

Two Poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894):  
Read through these poems and answer the questions  
below.

"A Birthday" [1862]

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a watered shoot:  
My heart is like an apple tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thickest fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell                   5  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
Hang it with *vair* and purple dyes;           10  
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,  
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
In leaves and silver *fleur-de-lys*;  
Because the birthday of my life               15  
Is come, my love is come to me.

1. How are the similes in the poem appropriate for the romantic longings the speaker feels? How is the metaphor of the birthday appropriate?
2. If the Victorian period is typically characterized by conventional sentiment, prudery, and didactic morality, does Rossetti's poem "A Birthday" fit into this model? Why or why not?
3. What does the imagery in the final stanza imply about the proper wrappings for a love-gift? Why are these appropriate?

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"Goblin Market" [written 1859, published 1862]

Morning and evening  
Maids heard the goblins cry:  
"Come buy our orchard fruits,  
Come buy, come buy:  
Apples and quinces,                               5  
Lemons and oranges,  
Plump unpecked cherries--  
Melons and raspberries,  
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
Swart-headed mulberries,                       10  
Wild free-born cranberries,  
Crab-apples, dewberries,  
Pine-apples, blackberries,  
Apricots, strawberries--  
All ripe together                                   15  
In summer weather--  
Morns that pass by,  
Fair eves that fly;  
Come buy, come buy;  
Our grapes fresh from the vine,               20  
Pomegranates full and fine,  
Dates and sharp bullaces,

Rare pears and greengages,  
Damsons and bilberries,  
Taste them and try:                               25  
Currants and gooseberries,  
Bright-fire-like barberries,  
Figs to fill your mouth,  
Citrons from the South,  
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye,           30  
Come buy, come buy."

Evening by evening  
Among the brookside rushes,  
Laura bowed her head to hear,  
Lizzie veiled her blushes:                   35  
Crouching close together  
In the cooling weather,  
With clasping arms and cautioning lips,  
With tingling cheeks and finger-tips.  
"Lie close," Laura said,                       40  
Pricking up her golden head:  
We must not look at goblin men,  
We must not buy their fruits:  
Who knows upon what soil they fed  
Their hungry thirsty roots?"               45  
"Come buy," call the goblins  
Hobbling down the glen.  
"O!" cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,  
You should not peep at goblin men."  
Lizzie covered up her eyes                   50  
Covered close lest they should look;  
Laura reared her glossy head,  
And whispered like the restless brook:  
"Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,  
Down the glen tramp little men.           55  
One hauls a basket,  
One bears a plate,  
One lugs a golden dish  
Of many pounds' weight.  
How fair the vine must grow               60  
Whose grapes are so luscious;  
How warm the wind must blow  
Through those fruit bushes."  
"No," said Lizzie, "no, no, no;  
Their offers should not charm us,           65  
Their evil gifts would harm us."  
She thrust a dimpled finger  
In each ear, shut eyes and ran:  
Curious Laura chose to linger  
Wondering at each merchant man           70  
One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry, 75  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry-scurry.  
Lizzie heard a voice like voice of doves

Cooing all together: They sounded kind and full of loves In the pleasant weather.	80	Clearer than water flowed that juice; She never tasted such before, How should it cloy with length of use? She sucked and sucked and sucked the more Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,	135
Laura stretched her gleaming neck Like a rush-imbedded swan, Like a lily from the beck, Like a moonlit poplar branch, Like a vessel at the launch When its last restraint is gone.	85	She sucked until her lips were sore; Then flung the emptied rinds away, But gathered up one kernel stone, And knew not was it night or day As she turned home alone.	140
Backwards up the mossy glen Turned and trooped the goblin men, With their shrill repeated cry, "Come buy, come buy."	90	Lizzie met her at the gate Full of wise upbraidings: "Dear, you should not stay so late, Twilight is not good for maidens; Should not loiter in the glen In the haunts of goblin men.	145
When they reached where Laura was They stood stock still upon the moss, Leering at each other, Brother with queer brother; Signalling each other, Brother with sly brother.	95	Do you not remember Jeanie, How she met them in the moonlight, Took their gifts both choice and many, Ate their fruits and wore their flowers Plucked from bowers	150
One set his basket down, One reared his plate; One began to weave a crown Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown (Men sell not such in any town); One heaved the golden weight Of dish and fruit to offer her:	100	Where summer ripens at all hours? But ever in the moonlight She pined and pined away; Sought them by night and day,	155
"Come buy, come buy," was still their cry. Laura stared but did not stir, Longed but had no money: The whisk-tailed merchant bade her taste In tones as smooth as honey, The cat-faced purr'd, The rat-paced spoke a word	105	Found them no more, but dwindled and grew gray; Then fell with the first snow, While to this day no grass will grow Where she lies low: I planted daisies there a year ago That never blow. You should not loiter so." "Nay hush," said Laura.	160
Of welcome, and the snail-paced even was heard; One parrot-voiced and jolly Cried "Pretty Goblin" still for "Pretty Polly"; One whistled like a bird.	110	"Nay hush, my sister: I ate and ate my fill, Yet my mouth waters still; To-morrow night I will Buy more," and kissed her. "Have done with sorrow;	165
But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste: "Good folk, I have no coin; To take were to purloin: I have no copper in my purse, I have no silver either, And all my gold is on the furze That shakes in windy weather Above the rusty heather."	115	I'll bring you plums tomorrow Fresh on their mother twigs, Cherries worth getting; You cannot think what figs My teeth have met in, What melons, icy-cold	170
"You have much gold upon your head," They answered altogether: "Buy from us with a golden curl." She clipped a precious golden lock, She dropped a tear more rare than pearl, Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red: Sweeter than honey from the rock, Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,	120	Piled on a dish of gold Too huge for me to hold, What peaches with a velvet nap, Pellucid grapes without one seed: Odorous indeed must be the mead Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink, With lilies at the brink, And sugar-sweet their sap."	175
	125		180

