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## **Unit-3 □ Christina Rossetti's 'A Dirge'; 'A Birthday'**

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### **4.3.0 Introduction**

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The previous unit (4.2) has introduced to you two important women poets of the Victorian age— Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Bronte. In this unit you will be acquainted with another poet of the same period whose poetry is rich in melodies and pictorial details. Widely published and appreciated in her lifetime, Christina Rossetti had mastered the art of poetic narration as well as lyric expression. The art of Rossetti bears clear influence of the English Romantic tradition and yet manages to carve its own niche along with the works of the other important Victorian poets like Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Hopkins.

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### 4.3.1. Christina Rossetti: A Literary Life

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The fourth and youngest child of Gabriele and Frances Polidori Rossetti, Christina Rossetti was born on 5 December 1830 in London. Christina's father, an Italian by birth, was a political refugee who came to England in 1824. Keenly



**Christina Rossetti**

interested in Italian art and literature, especially in the works of Dante, Gabriele Rossetti became a Professor of Italian in King's College London and married Frances Polidori, who was also half-Italian by descent. The four Rossetti children—Dante Gabriel, Maria Frances, William and Christina were brought up in a bilingual atmosphere of home under the strict supervision of their deeply religious mother. The Anglican principles that Christina's mother inculcated in her had a profound influence on her life and art. The

daughters of the household did not have any formal schooling and were taught at home by Frances. From a very tender age Christian started composing poetry. She began entering her completed poems in notebooks in as early as 1842. Her poetic talents were recognized and appreciated by her family members and in 1847 her first volume of poetry was privately published by her maternal grandfather. But situation at home was not very propitious for the young poet, in 1843 Gabriele had fallen ill and the eventual threat of blindness forced him to give up his teaching post. Christina's elder sister, Maria took up a position as a governess and William became a clerk in a government office. In the following years Christina was assisting her mother in setting up a private school which, however, proved to be a commercially unprofitable venture. The year 1848 proved to be a significant one in the history of the Rossetti household and also in the history of English Literature and art. In 1848, a group of young artists, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, set up the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a consortium of painters who attempted to recreate the fusion of sensuousness and religiosity in their painting. Their stated objective of the group was to go back to the artistic principles adopted by the painters of Italian High Renaissance before Raphael. The spirit and aims of the Brotherhood found expression not only in the painting of the members but also in the poetry of Dante Gabriel,

Charles Algernon Swinburne and Christina Rossetti. Christina, who was never a member of the Brotherhood, but remained at the margins of the group, was introduced to a young painter named James Collinson through his association with the PRB. Christina got engaged to Collinson but broke the engagement when he decided to convert to Roman Catholicism. Meanwhile Christina continued to write poetry and also started writing prose. 1862 saw the publication of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and in 1866 *The Prince's Progress* was published. A second engagement, this time with Charles Bagot Cayley, was broken around this period as Christina could not reconcile herself with Charles' unorthodox religious views. Publication of her works had begun in earnest since the 1860s through the encouragement and mediation of Dante Gabriel. Thus in 1870 Christina's first prose volume *Commonplace and Other Short Stories* was published; it was followed by *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872); *Seek and Find* (1879); *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881). By the time Frances Rossetti died in 1886, Christina's reputation as one of the leading poets of the late nineteenth century was firmly established. Always of frail health and suffering from various ailments, Christina was diagnosed with cancer which took her life in late 1894.

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### 4.3.2. Christina Rossetti as a Poet

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Unlike Emily Bronte, Christina was a much published and respected poet during her lifetime. Her religious poetry as well as her nursery rhymes were much admired by the contemporary readers. Though this judgment of her work still holds good, modern critics have drawn our attention to some other aspects of Rossetti's work which are equally compelling. The deft combination of the flesh and the spirit which marked so much of the paintings of the Brotherhood is also unmistakably present in Christina's poetry. She seems equally at ease while writing short simple lyrics and long, often symbolic, and complexly structured poems. Rich in imagery, mellifluous and at the same time amenable to different interpretations, Rossetti's poetry probably needs to be studied with more careful diligence and critical attention than is generally accorded to her work.

