

## 16. Remember by Christina Rossetti

### POET

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Rossetti was the child of an Italian immigrant who lectured at King's College, London. Her father died of tuberculosis in 1854, which led to Christina's nervous breakdown and a constant financial struggle for her family. Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel was a famous painter and founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Movement in art which sought to reverse the effects of industrialisation and return art to the truth of nature. Christina Rossetti was a devout Anglo Catholic who did charitable work with homeless women to educate and improve their conditions. She received two proposals of marriage during her lifetime, but refused them both due to a religious incompatibility. She remained single all her life. She suffered from Grave's Disease and later breast cancer which eventually killed her in 1894, aged 64. She wrote and published poetry from her teenage years and throughout her life.

### BACKGROUND

The poem was written when Rossetti was only nineteen years old. She had already experienced profound bereavement after the death of her father when she was fourteen. The poem is in a sonnet form which comes from Italy. Her family was Italian and her father taught Italian literature and poetry at King's College.

### SUMMARY

The speaker of the poem instructs her loved one to remember her when she is dead. However, by the end of the sonnet the speaker makes a different suggestion; she realises that she would rather her lover forget her and be happy, than remember her and be sad.

### ANALYSIS

The poem is written in the sonnet form. The sonnet is a fourteen line poem invented in Italy in the medieval period. Traditionally, sonnets were written by aristocratic men to show off their literary skill. They were always addressed to a woman or Beloved figure. Poets would write whole sequences of sonnets which would form the scenes or episodes in a love story. At a time when novels did not exist, these poems offered extended and developing narratives. Because the form was invented in Italy, a Catholic country, the Beloved was usually given the attributes of the Virgin Mary. She would therefore be pure, moral and unwilling to enter a sexual relationship with the male poet. Rossetti takes these typical ingredients or conventions of the sonnet and adapts them. By writing a sonnet, Rossetti is entering into a tradition of male love verse; this shows that she believes women are able to speak and feel as passionately about love as men. She also adapts the subject matter of the form; although the poem is still about love, it is also about death and memory. This shows her skill as a poet, exploiting the form to create new meanings. The title of the poem "Remember" is consequently surprising for a sonnet as it is not directly about love. Instead, the title seems to speak an instruction for a listener to obey. We are not sure at this stage if the intended listener is the Beloved or the reader. It places the reader under an immediate pressure to memorise what is about to be said and to be able to recall it in the future.

The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet. This form of sonnet divides the fourteen iambic pentameter lines into two distinct sections. The first eight lines or octave rhyme ABBA ABBA, while the final six lines or sestet rhyme CDE CDE. Petrarchan sonnets take this form in order to offer an opportunity for the poem to change the direction of its thoughts at the end of the octave. This change of direction is called the volta.

The octave begins with the phrase “Remember me”. This imperative is clearly addressed to a Beloved. It takes the form of an instruction. This gives the poetic voice a sense of authority and power. However, this authority is diminished when we realise that the instruction is repeated again in line five and in line seven, forming a refrain. The repetition of the order reduces its power, making the speaker seem uncertain or desperate about being heard. Moreover, the word “remember” is repeated five times in the fourteen lines of the poem. This underlines the anxiety of the speaker and possibly the sense that remembering is something which may be difficult to do.

The poem also begins with a pronoun – “me”. This pronoun is rapidly followed by another one in the opening line – “I”. This reiteration of words directing us back to the speaker shows how keen she is to be heard, and suggests that the subject matter of the poem is deeply personal and important to her. The first line ends with “when I am gone away.” The Beloved is therefore being told to remember the speaker when they have left. The word “gone” could mean that the speaker is simply departing. However, the more morbid meaning of this is revealed in the second line when the speaker repeats “Gone far away”. By breaking up the phrase with the word “far” the speaker extends the concept and this lengthening makes the distance she will go appear even greater. The line ends with a metaphor – “into the silent land”. It is now clear that the speaker is not just leaving the Beloved; their journey is taking them to somewhere not human – to a realm of death. Therefore the previous phrases have been euphemisms or nicer ways of seeing something awful; they are less upsetting words for death. Death is being imagined here as a journey, a trip to be embarked upon to a distant location. The location “the silent land” is an unnerving image. It describes a world where there is no sound. A lack of sound suggests possibly that the speaker’s senses will be deadened. It also implies that the afterlife is a lonely world with no one else to speak to or to hear. This could be read as quite unchristian; it is certainly not a typical view of heaven. More positively, the “silent land” could be interpreted as a place of quiet and therefore calm.

