



Reading the Poem

The Rainbow/The Wind

The Poet

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was part of a famous and highly artistic family which included the great Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Christina was educated at home. She was ill as a child, and chronically so in adulthood. She was briefly engaged to a young man, but when he converted to Catholicism, her father forbade the marriage, to her everlasting disappointment. She was herself a devout Anglican.

Through her family connections, Rossetti was strongly influenced by the 'arts and crafts' movement, associated most strongly with the artist and designer William Morris. Morris and his followers celebrated the forms of Nature such as leaves, flowers and animals. The movement was a throwback to some of the great themes of Romanticism early in the century. Rossetti's celebration of Nature is a strong feature of her poetry.

She wrote much poetry, as well as essays, reviews and short prose works. She is famous for her children's verses, ballads, love poems and a good deal of religious poetry.





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Rossetti's two famous short poems '**The Wind**' and '**The Rainbow**' are clearly aimed at children. The simple language and metaphors are reassuring. There is just enough imagery to be stimulating.

'**The Wind**' takes the form of two paired stanzas. The initial lines are identical. The second lines change slightly ('I nor you', 'you nor I'), to give a sense of variety. It is like the slight variation in a patterned wallpaper – soothingly the same, but interestingly different too. Taken together, these lines pose the sort of question, or riddle, that would charm a child: no one can see the wind – it is invisible – so how do we know it exists? The use of the expression 'I nor you' invites a sense of intimacy – putting the poet and the reader into a type of relationship - like that of a kindly adult talking to a child about such mysteries.

The third line then answers the 'problem' of the invisible wind with a pair of simple images. The trees 'hang trembling' (a lovely image) and 'bow down their heads'. Rossetti has here introduced a subtle form of 'personification' – the trees, like people, tremble and bow down. This connects them to the reader in a surprisingly direct way. Nature is therefore just like us – part of us. The last line of each stanza – again with only the slightest variation (passing by, passing through) rounds off the effect. The rhyme scheme is simple but effective.



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'The Rainbow' is based on two asymmetrical stanzas – one of four lines, the other of six. It is built around two metaphors: sailing, and a bridge – once again using the sort of sights that nineteenth century children would see and understand.

The first stanza compares clouds to boats and ships. Both 'sail' – in the case of clouds, sail across the river or sea of the sky. Rossetti makes a small but telling point in her last line. Man-made things (boats, ships) can never compare in beauty to the works of Nature. Even clouds are 'prettier far' than the sluggish vessels built by men.

The second stanza stays with the poem's central theme – the beauties of the sky. This time the subject is not clouds, but that more glorious wonder of Nature with which clouds (and rain) are usually associated: a rainbow. Cleverly, Rossetti takes a concept from the first stanza – rivers – and uses it to connect to her new subject by means of an association relating to rivers – bridges. Having established the image of the bridge in the child reader's mind, she is able to argue that the rainbow is a 'bridge' to heaven. She reinforces this with 'earth to sky'. There is a faint but unmistakable hint of religious faith here ('heaven' and the twice repeated 'sky') – a subliminal argument that God creates Nature, and that by celebrating Nature one celebrates Him. The poem ends with the simple refrain (copied from the first stanza), which reiterates the concept that Nature's (or God's) works are far greater than man's (bridges, roads) and bring the subject back to a child's scale: rainbows are pretty, after all, whatever they may mean.

Why include these poems? Because they are quite famous in their own right, are by a celebrated woman poet, and are simple yet accomplished.