

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?

"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
The rat-paced spoke a word 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." "You have much gold upon your head," They answered altogether: "Buy from us with a golden curl."	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 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	170
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	Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink, With lilies at the brink, And sugar-sweet their sap."	175
	125		180
	130		

Golden head by golden head,
 Like two pigeons in one nest 185
 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 190
 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 195
 Round their rest:
 Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
 Locked together in one nest.

Early in the morning
 When the first cock crowed his warning, 200
 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, 205
 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, 210
 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.

At length slow evening came-- 215
 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, 220
 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." 225
 But Laura loitered still among the rushes
 And said the bank was steep.

And said the hour was early still,
 The dew not fallen, the wind not chill:
 Listening ever, but not catching 230
 The customary cry,
 "Come buy, come buy,"
 With its iterated jingle
 Of sugar-baited words:
 Not for all her watching 235
 Once discerning even one goblin

Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling;
 Let alone the herds
 That used to tramp along the glen,
 In groups or single, 240
 Of brisk fruit-merchant men.

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. 245
 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, 250
 Put out the lights and drench us through;
 Then if we lost our way what should we do?"

Laura turned cold as stone
 To find her sister heard that cry alone,
 That goblin cry, 255
 "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; 265
 Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
 And gnashed her teeth for balked desire, and wept
 As if her heart would break.

Day after day, night after night,
 Laura kept watch in vain, 270
 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: 275
 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. 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; 285
 It never saw the sun,
 It never felt the trickling moisture run:
 While with sunk eyes and faded mouth

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		350 355 360
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,	365 370 375 380
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		
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		385 390

Cross-grained, uncivil;	395	In a smart, ache, tingle,	
Their tones waxed loud,		Lizzie went her way;	
Their looks were evil.		Knew not was it night or day;	
Lashing their tails		Sprang up the bank, tore through the furze,	450
They trod and hustled her,		Threaded copse and dingle,	
Elbowed and jostled her,	400	And heard her penny jingle	
Clawed with their nails,		Bouncing in her purse, --	
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,		Its bounce was music to her ear.	
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,		She ran and ran	455
Twitched her hair out by the roots,		As if she feared some goblin man	
Stamped upon her tender feet,	405	Dogged her with gibe or curse	
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits		Or something worse:	
Against her mouth to make her eat.		But not one goblin skurried after,	
		Nor was she pricked by fear;	460
White and golden Lizzie stood,		The kind heart made her windy-paced	
Like a lily in a flood,		That urged her home quite out of breath with haste	
Like a rock of blue-veined stone	410	And inward laughter.	
Lashed by tides obstreperously, --			
Like a beacon left alone		She cried "Laura," up the garden,	
In a hoary roaring sea,		"Did you miss me?"	465
Sending up a golden fire, --		Come and kiss me.	
Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree	415	Never mind my bruises,	
White with blossoms honey-sweet		Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices	
Sore beset by wasp and bee, --		Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,	
Like a royal virgin town		Goblin pulp and goblin dew.	470
Topped with gilded dome and spire		Eat me, drink me, love me;	
Close beleaguered by a fleet	420	Laura, make much of me:	
Mad to tear her standard down.		For your sake I have braved the glen	
		And had to do with goblin merchant men."	
One may lead a horse to water,			
Twenty cannot make him drink.		Laura started from her chair,	475
Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,		Flung her arms up in the air,	
Coaxed and fought her,	425	Clutched her hair:	
Bullied and besought her,		"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted	
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,		For my sake the fruit forbidden?	
Kicked and knocked her,		Must your light like mine be hidden,	480
Mauled and mocked her,		Your young life like mine be wasted,	
Lizzie uttered not a word;	430	Undone in mine undoing,	
Would not open lip from lip		And ruined in my ruin;	
Lest they should cram a mouthful in;		Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?"	
But laughed in heart to feel the drip		She clung about her sister,	485
Of juice that syruped all her face,		Kissed and kissed and kissed her:	
And lodged in dimples of her chin,	435	Tears once again	
And streaked her neck which quaked like curd.		Refreshed her shrunken eyes,	
At last the evil people,		Dropping like rain	
Worn out by her resistance,		After long sultry drouth;	490
Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit		Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,	
Along whichever road they took,	440	She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.	
Not leaving root or stone or shoot.			
Some writhed into the ground,		Her lips began to scorch,	
Some dived into the brook		That juice was wormwood to her tongue,	
With ring and ripple.		She loathed the feast:	495
Some scudded on the gale without a sound,	445	Writhing as one possessed she leaped and sung,	
Some vanished in the distance.		Rent all her robe, and wrung	
		Her hands in lamentable haste,	
		And beat her breast.	

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."

1. Why are all the goblin-creatures figured as "men," and all the protagonists figured as 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?

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

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