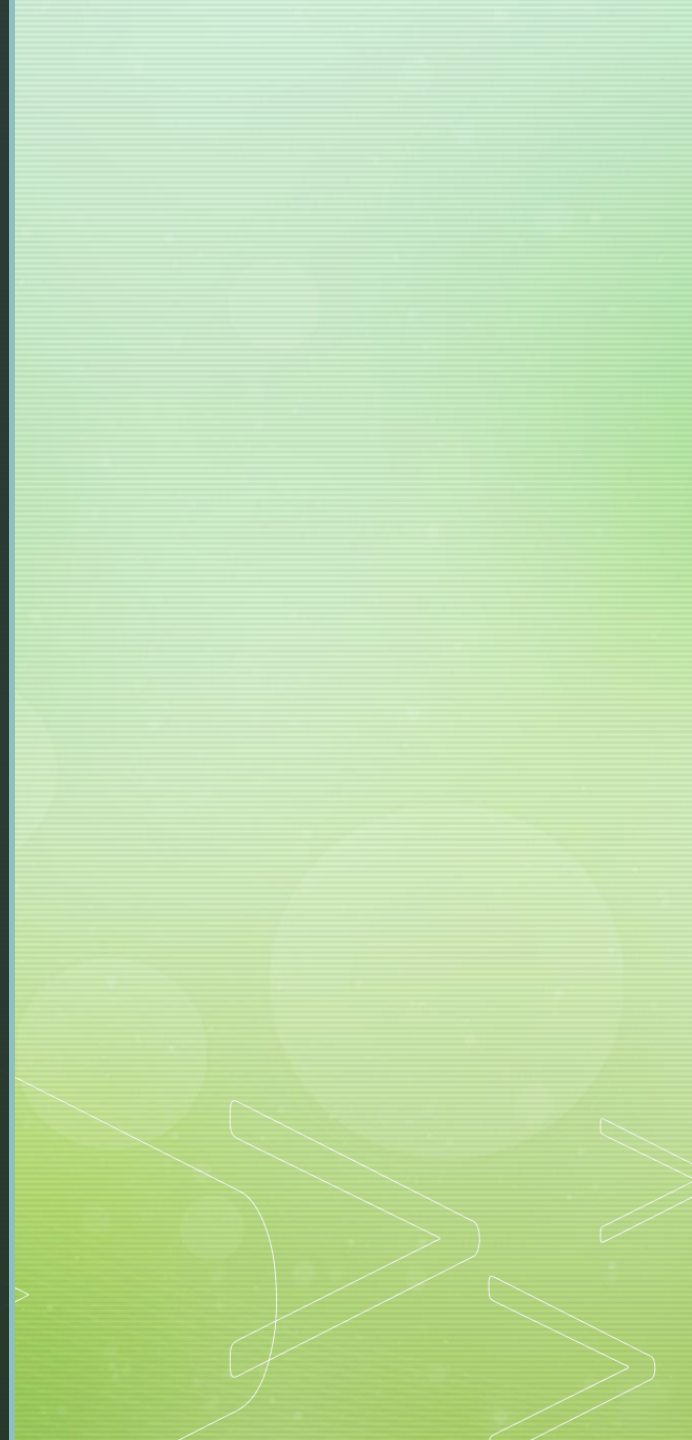





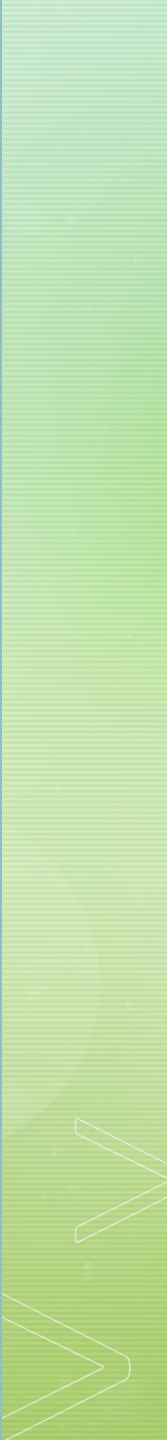
BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

A Birthday






- 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.


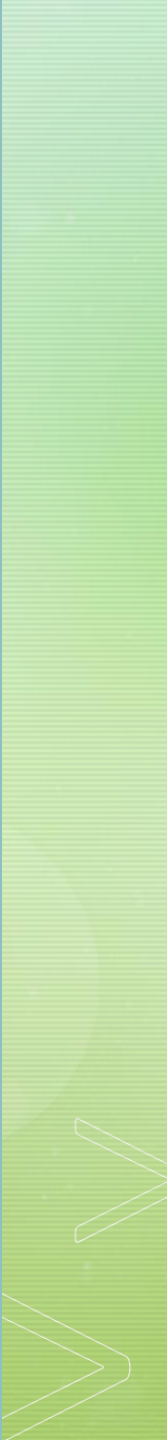
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- In the first stanza, Rossetti likens her heart to a singing bird, denoting happiness; to an apple-tree, with plenty of ripe fruit on its branches; to a rainbow shell (a species of ocean-dwelling mollusc, or abalone) paddling in a calm and peaceful 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.
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- 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.



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- 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.

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- 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.
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- 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 'thickset fruit', suggesting ripeness and fecundity (or fertility).

What is the theme of A Birthday by Christina Rossetti?

- Christina Rossetti had to face difficult situations in her life. When she was just a child, her father, one of her biggest influences, was diagnosed with possible tuberculosis. He began to lose his sight, which depressed him, and he was never the same again. Rossetti remained in isolation for several months, feeling depressed, lonely, and having anxiety attacks. The only thing that made her feel better was religion.
- Note that this love doesn't *have* to be read as romantic. It's also possible that the speaker is talking about love of God, or even the birth of a child. What's clear is that love is a life-giving force.
- The love in "A Birthday" isn't necessarily romantic in nature. Read in the context of Rossetti's deep Christian faith,
- The poem is filled with Christian imagery that supports the idea that the speaker's beloved is God. For example, the apple tree might be an allusion to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden;



- Rossetti was born in London, England, in 1830
- As a child Rossetti lived in England's countryside
- These experiences gave her a lifelong love for nature and animals
- Her first published poem appeared in the Athenaeum magazine when she was eighteen.



Love poetry or *being* in love

- 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 (Sir Thomas Wyatt , Sir Philip Sidney, the frustrations and jealousies of Shakespeare's Sonnets)
- to celebrate Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday', for giving voice to the exhilarating happiness that finding that special someone provides.



- The first stanza is descriptive, while the second stanza is written in the imperative mood (giving direct commands, e.g. 'Raise', 'Hang', 'Carve').

