journalist-critic Robert Buchanan) on "The Fleshly School of Poetry" singled out Rossetti for attack. Rossetti responded temperately in "The Stealthy School of Criticism," published in the *Athenaeum*, but the attack, combined with remorse and the amount of drugs and alcohol he now took for insomnia, brought about his collapse in 1872. He recovered sufficiently to paint and write, but his life was subsequently that of a semi-invalid and recluse. In the early 1880s Rossetti occupied himself with a replica of an early watercolour, "Dante's Dream" (1880), a revised edition of *Poems* (1881), and *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881), containing the completed sonnet sequence of "The House of Life," in which he described the love between man and woman with tragic intensity. From a visit to Keswick (in northwestern England) in 1881, Rossetti returned in worse health than before, and he died the following spring.

Rossetti remains an important figure in the history of 19th-century English art and literature because he broke with tradition and experimented with new themes. What is remarkable in his work is his eye for detail, through his painting as well as his poems. In his poetry, through the accumulation of details and the building up of a deep emotional intensity, he is able to create the desired atmosphere effectively. This is what he does in his poem "My Sister's Sleep" where one can almost feel the silence and sickness of the woman's room and the sense of doom that prevails. In other poems, too, he employs similar effects, as in "The Wood Spurge" and the lyric "I have been here before." "The Stream's Secret," haunted by the ghost of his dead wife, evokes pity and regret by the power of its verbal music. This theme of death, grief and longing is a prominent one in the work of Rossetti. The relation between life and death, the physical and the spiritual, haunted him throughout, heightened particularly by the tragic loss of his wife.

Rossetti's poetic art had other, less subjective aspects. "The Last Confession," a tragic episode set against a background of the Italian Risorgimento (the movement for the liberation and unification of Italy, 1750-1870), is a powerful dramatic monologue that can bear comparison with those of Robert Browning. With his feeling for medieval subjects, Rossetti also caught the spirit of the ballad as in his "Sister Helen" and "Eden Bower." "The White Ship" and "The King's Tragedy," are outstanding re-creations of the historical ballad. Early in Rossetti's career, the sight of the great winged bulls in the British Museum evoked his poem "Burden of Nineveh" (1850), a meditation on the unpredictable course of history that is rich in word-music and far-ranging in imaginative vision.

In this section you will read two poems of D.G. Rossetti. They are 'My Sister's Sleep' and 'The Blessed Damozel'.

#### 40.4.1 "My Sister's Sleep"

In "My Sister's Sleep" Rossetti attempts with the help of words what the Pre-Raphaelite painters did with paintbrush and easel in their paintings: he uses verbal effects where they use colours and paints to evoke a realistic scene in the minutest detail. The setting appears to be the Rossetti home but the dying sister is a figment of his imagination.

The poem is remarkable for its creation of a hushed atmosphere, its concentration of detail, and its visual images. There is in the poem the sorrow that is inevitably related to death and the idea of dying. But the sorrow does not become claustrophobically unbearable as there is an element of equanimity that pervades the poem, a calmness that makes sorrow an acceptable reality.

Rossetti's poetic style needs a special mention. He tends to use monosyllabic words and his lines are short, composed in simple iambic (an unstressed and a stressed syllable) tetrameter (three feet in each line). The stanzaic pattern is rhymed *abba* quatrains. What holds the attention most, however, is not the technicalities of the poem but the play of light and colour throughout. Rossetti remains a painter even in his poems, creating visual art with words. His poetry appeals more through the images it evokes than the ideas it contains.

As is evident from "My Sister's Sleep," Pre-Raphaelite poetry generally focuses on a single female figure: its beauty, grace, and divinity is evoked in sensuous detail. One may notice a romantic idealization of womanhood in these portrayals. The women, as in romantic poetry, are frail, weak, weeping, pining, swooning or dying. They need to be looked after, to be supported, to be protected. True, this is a chauvinistic view, but such was the stereotype favoured in the nineteenth century. Anything different was seen as an anomaly. Such is also the female figure presented in Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel."

