

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI FACT SHEET

- Christina Rossetti was born in 1830 into a very gifted family. Her father, the Italian poet and political exile Gabriele Rossetti, immigrated to England in 1824 and established a career as a Dante scholar and teacher of Italian in London. Christina's mother was a very good teacher and home-schooled Christina.
- Christina was the youngest of four children. First born Maria wrote a respected book on Dante and books of religious instruction. She became an Anglican nun. Brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of the foremost painters and poets of his generation and brother William was a prolific art and literary critic and chronicler of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.
- Christina was the author of numerous books of poetry, including *Goblin Market and other Poems* (1862), *The Prince's Progress* (1866), *A Pageant* (1881), and *The Face of the Deep* (1882).
- In 1850 Christina's brother Dante Gabriel painted her as the model for his Annunciation painting *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* ("Behold the handmaiden of the Lord!"). The painting shocked many as it appeared to lack the modesty usually associated with the subject.
- By the time Dante Gabriel painted Christina as Mary, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was well established and Christina knew the other members well – Ford Madox Brown, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, modeling for them as well as for her brother.
- In the year of *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, Rossetti wrote the poem "Repining", in which a young woman is rescued from her oppressive family by a young man who visits her at night. But rather than a romantic interest, Rossetti transforms the hero into a Christ-like figure, who urges her to "Rise up: be not afraid" (echoing that call from the Angel Gabriel) and "Rise up and follow me" – akin to Christ's calling to his Apostles.
- Rossetti wrote around 30 poems on the Second Coming alone. But her interest in Scripture went even further, for she was also the author of many bestselling books of biblical exegesis – a remarkable achievement for a woman with no formal education in theology.
- Rossetti's faith was profoundly influenced by High Anglicanism, especially her contact with followers of the Oxford Movement, who sought the revival of sung liturgies, beautiful vestments and the importance of the sacraments, including Confession.

- Rossetti's deep faith inspired not only an interest in theology but a calling to serve others. It led her to work with prostitutes through the Highgate Penitentiary, set up and run by a church group in 1855 to help rescue "fallen women". In the 1850s there were 9,000 prostitutes in London alone, and the Diocese of London responded by opening a reception center for those who were victims of what it called a "monstrous growth of corruption".
- "In The Bleak Midwinter" is typical of her writing with rhythm that often reflects speech, and simple-seeming ideas that are highly complex, often theological:

*Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him,
nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when
He comes to reign.*

- Rossetti died in 1894, aged 63. She is still read today and is loved by both scholars and ordinary readers alike. She always wanted to write a hymn. After her death in 1906 Holst set "In the Bleak Midwinter" to music and Darke followed in 1911. This Christmas, as for so many years past, we will be moved to sing:

*What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part –
Yet what can I give Him?
Give my heart.*

This fact-sheet is based on an article in 'The Tablet' by Catherine Pepinster, *Christina Rossetti and the heart of Christmas*.



Ecce Ancilla Domini!, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti