

## Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Barren Spring"

1. This is a sonnet from Rossetti's sonnet-cycle The House of Life, which is a sequence of hundreds of sonnets on subjects of love, time, and change in a highly autobiographical context.
2. This lyric is a sonnet by form. Rossetti experimented with the form of this sonnet. He works within the convention of the Petrarchan sonnet form but disrupts the rhyme scheme of the sestet. The volta or turning-point of thoughts keeps its classic position between octave and sestet. The octave states the basic problem of the sonnet which is the speaker's failure or inability to respond to revival of life in Spring. He is melancholic and is not able to interact with life in Spring. This statement is realized in the regular rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan octave: a b b a-a b b a. The sestet is highly irregular in its rhyme scheme as the speaker lists illustration from nature and religion to show why his melancholy is healthy. Spring apple-trees and flowers to flourish. But these are of evil Biblical connotations. Spring breeds "the fruit that breeds the serpent's art." Spring-flowers flourish when the biblical Lily dies. The sestet moves from regular rhyme scheme, c d d c, to the highly irregular c d which is supposed to form a concluding couplet as in the Shakespearean sonnet. However, it is the last line in the sestet which carries this function but by carrying a concluding symbolic image rather than an aphoristic argument as in the classic Shakespearean sonnet. This image invokes the Biblical Last Supper of Jesus Christ but with rich colorful texture: 'white cup' and 'golden heart'.
3. This sonnet is better understood in the context of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the Victorian age. This artistic and literary movement was founded by Rossetti and other artists and poets to reform the art of painting. Those poets and artists sought to get rid of the academic style in painting by returning to the vitality and sensuousness of painting before the Italian renaissance. This movement influenced Victorian poetry heavily through its emphasis on visual perspective and the use of rich colorful imagery. It gave poetry sensuousness, spirituality, and energy by going back to Medievalism for inspiration. Although "Barren Spring" deals with a temporal, rather than spatial, event which is the coming of Spring and

the seasonal cycle, Rossetti charts the speaker's melancholic response to these events in terms of spatial imagery. The robe-walker girl and dead boughs imagery in the octave are highly symbolic and realized in rich language and melodious music. The sestet emphasizes this appeal to the reader's visual perspective by starting with the command "behold" which is an invitation to see. This is followed by a profusion of imagery of elemental and botanical nature. Such images are not only of striking visual appeal but also with deep connotations. Fire and snow imagery are elemental and primeval in scope while the apple tree and the lily are Biblical in connotation.