#### 40.4.2 "The Blessed Damozel"

"The Blessed Damozel" was first written in 1847, when Rossetti was 19, and published in *The Germ* in 1850. There is also a painting by Rossetti of the same subject which dates much later (between 1875 and 1879). The poem, as Rossetti himself said, is inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" in which speaks of a grief-stricken lover. The Rossetti's were familiar with foreign literatures and had discovered Poe's work much before it hit the European scene. As Rossetti was to state later in life, "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the condition, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven."

So, in Rossetti's poem, the beloved is in heaven, longing for her lover who has survived her on earth. One may trace in the poem the obvious influence of Dante. Just as Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, glorifies his beloved, Beatrice, and looks on her as a medium that will take him to divinity, so too, Rossetti looks upon the woman in the poem as some kind of a divine creature, looking down at her mortal lover. Like Dante's poem, "The Blessed Damozel" combines physical love with the spiritual, seeking a plane that transcends earthly bonds.

The manner in which Rossetti turns to heaven and to a spiritual after-life would convey the idea that his is religious poetry. In fact, the title of his poem ("The

Blessed Damozel") brings to mind the Virgin Mary. But Rossetti's intention was never to write for religious purposes. On the contrary, whereas religion believes in a shedding of all earthly bonds following a union with God, the idea Rossetti presents in "The Blessed Damozel" is that earthly love survives in heaven. There is also a lot that the religious-minded would object to in his portrayal of the disconsolate woman's indifference to all heavenly delights in her disconsolate, grief-stricken state.

The poem begins with a picture of the beloved in her heavenly abode. But she is discontented and sorrowful. Oblivious of all the beauties that surround her, she looks down at the earth below:

The blessed damozel leaned out  
From the gold bar of heaven;  
Her eyes were deeper than the depth  
Of waters stilled at even;  
She had three lilies in her hand,  
And the stars in her hair were seven.

This opening stanza of the poem prepares us for what is to follow. It "locates" the poem, so to speak, identifies its main character, and points a cue to the stylistic devices the poet uses.

Location-wise, the scene is heaven. But there is an ambivalence in Rossetti's portrayal of heaven: the "gold bar" brings to mind the bars of a prison, it suggests a lack of freedom. For the woman, no doubt, heaven is a prison that keeps her away from her true love. (The last stanza of the poem will tell us that they are "golden barriers.") Similarly, there is irony in the poet's use of the adjective "blessed" for the girl. A blessed state generally connotes contentment, bliss, peace, shades of divinity. In the girl's case, however, there is neither peace nor happiness. Even though her sorrow is not outlined in the opening lines, a suggestion of it is present in the "bar" that confines her to heaven and in the mysterious depths of her eyes (l.3).

The description of the girl merits some more attention. The three lilies in her hand and seven stars in her hair are a statement on the Pre-Raphaelite poetic method: its concentration on minute detail in order to create a realistic picture. There is also a romantic element in the description of the girl with languid, deep eyes, adorned with flowers and stars, leaning over the gold bar. It reminds us of idealized female figures in romantic poetry. As we proceed further into the poem, this impression is reinforced when we are told that the woman pining for her lover. This brings to mind the woman wailing for her demon lover in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." But the situation is somewhat different because in Rossetti's poem it is the woman who is divine ("blessed") while her lover is mortal.

The poem may be divided into two almost equal parts. The first half (65 lines) of the poem concentrate on the forlorn woman's elysian surroundings while the second half comprises mainly her monologue, her yearning for her lost love.

In the first half of the poem there is a constant play on the polarities of this world that the girl now inhabits (heaven) and the other world (the earth) that she has left far behind, that lies way below. It may be noted that whereas the first is described in detail, the second (the earth) is not described at all and there is a constant reference to the gap, the chasm that separates the two. Even though the girl tries hard to see what is happening in the world below, she is unable to do so. All she sees is mists and darkness, both symbolic of her unmitigated despair.

