



A Birthday

BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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 thickset 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.

Author Biography

Rossetti was born in London, England, in 1830 to Gabriele Rossetti and Frances Polidori Rossetti. Her father was an Italian exile who had moved to London some four years earlier. As a child Rossetti lived in Buckinghamshire in England's countryside and often visited her maternal grandfather, Gaetano Polidori, who lived nearby. These experiences gave her a lifelong love for nature and animals. In 1839 the Rossetti family moved to London where Christina was to spend her adolescent years. Her father taught Italian at King's College and tutored students privately as well. As his health declined, the family developed other sources of income. For a time Rossetti's mother became a governess and opened a small school in London. In 1853 the family moved to Somerset to run a school, but that effort ended a year later in failure. Rossetti's brother William, who worked for the Inland Revenue Office and wrote for newspapers, was to provide the bulk of the family's income. Rossetti demonstrated her poetic gifts early, writing sonnets in competition with her brothers William and Dante Gabriel. Her first published poem appeared in the *Athenaeum* magazine when she was eighteen. Dante Gabriel founded the journal *The Germ* in 1852, and Rossetti became a frequent contributor. Her book *Goblin Market and Other Poems* appeared in 1862 in an edition for which Dante Gabriel provided two illustrations. He also designed and provided woodcut illustrations for Rossetti's next book, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (1866).

Poem Summary and Analysis

Love poetry is obviously common enough in English literature, but there are actually few truly great poems about *being* in love (and being happy). Many of the most critically celebrated and popular poems in English literature are instead about frustrated, lost, unfulfilled, or unrequited love, whether it's the courtly love tradition of the Elizabethan age (Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Philip Sidney, for instance), the frustrations and jealousies of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, or the

love-gone-wrong of, say, Tennyson's Tithonus or the love-of-someone-now-dead in Thomas Hardy's Poems of 1912-13. All the more reason, then, to celebrate Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday', for giving voice to the exhilarating happiness that finding that special someone provides.

A brief summary of 'A Birthday',

The first stanza is descriptive, while the second stanza is written in the imperative mood (giving direct commands, e.g. 'Raise', 'Hang', 'Carve'). In the first stanza, Rossetti likens her heart to a singing bird, denoting happiness; to an apple-tree, with plenty of ripe fruit on its branches; to a rainbow shell (a species of ocean-dwelling mollusc, or abalone) paddling in a calm and peaceful sea; but although her heart is *like* all these, her heart is 'gladder' than them all because the speaker's beloved has come to her.

In the second stanza, Rossetti's speaker shifts from describing the happiness in her heart to commanding for things to be done to honour the love and happiness she feels. She wants a dais – that is, a platform particularly associated with royal throne rooms – built out of silk and soft feathers ('down'); the plush luxuriance continues with her request that this be hung with 'vair' (expensive squirrel-fur) and purple dyes (purple is a colour associated with royalty); she wants images of doves (symbols of peace) and pomegranates (which has royal connotations again, as well as being purple) as well as peacocks carved into this royal platform. She wants gold and silver grapes carved into the dais, and fleurs-de-lys – the French flower associated with royalty. She then ends the same way she concluded the first stanza, by announcing

Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

A few words by way of analysis of 'A Birthday'. Given all of these images associated with imperial grandeur and royalty, the second stanza reads like somebody preparing for a royal visit.

The speaker's beloved is like a king, and must be treated accordingly. But another celebration for which these preparations are being made is, of course, the speaker's birthday – or rather, 'the birthday of [her] life'. Her life has only now truly begun, when her love has come to her. (It's worth comparing Rossetti's 'A Birthday' with another of her poems, 'The First Day'.) Because the coming of her love has changed everything for the speaker, transforming her life into something special and rare, she feels the love should be honoured in a fitting way.

What of those images that populate the first stanza? Are they simply meant to be analyzed and interpreted as symbols of happiness? Well, yes and no. The singing bird starts off that way, but the detail regarding its nest suggests that the speaker has now truly found someone to make a life with – a home and, perhaps, a family. (Rossetti herself never married, so how autobiographical the poem is meant to be we wouldn't like to say.) This suggestion of homemaking and starting a family, which we often associate with nests (the 'nest instinct', for instance) is then developed in the next image of the apple-tree with its 'thicket fruit', suggesting ripeness and fecundity (or fertility). The 'rainbow shell' in the 'halcyon sea' suggests the exoticism we encounter in the second stanza (suggesting that the speaker's love *is* worthy of all the lush ceremony being prepared) but also 'halcyon', a poetic word for the kingfisher, summons up the air of royalty (in *kingfisher*) that dominates the poem's second stanza.