Golden head by golden head, Like two pigeons in one nest Folded in each other's wings, They lay down, in their curtained bed: Like two blossoms on one stem, Like two flakes of new-fallen snow, Like two wands of ivory Tipped with gold for awful kings. Moon and stars beamed in at them, Wind sang to them lullaby, Lumbering owls forbore to fly, Not a bat flapped to and fro Round their rest: Cheek to cheek and breast to breast Locked together in one nest.	185       190      195	Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling; Let alone the herds That used to tramp along the glen, In groups or single, Of brisk fruit-merchant men.	240
Early in the morning When the first cock crowed his warning, Neat like bees, as sweet and busy, Laura rose with Lizzie: Fetched in honey, milked the cows, Aired and set to rights the house, Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat, Cakes for dainty mouths to eat, Next churned butter, whipped up cream, Fed their poultry, sat and sewed; Talked as modest maidens should Lizzie with an open heart, Laura in an absent dream, One content, one sick in part; One warbling for the mere bright day's delight, One longing for the night.	200       205      210	Till Lizzie urged, "O Laura, come, I hear the fruit-call, but I dare not look: You should not loiter longer at this brook: Come with me home. The stars rise, the moon bends her arc, Each glow-worm winks her spark, Let us get home before the night grows dark; For clouds may gather even Though this is summer weather, Put out the lights and drench us through; Then if we lost our way what should we do?"	245       250
At length slow evening came-- They went with pitchers to the reedy brook; Lizzie most placid in her look, Laura most like a leaping flame. They drew the gurgling water from its deep Lizzie plucked purple and rich golden flags, Then turning homeward said: "The sunset flushes Those furthest loftiest crags; Come, Laura, not another maiden lags, No wilful squirrel wags, The beasts and birds are fast asleep." But Laura loitered still among the rushes And said the bank was steep.	215     220     225	Laura turned cold as stone To find her sister heard that cry alone, That goblin cry, "Come buy our fruits, come buy." Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit? Must she no more such succous pasture find, Gone deaf and blind? Her tree of life drooped from the root: She said not one word in her heart's sore ache; But peering thro' the dimness, naught discerning, Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way; So crept to bed, and lay Silent 'til Lizzie slept; Then sat up in a passionate yearning, And gnashed her teeth for balked desire, and wept As if her heart would break.	255              265
And said the hour was early still, The dew not fallen, the wind not chill: Listening ever, but not catching The customary cry, "Come buy, come buy," With its iterated jingle Of sugar-baited words: Not for all her watching Once discerning even one goblin	230       235	Day after day, night after night, Laura kept watch in vain, In sullen silence of exceeding pain. She never caught again the goblin cry: "Come buy, come buy," She never spied the goblin men Hawking their fruits along the glen: But when the noon waxed bright Her hair grew thin and gray; She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn To swift decay, and burn Her fire away.	270       275      280
		One day remembering her kernel-stone She set it by a wall that faced the south; Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root, Watched for a waxing shoot, But there came none; It never saw the sun, It never felt the trickling moisture run: While with sunk eyes and faded mouth	285