The poem does not end on a note of hope even though there is a temporary calming of grief in the penultimate stanza when the girl is "Less sad of speech" and she smiles. It is almost as she consoles herself, reconciling herself to her present forlornness. Perhaps in her heart of hearts she knows that reunion is impossible and



she realizes the futility of her longing, because the concluding stanza tells us again that she weeps with her face buried in her hands.

Despair, in Rossetti's vision, is also to be found in heaven! Despair and longing for earthly bliss, for human love.

**Simple exercises for comprehension:**

1. Show how Rossetti in his poems uses words the way a painter uses colours. [You will have to look at the poems carefully and study the images they describe, their concentration on detail, the use of colour, light, and shadows. You will also assess the symbolic value of the images and their appropriateness in the given context.]

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2. Explain how Rossetti is concerned with the connection between this physical world and the other world of afterlife. Do you find traces of romanticism in this concern? Illustrate your answer with the help of the themes and images employed in his poems. [For this question you will first speak of the theme of death in both the poems that have been discussed in this unit. Then you will show how death has been treated. You will try to figure out in what way it is connected with earthly existence. Which of the two, in your opinion, seems more satisfying to the poet? Life or death?]

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3. With the help of the two poems you have read by Rossetti, comment on the Pre-Raphaelite treatment of women. [Keep in mind that the important women in Rossetti's life were initially models who posed for the young painters. So, for the Pre-Raphaelites they were tools that could take them towards success. Paradoxically, even though they could be "hired" in the commercial sense, these women were idealized by the Pre-Raphaelites. They were not visualized as drab, ordinary women, but as divine, ethereal creatures. So the women they painted or wrote about were transformed from ordinary, realistic human beings into extraordinary, "blessed" creatures who, by virtue of their suffering or by dying, acquired a halo of divinity. The poets seemed to believe in the romantic concept of women as creatures who are frail and may swoon, faint or die. This point may be easily illustrated with the help of Rossetti's work.]

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**40.5 CHRISTINA ROSSETTI**

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI, pseudonym ELLEN ALLEYNE (b. 1830--1894), one of the most important of nineteenth-century English women poets both in range and quality. Christina was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti and was the

sister of the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In 1847 her grandfather, Gaetano Polidori, printed on his private press a volume of her *Verses*, in which signs of poetic talent are already visible. In 1850, under the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, she contributed seven poems to the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*. In 1853, when the Rossetti family was in financial difficulties, Christina helped her mother keep a school at Frome, Somerset, but it was not a success, and in 1854 the pair returned to London, where Christina's father died. In straitened circumstances, Christina entered on her life work of companionship to her mother, devotion to her religion, and the writing of her poetry. She was a firm High Church Anglican, and in 1850 she broke her engagement to the artist James Collinson, an original member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, because he had become a Roman Catholic. For similar reasons she rejected Charles Bagot Cayley in 1864, though a warm friendship remained between them.



In 1862 Christina Rossetti published *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and in 1866 *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, both with frontispiece and decorations by her brother Dante Gabriel. These two collections, which contain most of her finest work, established her among the poets of her day.

In 1871 Christina was stricken by Graves' disease, a thyroid disorder that marred her appearance and left her life in danger. She accepted her affliction with courage and resignation, sustained by religious faith, and she continued to publish, issuing one collection of poems in 1875 and *A Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881. But after the onset of her illness she mostly concentrated on devotional prose writings. *Time Flies* (1885), a reading diary of mixed verse and prose, is the most personal of these works. Christina was considered a possible successor to Lord Alfred Tennyson, as poet laureate, but she developed a fatal cancer in 1891. *New Poems* (1896), published by her brother, contained unprinted and previously uncollected poems.

