

A Birthday



POEM TEXT

- 1 My heart is like a singing bird
- 2 Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
- 3 My heart is like an apple-tree
- 4 Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
- 5 My heart is like a rainbow shell
- 6 That paddles in a halcyon sea;
- 7 My heart is gladder than all these
- 8 Because my love is come to me.

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



SUMMARY

My heart sings like a bird nesting in a young branch nourished by water. My heart is like an apple tree whose branches are heavy with lots of fruit. My heart is like a rainbow-colored shell gently floating about on calm, beautiful waters. Actually, my heart is even happier than all of these things because my love is here.

Build me a platform for a throne out of silk and fine feathers. Drape it with fine, bluish-black fur and purple fabric. Carve it with ornate decorations of doves, pomegranates, and peacocks with feathers that look like they're covered in hundreds of eyes; add images of gold and silver grapes, leaves, and fleur-de-lys (a symbol used by French royalty). Because today is the day my life really begins, now that my love is here.



THEMES



THE JOY OF LOVE

Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday" captures the giddy joy of love. The title refers not to the speaker's literal birthday, but rather to a day on which the speaker *feels* reborn. Life truly begins, in this poem, when love arrives.

The speaker celebrates the rush, wonder, and excitement of love by comparing their heart to a range of pleasant things: "a singing bird" in its nest, "an apple-tree" laden with fruit, and a "rainbow shell" bobbing about on a tranquil sea. Each of these [similes](#) connotes peace, comfort, and fulfillment. The bird is safe and secure (perhaps a vision of domestic intimacy), the tree is heavy with tasty apples (perhaps a nod to reproduction, or at least plenitude), and the shell is simply having a nice time floating about in calm, sunny waters. Being in love, these similes suggest, is utterly delightful.

In fact, the speaker's heart "is gladder than all these" things now that love has arrived. "My love is come to me," the speaker says, making this the "birthday of [the speaker's] life." Love is so powerful that the speaker effectively gets born again, becoming a newer, happier, more complete version of themselves.

The speaker then issues a series of instructions to pay tribute to this love. The speaker wants a raised platform (for a throne) to be made of "silk and down," decorated with the finest carvings of "doves and pomegranates, / And peacocks with a hundred eyes." It should be lined with gold and silver in the finest style. These items [symbolize](#) the spiritual and emotional wealth of love, a kind of inner richness that nothing else can match. This metaphorical birthday deserves a lush party fit for royalty; only the best will do!

Note that this love doesn't *have* to be read as romantic. It's also possible that the speaker is talking about love of God, or even the birth of a child. What's clear is that love is a life-giving force.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



FAITH AND SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT

The love in "A Birthday" isn't necessarily romantic in nature. Read in the context of Rossetti's deep Christian faith, "A Birthday" might also be interpreted as a hymn of praise that anticipates Jesus's return to earth. The speaker's "birthday," in this reading, refers to an occasion of *spiritual* revelation and fulfillment. (Indeed, some of Rossetti's other work, such as "[From House to Home](#)," refers to the Second Coming—that is, the day of Christ's return—as a birthday.)

The speaker's "heart" is in a state of pure rapture. The poem tries to capture this feeling, but no comparison will quite do—perhaps because nothing can truly compare to Christ's homecoming. Not a "singing bird," an apple tree in bloom, nor a beautiful "rainbow shell" can match the happiness of the

speaker's heart upon reuniting with God.

The poem is filled with Christian [imagery](#) that supports the idea that the speaker's beloved is God. For example, the apple tree might be an [allusion](#) to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden; a rainbow is a sign of the covenant between God and the earth in the biblical story of Noah. The imagery of the second stanza is even more explicitly religious in nature:

- When the speaker demands that a beautiful, ornate dais be made, this special platform might be meant for the throne of the "king" that is Christ himself.
- Purple is the color of royalty (again nodding to the idea of Christ as king), and images of pomegranates decorate priestly garments in the Book of Exodus.
- A dove appears to Noah as a symbol of peace and deliverance after the flood.
- Peacocks are an ancient Christian symbol of eternal life, and the many "eyes" on their feathers represent God's omniscience.
- Finally, the fleurs-de-lys often represents purity and/or the Holy Trinity.