Since the hundred and twenty years or so after her death, Christina Rossetti's critical fortunes have undergone quite a radical transformation. Rossetti herself, along with Emily Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning before her, were writing within an already established tradition of poetry by women. They had their worthy

predecessors in the likes of Felicia Hemans, Anna Letitia Barbauld and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, all of whom were well-known and popular poets of the Romantic period. Victorian women poets though, like their Romantic counterparts, had to negotiate a discourse of their own as poetry had traditionally been thought of as being predominantly a masculine sphere of literary activity. The Victorian “poetess” had a certain public and social role to play. In an age which often thought of women as fulfilling one of the two diametrically opposite roles of being either “the Angel in the House” or “the devil in the flesh”, it was no easy task for them to write poetry which would meet the standards of contemporary aesthetics as well as contemporary morality. In keeping with the critical temper of her times Rossetti’s poetry was deemed suited for women readers and children. This state of things continued till long after her death. She was often remembered as a rather marginal figure hovering at the periphery of the Pre- Raphaelite Brotherhood as also someone who wrote nursery- rhymes. Standard histories of literature will characteristically give more prominence and critical attention to her brother than to Christina herself.

However, Rossetti’s critical fortunes revived in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the advent of feminist literary theory and criticism, especially with that branch of it which concerns itself with writing by women (“Gynocriticism” to use the term coined by Elaine Showalter). *Goblin Market*, Rossetti’s long poem revolving around the two sisters Lizzie and Laura and their dealings with Goblin men who sell luscious magical fruits and specifically tempt women to buy from them, has generally been at the centre of this critical reappraisal of her entire oeuvre. The sexual innuendoes and psychological complexities of the poem reveal hitherto undiscovered layers of connotations in a work which had long been read as a children’s poem. Critics have also noted the frequent use of the grotesque as well as animals of the lower order in Rossetti’s works, problematizing a straight-forward reading of her poems as merely pleasant stuff. It is important to see Rossetti’s work in the context of Victorian poetry as well as in the broader context of writing by women and to evaluate her poetic achievements accordingly.

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### 4.3.3. About the Poems

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‘A Dirge’ was composed in 1865 but was first published in the *Argosy* in January 1874. ‘A Birthday’, on the other hand, was composed in November 1857 and published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in April 1861.

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#### 4.3.4. The Text of ‘A Dirge’

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*Why were you born when the snow was falling?  
You should have come to the cuckoo’s calling,  
Or when grapes are green in the cluster,  
Or, at least, when lithe swallows muster  
For their far off flying  
From summer dying.*

*Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?  
You should have died at the apples’ dropping,  
When the grasshopper comes to trouble,  
And the wheat-fields are sodden stubble,  
And all winds go sighing  
For sweet things dying.*

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#### 4.3.5 Analysis/Explanation

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**The title** - Dirge is a poem of mourning on the occasion of a particular person’s death. A dirge is generally shorter and less complex in structure than an elegy. Like lyric poetry dirges were also originally meant to be sung.

- i-ii. The first two lines refer to two seasons— winter and spring respectively
- iv. Lithe, graceful and supple; muster— assemble or gather in troops. English Swallows typically migrate to hotter climate zones during late autumn in search of food
- vii. The “cropping” of lambs may refer to both the practice of docking the lambs’ tail when they are very young, and to feed by grazing. In both senses it again refers to a season— the season of spring when lambs are born
- ix. Probably an allusion to the well known fable of ‘The Ant and the Grasshopper’ found in Aesop. The indolent grasshopper sang and danced through the warm months of summer and came to trouble with the onset of winter as he had not stored food
- x. Sodden- soaked through; stubble- the stalks of plant left on the ground after the harvest

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### 4.3.6. Critical Appreciation