Though she was haunted by an ideal of spiritual purity that demanded self-denial, Christina resembled her brother Dante Gabriel in certain ways, for beneath her humility, her devotion, and her quiet, saintlike life lay a passionate and sensuous temperament, a keen critical perception, and a lively sense of humour. Part of her success as a poet arises from the fact that she apparently succeeded in uniting these two seemingly contradictory sides of her nature. There is a vein of the sentimental and didactic in her weaker verse, but at its best her poetry is strong, personal, and unforced, with a metrical cadence that is unmistakably her own. The transience of material things is a theme that recurs throughout her poetry, and the resigned but passionate sadness of unhappy love is often a dominant note.

While looking at Christina Rossetti's poetry, one must keep certain factors in mind. In the first place, it is important to remember that in the nineteenth-century Victorian Age there were several repressive forces constantly operating on women. Women were not supposed to be opinionated. They were conventionally required to simply conform to the male line of thought. Christina Rossetti was gifted with a sharp, intelligent mind but the keenness of her mind was suppressed by the pressures of social propriety. She lived a more or less sheltered life with little contact with the world outside except through her brothers and their bohemian friends. She was not learned, unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and remained unexposed to scholastic theories. Above all, what governed her actions throughout her life was her deep religious belief.

#### 40.5.1 "Goblin Market"

'Goblin Market' is Christina Rossetti's best known poem. Unfortunately, it is only in recent decades that it has received the attention it deserves. Formerly it was generally relegated to the children's literature or fantasy literature category. The reason for its neglect was partly because its main characters are two young girls and partly because Christina Rossetti's talents remained undiscovered until she was resurrected by contemporary feminist critics.

On the surface level "Goblin Market" (henceforth "GM") is what may be called a "fairy poem." Loosely speaking, it may be placed in the ballad tradition. It is a narrative that follows a swift, racy pace, revolves around a given character and her fate, leads up to a central event, and apparently underscores a (then) socially acceptable moral lesson. The distinctive feature lies in that this poem is about a female character, her fall from grace, and subsequent redemption. If we look at the poem, we find similarities with the ambitious project tackled by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*. There are, however, significant differences: Christina Rossetti's poem speaks of no male characters, except for the goblins who are not human but half-animals, whereas Milton's epic speaks of the fall of Adam. "GM" speaks of transgression by a female protagonist; the role of a Christ-like saviour is taken up by

another female character, the erring girl's sister. The central motif remains the same: succumbing to temptation, suffering as punishment, sacrifice and redemption.

In the very first lines (ll. 1-80), the poem lays bare the situation: there are two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, both young, innocent, and virginal. And there is temptation that lurks everywhere in the form of strange, deformed goblins who appear as fruit-sellers to seduce and destroy the innocence of unsuspecting girls. The goblins are fearsome, yet fascinating. One of the sisters, Laura, finds herself being drawn towards them despite her sibling's admonishments.

Lines 81-140 speak of Laura's transgression: she partakes of the goblins' fruit, paying for them with a symbolic lock of her golden hair, and returns home satiated. A wise Lizzie upbraids her and reminds her of the harm the goblins did to a certain Jeanie who had tasted their fruit and died in her youth. Laura, however, is sort of intoxicated with the goblin's feast and pays little attention (81-183). As they fall asleep, they present a pretty picture (184-198), typically Pre-Raphaelite in its detailed description.

The following day, a change comes over the errant girl. She goes about her chores as usual but pines for the night when the goblins would appear again with their wares. However, when twilight gathers, her sister, Lizzie can hear the goblins' call but not Laura. This makes Laura realize that her desire for more fruit from the goblins would never be satisfied and that she is now doomed to a life of frustrated desire (199-268).

Lines 269 to 328 describe Laura's suffering and decline. It appears that she will now suffer a fate as miserable as Jeanie's. Finally, when she is at death's door, Lizzie decides to save her somehow, so she goes to the goblin men and asks for some fruit. The goblins insist that she should eat the fruit in their presence but she refuses to do so. Thereupon they are enraged and attack her with the fruit, trying to force her to eat. She stands stoically, braving their assaults and is covered with juices (329-446). In this dissheveled state, drenched with fruit-juices, Lizzie runs home and tells Laura to lick the juices off her. The ailing sister does so, and is saved but only after suffering a raging fever (447-542).