All of these images hint that the speaker is celebrating a spiritual union with God. Christ's return is the "birthday" of the speaker's life, the day their life really begins.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;*

"A Birthday" celebrates love's arrival. What specific *type* of love is open to interpretation; it sounds like the speaker is celebrating romantic love, but the poem might just as well be praising the birth of a child or the love of God. Whatever specific form this love takes, it has completely transformed the speaker's world.

In these opening lines, the speaker compares their heart to various delightful things in order to illustrate how happy they are. First, they declare, "My heart is like a singing bird / Whose nest is in a water'd shoot." In other words, the speaker is as delighted and content as a bird twittering away in the safety of its nest.

The nest sounds like it's in a good spot too, resting "in a water'd

shoot." A *shoot* refers to a young branch, something freshly grown, thanks to that nearby "water[]." In addition to simply conveying the speaker's joy, then, this [simile](#) evokes the speaker's rebirth: the speaker is "water'd" by love. The image of a nest might also [symbolize](#) home and domestic intimacy—things the speaker perhaps feels they've finally found in their beloved.

Lines 3 and 4 then follow the same structure as lines 1-2, creating [anaphora](#) and [parallelism](#) as the speaker uses another simile to convey their feelings:

*My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;*

The repetitive nature of the language creates a sense of abundance, as though the speaker's heart is so happy that they could think of any number of similarly happy things (or, perhaps, that *no* simile is quite right; nothing can really capture the bliss the speaker feels!).

This time, the speaker compares their heart to an apple tree with branches so heavy with fruit that they're "bent." It's simply bursting with fruit, just as the speaker's heart is bursting with joy. The image of "thickset fruit" suggests plenitude and might even call to mind reproduction (i.e., being *fruitful*). The bold [alliteration](#) of "boughs"/"bent" evokes the sheer weight of those branches, loaded up with apples ripe for the picking.

"A Birthday" is written in [iambic](#) tetrameter, meaning each line contains four iambs: poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed pattern. Here are lines 1-2 as an example:

*My heart | is like | a sing-| ing bird
Whose nest | is in | a wa- | ter'd shoot;*

The gentle pulse of those iambs creates a confident, soothing rhythm.

LINES 5-8

*My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.*

The speaker's third [simile](#) is set up just like the first two, creating more [anaphora](#) and grammatical [parallelism](#):

*My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;*

Once again, the repetitive language creates the sense that the speaker is positively bursting with happiness and is desperately searching for the right words to communicate their joy. Now, they compare their heart to "a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea." The sweet, innocent [imagery](#) of these lines

suggests that the speaker's love itself is safe, natural, and protective. Things don't "paddle" when they're frightened or desperately trying to stay afloat; instead, the word connotes happy, playful swimming. Halcyon, meanwhile, means calm and lovely. This [personified](#) little shell is having a great time lolling about in these beautiful waters. That delicate little shell reflects the fragility of the speaker's heart; the shell might be tossed about or even shattered by a rougher sea, but, luckily, conditions are just right.

There are some possible religious [allusions](#) embedded in this simile as well:

- A rainbow appears after the flood in the biblical story of Noah's Ark. This rainbow is a [symbol](#) of God's pact—or "covenant"—with humankind; it's God's way of promising to never send another flight and to always be with people through the storms of life. In this poem, then, the rainbow might suggest the peace and contentment that accompanies *faith*.
- The word "halycon" stems from the Greek myth of Alcyone—a princess turned into a kingfisher (a kind of bird that nests near the sea). Zeus would make the sea calm for a short period every year so she could lay her eggs (give "birth"!).

These lines are filled with gentle [consonance](#) and [assonance](#). Listen to the lilting /t/ and swishing /s/ sounds, as well as the rhythmic /a/ assonance:

My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;

The poem's sounds evoke the soft, rhythmic movement of little waves. These sounds combine with the poem's steady [meter](#) to create [euphony](#) that mirrors the speaker's delight.