Having told her Beloved that she will die and that he must remember her, the speaker describes what it will be like when she is gone. She paints a vivid picture of the Beloved being unable to “hold me by the hand”. This suggests that normally there is physical intimacy between them, but that this will be impossible after death. She also explains that she will have no alternative; “Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay”. Lines three, four and five contain three negatives: “no”, “Nor” and “no”. These underline the inescapable nature of death, and the fact that she will not be able to control or evade it.

The speaker goes on to imagine other examples of what will be lost when she dies. The couple will not be able to share “our future that you planned” and it “will be late to counsel then or pray”. This means she moves from the physical companionship they share when holding hands to the emotional and mental relationship they have. It describes a relationship which has been ended prematurely, as there was a “future” which can now not be realised. This is sad. More emotional still, is the realisation that time will run out for them, and there

will be no opportunity to gain advice from friends or to seek help from God. The idea that neither the human nor the divine realms will be able to help is again disturbing and depressing. Throughout these lines, the refrain "Remember me" echoes, reminding the Beloved that the only way she can survive is in his thoughts.

The volta comes at the end of the octave with the word "Yet". This changes everything. The word is a synonym for 'but'. The speaker is offering an alternative. The reader must wonder if this alternative is being provided because the speaker has lost confidence in the Beloved remembering her or if a new idea has simply occurred.

The speaker now moves on to deal with the possibility of forgetting. This is ironic in a poem entitled "Remember". The sestet contains two "if"s. They focus the reader on the possible aftermath of the speaker's death. The speaker tells her Beloved "if you should forget me for a while And afterwards remember, do not grieve". Here she reassures the Beloved that if he does not remember her constantly and begins to live his life again that he should not feel guilty. Interestingly, she uses the word "grieve" to describe the emotion of sadness that he should not feel about forgetting her. This word is more usually applied to the feelings of a person who is remembering a dead loved one. This is ironic.

The speaker goes on to explain why she does not want her Beloved to be sad when she is gone – "For if the darkness and corruption leave A vestige of the thoughts that once I had". The "darkness and corruption" describe death itself. Again this appears quite unchristian as death is not imagined as a gateway to a heavenly afterlife. Instead, death is lacking light and it is full of decay. The word "corruption" is being used here in its archaic form to mean putrefaction or the process of becoming rotten. It is a horrible image which draws the reader's attention to the fact that the speaker's body will be decaying in the grave. However, she hopes that a "vestige" or little bit of her "thoughts" or personality will still survive after her body's destruction. This might refer to a soul living on after death or simply a spiritual presence or echo of her. The speaker believes that if a tiny part of her soul can remain when her body has decayed, that this part of her would want her Beloved to be happy.

The final two lines of the sonnet reverse the meaning of the octave. The speaker seems to have changed her mind; now she has realised that she would rather her Beloved avoids her instruction to "Remember me" if this means he can be happy without her. She says "Better by far". This emphasizes the change in her thoughts, and her acknowledgement that she would sacrifice the lasting memory of her in return for her lover's contentment. These lines juxtapose two contradictory phrases: "you should forget and smile" and "you should remember and be sad". The phrases equate forgetting with happiness and remembering with grief. It is as though the speaker of the sonnet has spent the octave thinking about her own fears of death, but has now decided that she loves her partner enough to want to be obliterated from his memory so he can be happy once again. Thus the speaker ultimately gives up on her order to "remember" and gives her Beloved permission to move on with his life after she is gone. She wants him to "smile". This simple word encapsulates the hope she has for the Beloved's future which is starkly in contrast with her own expected death, decay and eradication from memory.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“War Photographer” – provides an interesting contrast with this poem as it is also about capturing death and destruction, but this time in photographs. The photographer wants people to notice and remember, whereas Rossetti finally decides forgetting is better.

“My Last Duchess” – provides a point of comparison between a male voice remembering a dead lover, while this poem has a female voice instructing forgetfulness of herself.

“Do not go gentle into that good night” – provides a powerful comparison as Thomas pleads with his father to fight against death, and Rossetti’s speaker accepts the inevitability of death.