The concluding lines of the poem (543-567) shift the focus into the future and speak of the two sisters as grown women, contented with their home and children, warning their daughters of the dangers that may befall them if they go astray, advising them to stand by each other in time of need.

This is the narrative on the obvious level. Writing in times when women were supposed to be angels in the house, it appears as though Christina Rossetti is reinforcing the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Laura is innocent and happy as long as she remains within the confines of domesticity, away from temptations of the outside world, particularly temptations related to female desire. Accepting the repressive norms of society, she may ensure for herself a trouble-free existence. However, when she breaks the social taboo, she has to suffer. Lizzie, who admonishes her from time to time, acts as the moral voice of her times, repeating the socially correct message.

Some critics, referring to the poet's personal life and her rejection of men and marriage, read the poem as an expression of Christina Rossetti's underlying fear of sexuality. The goblins, in their evil, distorted guise, represent the latent fear of men that Christina Rossetti probably lived with. This may be related to the fact that there are no other normal men in the narrative. Even when, in the final stanza, "GM" tells of Laura and Lizzie in their maturer years, neither their husbands nor their sons are mentioned. They are shown only in the company of their daughters and the close bonding between them is stressed. The concluding lines are:

For there's no friend like a sister  
In calm or stormy weather;  
To cheer one on the tedious way,

To fetch one if one goes astray,  
 To lift one if one totters down,  
 To strengthen whilst one stands.

These lines further strengthen the theme that sisterhood is powerful and make "GM" an unmistakably feminist poem. No wonder, therefore, that feminist critics discovered much to be lauded in the poem.

The two sisters of the poem, it has been argued, may be taken to represent two sides of the poet: one stern, self-denying and ascetic, the other sensuous, hedonistic, and self-indulgent. Lizzie represents the society with its repressive norms while Laura is the rebel, questioning and transgressing those norms. In keeping with the Victorian ideology, Laura suffers because she breaks the rules. She pays a heavy price for not observing the moral code. And when she regains life and vitality through her sister by symbolically "eating" her, she is in a way ingesting the moral code, reconciling to and accepting the social norms she had earlier transgressed. Consequently, she can be happy once more.

Like the women portrayed by the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, "GM" also gives us a picture of a woman who is weak and vulnerable. Laura, as she wilts away, is very close to the kind of women immortalized on the canvas by Rossetti and his followers. Christina Rossetti was far too conditioned by her social milieu not to be influenced by the stereotype. And yet, being an intelligent, thinking, person, she could not rest with merely the conventional portrait of a woman. So her protagonist is given other traits: a questioning mind (like her creator's), a spirit of adventure, and the courage to face the consequences of rebellion. Similarly, Laura, even though she represents the patriarchal order, is presented as an individual that one may not break: for instance when she stands firm as a rock facing the onslaughts of the goblins. Contrasted with the evil role played by the (male) goblins, she takes on a positive, nurturing role as she risks her own life to save her sister and nurse her back to health once more. For this reason "GM" remains a strong, woman-centered poem.

The poem may be compared to Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" where a loitering knight encounters a beautiful woman and succumbs to her charms. The woman betrays him and he is doomed to pine forever more. Whereas Keats portrays a *femme fatale* (a deadly woman), Christina Rossetti in "GM" portrays *les hommes fatales* (dangerous men) in the horrendous band of goblins. She is concerned with how men manage to seduce women and then discard them once their object is fulfilled. According to the patriarchal Victorian ideology, women are attractive as long as they are virginal, but once "fallen," they are of no use and lose their charm. These are rules laid down by men (goblins in the poem) who are the lawmakers.

