



**Greater than Moses, turn and look once more  
And smite a rock.**

The final stanza begins with a plea to Jesus not to give up on the speaker, and the poem picks up its prayer-like tone again. The speaker begs Jesus to “seek” them, to bring them back into the flock as a lost sheep would be sought after. When she names Jesus as “Greater than Moses”, Rossetti reaffirms the Christian belief that although Moses was a great leader and Prophet, Jesus was the Son of God and therefore by his death can redeem Mankind. The caesura addressing Jesus – “true Shepherd of the flock” – lends a sense of weight to her plea. On the second to last line, the caesura before “turn and look once more” pauses the reader momentarily to capture the moment when the speaker is once again able to feel more emotion. The final line “and smite a rock”, with its consonant ending and short deliberate tone ends on a relatively hopeful note in comparison, that they will be able to experience the level of faith and feeling that they wish.

**Short lines** to end each stanza; each emphasizes the difficulty the speaker is experiencing and their lack of understanding of their own response

**Rhyming couplets** in the middle of the first two stanzas suggest the trapped feeling of the speaker as they’re trying to break out and fully experience their emotions. The change in stanza three, removing the rhyme but retaining the iambic pentameter, suggests that the speaker is beginning to experience, and come to terms with the way that they experience God

**Iambic rhythm** for the most part emphasizes key words “I”, “stone”, grief”, “loss” and so on.

**Interruption** of “I, only I is a changed rhythm, and emphasizes the fact that the speaker’s the only one who can look on what is happening.

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### CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

“Good Friday is a passionate outcry against the easy indifference with which man can think of the Christ who bore our shame in agony.”

Myra Reynolds, 1898

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### CONNECTIONS

Religion – Twice; Up-hill; Shut out

Doubt – Twice; Remember

Natural Imagery – Goblin Market; Shut Out; Maude Clare

also slightly clichéd in its reassurance to one another, perhaps lacking a sense of genuine love – but perfectly suited to the portrayal of two brave young people sacrificing themselves.

The lack of attribution in the dialogue makes it sound more immediate, and creates a sense of intimacy in this desperate moment, but there is no danger of not being able to distinguish one from the other; the wife's speech seeks reassurance and Skene's delivers it.

**Kiss and kiss: 'It is not pain  
Thus to kiss and die.  
One kiss more.'—'And yet one again.'—  
'Good-bye.'—'Good-bye.'**

Repetition of "kiss" through this stanza emphasizes again the intimacy of the relationship, and the self-sacrificing nature of the couple. The "goodbye" at the end provides the sense of finality, without specifically writing any details of the death which would not have been appropriate for Rossetti's publication.

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### STRUCTURE AND FORM

**Ballad form** Some elements of the ballad, including the regular ABAB rhyme scheme in each quatrain, creating a quick pace suited to the active content, and the tragic narrative being told.

**Enjambment** in each stanza also contributes to the quickening pace, mirroring the fast nature of the decisions being made.

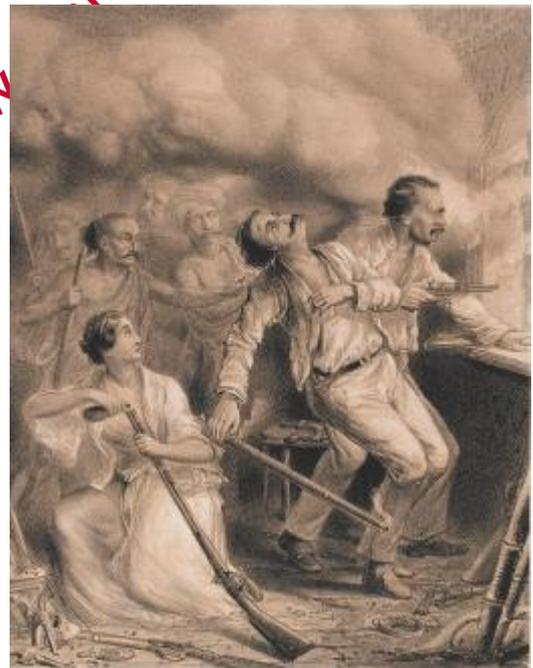
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### CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

There's a post-colonial interpretation of much Victorian literature of this type which views a

large swathe of the British population as what we would now term racist (although the term is anachronistic, wouldn't have been used then). People from other lands, specifically those controlled as part of the British Empire, are often represented as savages, uncivilized with monstrous characteristics. They are often "other", a literary term fairly simply meaning anyone contrasting with the dominant narrative – which is white Victorian British. Think about Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, the mad Creole in the attic who's described as vampiric, animalistic. In Kipling's poetry, he stresses the "white man's burden", the moral imperative to rescue the "other" from their own savage destruction. While this is not the place for an in-depth discussion on the pros and cons of the British Empire, it is worth acknowledging that for the majority of British Victorian citizens, who never went anywhere but their own country, many genuinely thought they had a Christian duty to bring British values to less enlightened citizens of the world.

The animalistic impressions of the Indians in Rossetti's poetry seems to be worth viewing through this post-colonial lens, as the mass of people at the bottom tower is a homogenous swarm (that word itself has startlingly modern connotations in terms of racist views



A lithograph (1857) of the Skenes sheltering in the Tower

There is an echo too of Jane Eyre's refusal of St. John Rivers who suggests "enough of love will follow" their marriage, to which she replies: "I scorn your idea of love...I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer, and I scorn you when you offer it."

