

Christina Rossetti: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Remember" (1862)

Summary:

The narrator, who presumably represents Rossetti, addresses her beloved and encourages him to remember her after her death. She asks him to remember her even when his memory of her begins to fade. Eventually, the narrator gives this person (it is unclear if he or she is real or imagined) her permission to forget her gradually because it is better to "forget and smile" than to "remember and be sad."

Analysis:

"Remember" is a Petrarchan sonnet in iambic pentameter, consisting of an ABBA ABBA octave and a CDE CDE sestet.

Rossetti repeats the word "remember" throughout the entire poem, as if the narrator fears that her beloved will not heed her request. Rossetti also uses repetition to underline the vast boundary between life and death, writing "gone away," and later, "gone far away." The "silent land" is a symbol of death, emphasizing the narrator's loneliness without her beloved rather, which is stronger than her fear of death itself. Acceptance of death is common in Pre-Raphaelite philosophy. Pre-Raphaelites believed that material troubles pale in comparison to the struggles of the mind.

The tone of the octave is contemplative and reconciliatory on the topic of death. The narrator can finally be at peace because she has renounced her desire for earthly pleasures, such as the physical presence of her beloved. She is even accepting of death, content to exist only in her beloved's memory. However, she has not yet made peace with the possibility that her lover will forget her; this form of death would be more painful than her physical expiration.

Even though the narrator seems to reach peace with her death at the end of the octave, the Pre-Raphaelite belief system demands a further renunciation of human desire. The narrator's tone changes with the volta, which is the break between the octave and the sestet. The volta typically accompanies a change in attitude, which is true in this poem. The narrator even renounces the need to be remembered, which is ironic because the poem is titled "Remember." She wishes for her beloved to be happy, even if that means forgetting her. The narrator sacrifices her personal desire in an expression of true love.

"Remember" ultimately deals with the struggle between physical existence and the afterlife. Rossetti grapples with the idea of a physical body, which is subject to decay and death, and how it relates to an eternal soul.