She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees False waves in desert drouth With shade of leaf-crowned trees, And burns the thirstier in the sandful breeze.	290	Cat-like and rat-like, Ratel- and wombat-like, Snail-paced in a hurry, Parrot-voiced and whistler, Helter-skelter, hurry-scurry, Chattering like magpies, Fluttering like pigeons, Gliding like fishes, -- Hugged her and kissed her; Squeezed and caressed her; Stretched up their dishes, Panniers and plates: "Look at our apples Russet and dun, Bob at our cherries Bite at our peaches, Citrons and dates, Grapes for the asking, Pears red with basking Out in the sun, Plums on their twigs; Pluck them and suck them, Pomegranates, figs."	340
She no more swept the house, Tended the fowls or cows, Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat, Brought water from the brook: But sat down listless in the chimney-nook And would not eat.	295		345
Tender Lizzie could not bear To watch her sister's cankerous care, Yet not to share. She night and morning Caught the goblins' cry: "Come buy our orchard fruits, Come buy, come buy." Beside the brook, along the glen She heard the tramp of goblin men, The voice and stir Poor Laura could not hear; Longed to buy fruit to comfort her, But feared to pay too dear,	300 305 310		350
She thought of Jeanie in her grave, Who should have been a bride; But who for joys brides hope to have Fell sick and died In her gay prime, In earliest winter-time, With the first glazing rime, With the first snow-fall of crisp winter-time.	315	"Good folk," said Lizzie, Mindful of Jeanie, "Give me much and many"; -- Held out her apron, Tossed them her penny. "Nay, take a seat with us, Honor and eat with us," They answered grinning; "Our feast is but beginning. Night yet is early, Warm and dew-pearly, Wakeful and starry: Such fruits as these No man can carry; Half their bloom would fly, Half their dew would dry, Half their flavor would pass by. Sit down and feast with us, Be welcome guest with us, Cheer you and rest with us." "Thank you," said Lizzie; "but one waits At home alone for me: So, without further parleying, If you will not sell me any Of your fruits though much and many, Give me back my silver penny I tossed you for a fee." They began to scratch their pates, No longer wagging, purring, But visibly demurring, Grunting and snarling. One called her proud,	360
Till Laura, dwindling, Seemed knocking at Death's door: Then Lizzie weighed no more Better and worse, But put a silver penny in her purse, Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze At twilight, halted by the brook, And for the first time in her life Began to listen and look.	320		365
Laughed every goblin When they spied her peeping: Came towards her hobbling, Flying, running, leaping, Puffing and blowing, Chuckling, clapping, crowing, Clucking and gobbling, Mopping and mowing, Full of airs and graces, Pulling wry faces, Demure grimaces,	330 335		370
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Her locks streamed like the torch                    500  
 Borne by a racer at full speed,  
 Or like the mane of horses in their flight,  
 Or like an eagle when she stems the light  
 Straight toward the sun,  
 Or like a caged thing freed,                    505  
 Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her  
 heart,  
 Met the fire smouldering there  
 And overbore its lesser flame,  
 She gorged on bitterness without a name:    510  
 Ah! fool, to choose such part  
 Of soul-consuming care!  
 Sense failed in the mortal strife:  
 Like the watch-tower of a town  
 Which an earthquake shatters down,            515  
 Like a lightning-stricken mast,  
 Like a wind-uprooted tree  
 Spun about,  
 Like a foam-topped water-spout  
 Cast down headlong in the sea,                520  
 She fell at last;  
 Pleasure past and anguish past,  
 Is it death or is it life ?

Life out of death.  
 That night long Lizzie watched by her,        525  
 Counted her pulse's flagging stir,  
 Felt for her breath,  
 Held water to her lips, and cooled her face  
 With tears and fanning leaves:  
 But when the first birds chirped about their eaves,  
 And early reapers plodded to the place  
 Of golden sheaves,  
 And dew-wet grass  
 Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,  
 And new buds with new day                    535  
 Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,  
 Laura awoke as from a dream,  
 Laughed in the innocent old way,  
 Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice;  
 Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of gray,  
 Her breath was sweet as May,  
 And light danced in her eyes.

Days, weeks, months, years  
 Afterwards, when both were wives  
 With children of their own;                    545  
 Their mother-hearts beset with fears,  
 Their lives bound up in tender lives;  
 Laura would call the little ones  
 And tell them of her early prime,  
 Those pleasant days long gone                550  
 Of not-returning time:

Would talk about the haunted glen,  
 The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,  
 Their fruits like honey to the throat,  
 But poison in the blood;                    555  
 (Men sell not such in any town;)  
 Would tell them how her sister stood  
 In deadly peril to do her good,  
 And win the fiery antidote:  
 Then joining hands to little hands            560  
 Would bid them cling together,  
 "For there is no friend like a sister,  
 In calm or stormy weather,  
 To cheer one on the tedious way,  
 To fetch one if one goes astray,            565  
 To lift one if one totters down,  
 To strengthen whilst one stands."

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1. Why are all the goblin-creatures figured as "men," and all the "good guys" young girls?

2. Why does a second taste of the forbidden fruit from a sister's lips cure the addiction?

3. Does the fruit offered to the young girls seem to be only literal fruit, or does it figuratively represent something else?

3. What moral does Rossetti's poem offer a Victorian audience?

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For additional information about Christina Rossetti, see, among other publications, the following works:

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