**Let bygones be bygones:  
Don't call me false, who owed not to be true:  
I'd rather answer "No" to fifty Johns  
Than answer "Yes" to you.**

The tone becomes briefly more conciliatory here – she wishes him to allow her the choice. Throughout she's still insistent she's never been "false" – there's a definite anger here that she is expected to simply acquiesce to his request for a relationship. But her friendly first line is quickly lost with the sarcastic "I'd rather answer no to fifty Johns" She is determined, no matter how persistent he may be, to refuse his proposal. His accusation of betrayal is, too, soundly refuted. The speaker is not content with refusing but she will insist that this relationship has been created by him with no input from her, "who owed not to be true."

**Let's mar our pleasant days no more,  
Song-birds of passage, days of youth:  
Catch at today, forget the days before:  
I'll wink at your untruth.**

Yet in this stanza she seems to tire of arguing and agrees to "wink at your untruth" - agree to disagree, yet we both know it is an "untruth". The introduction of sweeter imagery – "song-birds", "days of youth", "pleasant days" are vaguely lovely, though unspecific, but they are an indication that life is too short to spend arguing and bearing a grudge. "Catch at today" encourages him to move on from her, and spend his time in more pleasant pursuits.

**Let us strike hands as hearty friends;  
No more, no less; and friendship's good:  
Only don't keep in view ulterior ends,  
And points not understood  
In open treaty. Rise above  
Quibbles and shuffling off and on:  
Here's friendship for you if you like; but love,-  
No, thank you, John.**

Even in parting she warns that this is no ploy – "don't keep in view ulterior ends/and points not understood//in open treaty." The language of conciliation in war implies her firmness; the "treaty" should bring peace, if both parties abide by it. "Hearty friends" is generous, and shows her willingness to continue her association yet she will not brook marriage or love. "No more, no less, and friendship's good" – there is value in being good friends, and unusually for a Victorian writer Rossetti acknowledges the value of friends of the opposite sex who were, of course, quite difficult to continue given the social expectations. She appeals to his pride too – "rise above/quibbles" – the word "quibble" making it seem petty and childish again. She offers generously "here's friendship for you if you like" but then leaves the decision to him. The finality of the last line, the cyclical echo of the beginning's direct address reminds us of her determination, and that she has not changed her stance since the beginning. Marriage, with John at least, is not for her.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND HOW DO YOU APPLY IT?

“Context” is assessed as AO3, and it is only worth 10% but they should be relatively straightforward marks to achieve. It basically means; how is a poet affected by their life, time and circumstance, and how is our reading of their work affected by **our** life, time and circumstances.

There is a *lot* of information about Rossetti’s life and biography which I find fascinating! But for this guide, I have focused on what I think is most useful in helping you to understand and interpret the poems. If you’re interested in knowing more, I highly recommend Jan Marsh’s biography. What you definitely **don’t** want to be doing is dumping information about Rossetti’s family at the end of a paragraph. Everything you comment on about Rossetti’s context needs to be used to help explore the meaning of the poem you’re writing about.

## FAMILY HISTORY

Christina Rossetti was born in 1830, meaning she was 7 when Queen Victoria ascended the throne at 18. Rossetti’s family was very intellectual and well-educated. It’s a common myth that Victorian women weren’t educated – while Rossetti didn’t go to school, she was mostly home-educated, read Keats, Scott and Dante (her father was Italian, so she also read other Italian writers). Her home was filled with scholars and artists, so she had a lot of highly intellectual influences. Her uncle, incidentally, was John Polidori, Lord Byron’s physician, who wrote *The Vampyre* on a holiday in Switzerland with Byron and the Shelleys, during which Mary Shelley also wrote *Frankenstein*. (Ok, so that bit doesn’t help interpret the poetry, but isn’t it a cool fact?!)

There was a lot of illness in her family – in particular her father suffered bronchitis, probably TB, and impending blindness, which also caused depression. Because he was the main income-earner, this also caused tremendous financial difficulties, meaning her mother began teaching and her sister Maria began working as a live-in governess. As her other siblings were away working or in education, she became increasingly isolated and lonely. At 14, she was diagnosed with religious mania after a nervous breakdown. Christina’s sister Maria later joined a religious order as a nun.



Lady Lilith, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

One brother was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was a painter and one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, looking back to art styles of the Italian Renaissance, and using ideas from the medieval period to reinterpret the modern. Among some of their most famous paintings are the version of Ophelia by John Millais, using the model Lizzie Siddall who later married Dante Gabriel, and Lady Lilith, by Dante Gabriel. Dante and Lizzie were both drug addicts, and Lizzie died of an overdose – Dante never really got over her death.

Christina never married (see below) but had a very close relationship with her siblings and mother, and remained living with her mother for most of her life.

She became very ill herself in later life, suffering from Graves disease for nearly twenty years, a serious thyroid illness which in Rossetti contributed to a diminished physical appearance which made her more reclusive than ever. She also developed breast cancer, which killed her. She died in 1894, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery in London with her parents.

Christina Rossetti selected poems revision guide sample pages – [www.charlotteunsworth.com](http://www.charlotteunsworth.com)