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‘A Dirge’, as you have already noted, is a poem of mourning. This short poem is a lyrical expression of grief and has the graceful melody of a song. Structurally, the two stanzas run parallel to each other and the two rhetorical questions that begin each is the pivot on which the rest of the poem turns. Between “ Why were you born when the snow was falling? And “ Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?”, we have a sense of the “untimeliness” of the death of the person being mourned. This symmetry is repeated in the concluding couplets of the stanzas as well— the repetition of the word “dying” in the last line of each reinforce the sense of the speaker’s melancholy and serve almost as a refrain. The rhetorical questions posed at the beginning of each stanza are responded to in the second line of each, and the answer is followed by an enumeration of the characteristic natural scenes of the seasons being talked of. The birth of the unnamed deceased should have taken place in spring or summer and not in the dead of the winter with the snow falling. Winter is the season of desolation and barrenness; the birth of the one being mourned should have been celebrated in spring when the sky would have been echoing with the call of the cuckoo, the harbinger of spring. The birth should have taken place in the full glory of the season, when green grapes —signifying youth and vigour— hang in clusters from the boughs. At least, she/he could have been born while the swallows prepare for their annual migration before the onset of winter. Though the impending flight of the swallows indicates the death of summer, it still takes place before winter comes to wipe away every trace of new life from the face of nature.

The death of the beloved is equally untimely. It takes place when the young lambs are cropping and the world in general seems to bask in the glory of summer. The death should have visited the person during late autumn or early winter when the harvested wheat fields lose their beauty and grandeur and is covered with stubble. The sighing of the winds through the trees would have provided fit music to the dying of sweet things. This untimeliness seem to go against the very grain of nature as in the cycle of seasons spring/summer is the season of fruition whereas autumn and winter signify ripeness, maturity and eventual extinction.

While reading the poem, you may notice an interesting parallel with John Keats’s ‘To Autumn’. Some of the images used by Rossetti have their antecedents in Keats, most remarkably the swallows, the lambs and the stubble fields. The two poems, however, register a radical difference in the attitudes expressed towards the seasons.

We see Keats appreciating the ripeness of autumn, its fullness is taken as the climax of the seasonal cycle and the note of desolation is found only at the end of the poem and it takes the form of a calm acceptance of the inevitability of the cycles of life and death.

**Activity for Learners:**

**Read Keats's 'To Autumn' along with this poem. Compare the images of the English countryside presented in the two poems. Think about the mood and tone of the two poems. How do you think they are different?**

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### 4.3.7 The text of 'A Birthday'

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*My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;  
My heart is like an apple tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;*  
v. *My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in the halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.  
    Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
x. 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;*  
xv. *Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.*

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### 4.3.8. Analysis/Explanation

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- iv. Thickset— heavy, plump
- vi. Halcyon- calm and untroubled; the term also refers to a mythical bird thought to breed in a nest floating at sea and having the power to charm the wind and waves into calm. The secondary meaning of the term recalls the

image of the singing bird of the first line whose nest is also surrounded by water

- ix. Dais- platform; Down— soft, fine feathers generally used to make quilts or cushions
- x. Vair— Squirrel fur ; Purple— this colour often symbolizes royalty
- xiv. Fleurs-de-lys— Lily flowers

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### 4.3.9. Critical Appreciation

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In terms of the mood and the tone of the lyric, 'A Birthday' is a complete antithesis of 'A Dirge'. Jubilant and light-hearted, this lyric records the joy of the human heart at the impending arrival of the beloved; it is this arrival which has been characterized as "the birthday" of the speaker's life. The speaker compares her heart to a series of natural objects which seem to have a beautiful and blissful existence. The heart is compared to a singing bird which has made its nest in a watered shoot; it is compared to an apple tree with branches overladen with plump fruits; it is compared next to a many- coloured shell tossed about in the restless waves of the sea. But each of these objects, perfect and joyful in themselves, cannot surpass the fullness and joy of the speaker's heart. The reason of this unsullied and overflowing happiness is identified at the concluding verse of the first stanza— it is the expected arrival of the beloved that has filled the heart of the speaker to the brim with joy.