Despite all the wonderful things the speaker's "heart is like," however, none of these comparisons ultimately does justice to how they feel. The speaker ends the stanza by declaring that their heart is "gladder," or happier, than the bird, the tree, and the shell—and they all seem deeply glad! Their love has "come" to them, putting them in a state of unparalleled joy.

LINES 9-14

*Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;*

In the second stanza, the speaker issues a series of instructions. The speaker wants a luxurious "dais"—that is, a kind of raised platform on which a throne might sit—to be made in honor of their love's arrival.

The speaker packs this stanza with sensuous [imagery](#). This dais should be made of "silk and down," two precious, soft materials. "Hang it," the speaker continues, with fur ("vair," a soft fur taken from squirrels) and "purple dyes." Purple is associated with royalty; the speaker is demanding that their "love" be treated like a king. The speaker also wants this dais carved with "doves and pomegranates, / And peacocks with a hundred eyes." It should feature images of "gold and silver grapes" as well as ornate "leaves" and the "silver fleurs-de-lys," another [symbol](#) plucked from the world of royalty (specifically, French royalty). These objects have been chosen for their opulence; they're a way for the speaker to say that their love deserves the very best of the best. These images of material wealth reflect the spiritual/emotional value of the speaker's love.

These lines are also filled with distinctly *religious* imagery—hinting that Jesus is the "king" who will sit on this splendid throne and that the speaker is giddy not about romantic life, but a divine reunion with God:

- The speaker earlier mentioned a "rainbow," which appears as a symbol of God's covenant with humanity in the story of Noah's Ark. Now the speaker mentions a "dove": the bird Noah sends out to see if the flood waters have receded, and which eventually returns with an olive branch. The dove is a symbol of peace, salvation, and deliverance.
- Pomegranates traditionally represent the richness of the promised land. (In Greek myth, they're also symbols of marriage and fertility from the myth of Hades and [Persephone](#).)
- Peacocks are an ancient symbol of both immortality and God's omniscience (the "eyes" on their tails represent his all-seeing ability).
- The fleur-de-lys is sometimes used as a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

The rich, lyrical sounds of these lines again create [euphony](#). There's clear [alliteration](#) ("dais," "down," "dyes," "doves"; "purple," "pomegranates," "peacocks"; "gold," "grapes"), buzzing /v/ and /z/ [consonance](#) ("dais of silk"; "vair," "Carve," "doves," "leaves," "silver"; "raise," "dyes," "doves," etc.), and lilting /l/ sounds ("leaves," "silver fleurs-de-lys"). In short, the poem *sounds* as ornate and luxurious as this "dais" itself.

The poem varies its meter from [iambic](#) tetrameter here as well in order to convey the forcefulness of the speaker's commands. Each line starts with a [trochee](#) rather than an iamb—that is, a foot with a **stressed**-unstressed syllabic pattern (DUM-da):

Raise me | a dais | of silk | and down;
Hang it | with vair | and purp- | le dyes;
Carve it | in doves | and pom- | egranates,
Work it | in gold | and sil- | ver grapes,

Bringing forward the first stressed syllable creates a sense of both confidence and urgency. The speaker knows what they want, and they want it now.

LINES 15-16

*Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.*

The final two lines of the poem, as with the final two lines of the first stanza, reiterate the reason why the speaker is demanding all this opulence: their "love is come." This occasion is akin to "the birthday of my life," and a birthday like this deserves a grand celebration!

This "birthday," of course, is a [metaphorical](#) one. This is the first day of the speaker's *new* life, the one lived together with their "love." The speaker feels *reborn*. The [parallelism](#) of "my life / Is come, my love is come" emphasizes that, for this speaker, life and love are essentially the same thing.

Once again, the poem's sounds convey the speaker's delight. There's the bouncy [alliteration](#) of "because" and "birthday," as well as the [assonance](#) of "my life" and "love is come." Together, these sounds fill the poem with an exciting, exuberant music. And, of course, the alliteration of "life" and "love" hammers home the idea that these two things are two sides of the same coin; life doesn't start until love arrives.