The parallel between the consumption of the fruit and the loss of chastity, thus, is obvious through the poem. And yet the theme is subtly dealt with, in keeping with the Victorian taboo of female sexuality. Christina Rossetti, even though she tackles a bold theme, does not openly flout convention. She veils her point so successfully through this allegory that "GM" is often mistaken for children's literature.

### Self-Check Exercises

1. Make a list of the animals mentioned in the poem and note how they are all connected with the goblins. Try and assess the symbolic value of the animal imagery.

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time. The other two were Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. You should try to read some of their poems on your own. You may like to write a term paper on an aspect of the age and another on Lord Tennyson and the third one on *In Memoriam* which is considered a great Victorian poem. Besides being a Victorian Browning can also be considered a pre-modernist.

So would Oscar Wilde, whose *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was a controversial poem in its day but has since then been appreciated. You would read the poem in unit 41

The mediaevalist tendency of the Victorian age finds representation in the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites (discussed in unit 40). No matter how backward looking they might have been it is through them that we can appreciate an important tendency of the age, i.e. its love for the Gothic.

The frontispiece of this block is Turner's 'Rain, Steam and Speed - the Great Western Railway'. It was done in 1844. If on the one hand the creamy impasto appears to emulate Rembrandt, on the other it seems to anticipate Whistler (1834-1903) and the Impressionists. If the dancing maidens on the bank of the Thames and the plough in a distant field bespeak a society that is fading before the impact of the scientific revolution, the hare racing before the fiery dragon of the train opposes natural to man-made velocity. The present piece by Turner is the third on this course by him and you may compare the three works to discover the impact of the age on the mind of a visual artist of the calibre of Turner.

Editorial

2. Do you think the goblins of "GM" represent the male world? If so, is the poem an attack on patriarchy? Illustrate your answer with the help of the appearance, habitat, and profession of the goblins. [Note that they inhabit a glen --- a shady, mysterious place --- and only emerge in the dark, after sundown. Also take into account that theirs is a forbidden world into which maidens may stray only at the risk of their lives. Besides, they are merchants engaged in selling fruit that is not normal or seasonal, but enchanted, which has a disastrous effect on anyone (any girl) who eats it. This fruit is given not at an honest price, but for a lock of hair (to Laura) or forcibly thrust (so attempted in Lizzie's case). The girls are either helplessly caught in the game the goblins play or else they, like Lizzie, must remain strong and ward them off.]

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3. Highlight the connection between poetry and painting in "Goblin Market." [Compare the images and colours Christina Rossetti uses for the goblins with those used for the two sisters. Note how, like Dante Gabriel, she uses words the way an artist would use paints.]

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## 40.6 LET'S SUM UP

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In this unit you have been told about the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, how it originated and made a mark on the literary and artistic scene. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his sister Christina Rossetti, two of the main proponents of the movement have been discussed in detail. You should now be able to write about the movement and also about the works of these two poets.

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## 40.7 SUGGESTED READING

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Critical analyses of her writing include Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (1986); David A. Kent (ed.), *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (1987), a collection of essays; Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (1988); and Katherine J. Mayberry, *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (1989). Edna Kotin Charles, *Christina Rossetti: Critical Perspectives, 1862-1982* (1985), surveys critical responses to her poetry over 120 years. Sandra Gylbert and Susan Gubar have made a detailed study of "Goblin Market" in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

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## 40.8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (1928, reprinted 1978), gave an unsympathetic view of him; it was followed by the overt hostility of Violet Hunt, *The Wife of Rossetti* (1932). Against this prejudice the daughter of W. M. Rossetti

came to her uncle's defense: Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies* (1949, reprinted 1977). *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* by Lionel Stevenson (1972) speaks of the movement and the main artist-poets.

Assessments of Rossetti's achievements are found in Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (1976); Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (1981); David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (1983); and David G. Riede (ed.), *Critical Essays on Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1992), which includes several contemporary responses to his poetry as well as more modern critiques.