The natural objects of beauty enumerated in the first stanza are replaced by exquisite objects of human craftsmanship that the speaker desires in order to receive the beloved in full state and glory. A platform made of "silk and down", hung with carvings of gold and silver inlay of the lily flower would decorate the dais. The reception of the beloved would thus be made memorable and surrounded by objects of beauty. Like the pair of content lovers waking up to bid life "good morrow" in John Donne's poem of the same name, the coming of the beloved would mark a new beginning of the speaker's life —'A Birthday'.

Some critics are of the opinion that the Biblical Song of Solomon serves as one of the intertexts of the poem. There are certain verbal parallels to be noticed between the Song and the lyric by Rossetti. For example, compare these lines from the Song with the images used in the lyric "The voice of my beloved! Behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.... The flowers appear on the earth; the tome of the singing birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with tender grape give



a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:8-13). This interpretation of the poem, with the speaker as the bride and God as the bridegroom adds another dimension to the poem.

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#### 4.3.10. Style, Imagery and Technique of the Poems

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Both the lyrics employ simple and lucid language and a rich profusion of natural images. In ‘The Dirge’, the series of images drawn from nature imparts a pictorial quality to the poem. The two stanzas consisting of six lines each rhyming aa bb cc gives the poem a rapid movement. The couplets, however, are of varying length—beginning with decasyllabic ones, the later couplets give the impression (both visual and aural) of gradual compression culminating in the last line of each stanza with only five syllables. This gradual compression provides a sense of closure and finality to the last lines. Richness of details expressed in simple and evocative language is the strength of the second lyric. The images drawn from the world of nature and the world of art in the first and second stanzas respectively offer a profusion of colours—the rainbow tints of the shells, the rich purple of the dais, the silver and gold of the embroidery create a veritable riot of colours in the short space of the sixteen lines. If the rich natural imagery of ‘The Dirge’ reminds us of Keats’s ‘To Autumn’, the visual richness of ‘A Birthday’ would take us back to ‘The Eve of Saint Agnes’, where a similar appeal to the senses is made by the poet. The two stanzas of the poem, comprising of eight lines each can be notionally divided into quatrains with the rhyme scheme *abcb*. The musical quality of the lyric is further highlighted by the refrain like repetition of the line “my love is come to me” at the conclusion of both the stanzas. The rich visual imagery used by Rossetti, as well as her repeated references to different shades and tints may serve to remind us of her association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. These two short lyrics are not only mellifluous; they also bear testimony to Christina’s eye for pictorial details.

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#### 4.3.11. Summing Up

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- ‘A Birthday’ and ‘A Dirge’ are both short lyrics composed in a lucid yet rich language.
- The two poems show Christina Rossetti’s eye for visual details, as well as her propensity to use images and symbols drawn from the world of nature.
- The rhymed and neatly structured poems use poetic devices like refrain, interrogation and anaphora and create a beautiful but not overtly poetic verbal as well as visual pattern.

- These two short lyrics provide good examples of Rossetti's characteristic poetic techniques and style.

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### 4.3.12. Comprehension Exercises

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● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. Critically comment on Christina Rossetti's use of imagery in the two poems.
2. Compare and contrast the mood and the tone of the two lyrics. Would you call 'A Dirge' a poem of melancholy and 'A Birthday' a poem of happy anticipation?
3. Attempt a critical appreciation of the two poems in your own words.

● **Medium Length Questions-12 Marks**

1. Comment on the variations of line-length as used by Rossetti in 'A Dirge'
2. Briefly comment on Rossetti's association of death with winter in 'A Dirge'
3. Do you perceive any shift in the way imagery has been used in the first and the second stanzas of 'A Birthday'? Cite examples in support of your answer.

● **Short Questions-6 Marks**

1. What story is the poet referring to when she says "When the grasshopper comes to trouble"?
2. Explain the image— "My heart is like a rainbow shell/ That paddles in the halcyon sea".
3. Why does the poet refer to the "birthday" of her life at the end of the poem?

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### 4.1.13. Suggested Reading

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Rossetti, Christina. *Poems and Prose*. Simon Humphries, ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

Bristow, Joseph, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.

Mukherjee, Suroopa. *Victorian Poets: Tennyson, Browning and Rossetti*. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2010. Print.

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