SYMBOLS



CHRISTIAN IMAGERY

"A Birthday" is filled with religious [imagery](#) hinting the speaker's "love" is, in fact, God. Some of these images are more explicitly [symbolic](#) than others. The first stanza's images might simply exemplify the speaker's joy and contentment, but they also might subtly [allude](#) to the Bible:

- The apple tree perhaps brings to mind the Garden of Eden and suggests a return to "paradise."
- The "rainbow shell" might be a nod to the "rainbow" that appears after the flood in the story of Noah's Ark as a sign of God's covenant—or pact—with humankind. The rainbow becomes a symbol of God's presence in human life.

The images in the second stanza are more overtly religious:

- For one thing, a "dais" is often the platform for a *throne*. This ties in with the Christian idea of the "Kingdom of God"; in a religious reading of the poem, *Christ* is the king who will sit on this throne. Building on this idea, the speaker calls for this "dais" to be decked out with items and sumptuous fabrics traditionally linked with royalty. Silver and gold are

precious metals, purple is a royal color, and the "fleur-de-lys" is associated with French heraldry (it's also sometimes taken as a symbol of the Holy Trinity).

- Doves once again evoke the story of Noah's Ark: Noah sends a dove out to determine if the flood waters have receded, and the bird returns with an olive branch. The dove is thus a symbol of salvation and deliverance—things that the speaker's faith in God offers.
- Peacocks are an ancient symbol of eternal life, and the "eyes" on their feathers sometimes represent God's omniscience—that is, God's ability to see *everything*.

Readers certainly don't have to interpret these images through a Christian lens to make sense of the poem; in a secular reading, these images simply signify the emotional value of the speaker's love. Still, there are clear religious undertones throughout "A Birthday" that suggest that the speaker's new lease on life stems from their faith.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "an apple-tree"
- **Line 5:** "a rainbow shell"
- **Lines 9-14:** "Raise me a dais of silk and down; / Hang it with vair and purple dyes; / Carve it in doves and pomegranates, / And peacocks with a hundred eyes; / Work it in gold and silver grapes, / In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;"



NATURE

In the poem's first stanza, the speaker compares their "heart" to various images taken from the natural world: a bird singing in its nest, a tree laden with apples, and a colorful shell floating on gentle waters. Beyond simply illustrating the speaker's immense joy, all this natural imagery [symbolizes](#) the idea that love itself is something natural. Love, to the speaker, isn't a superfluous part of life. Love is as natural as a bird in its nest or fruit in a tree—and it's as necessary as water. Indeed, these natural images further reflect the nourishing, life-giving power of love:

- The bird builds its nest in a "water'd shoot." A "shoot" is a young branch—something, like the speaker's "life," that's newly born. Just as that bit of fresh life is nourished by nearby water, the speaker's heart is [metaphorically](#) "water'd" by love.
- The tree so thick with fruit that its branches sag suggests procreation, again reflecting the idea that love leads to new life—and, perhaps, that there's nothing shameful about physical intimacy.

- A delicate shell is free to enjoy itself in those calm, gentle waters. The speaker's heart is likewise delicate—perhaps even prone to breaking—but their love provides the peace and security to simply relax.

Interestingly, in the second stanza, the speaker calls for this "dais" to be carved with natural images: "doves and pomegranates," "peacocks," "gold and silver grapes," and "leaves." These are immortal versions of the items in the first stanza, perhaps symbolizing the idea that, *unlike* nature itself, love is everlasting.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "a singing bird / Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;"
- **Lines 3-4:** "an apple-tree / Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea;"
- **Lines 11-12:** "doves and pomegranates, / And peacocks with a hundred eyes;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "gold and silver grapes, / In leaves"



POETIC DEVICES

EUPHONY

"A Birthday" creates [euphony](#) through a mixture of sonic devices ([alliteration](#), [consonance](#), and [assonance](#)), a steady iambic meter, and a predictable rhyme scheme. This is a poem that simply *sounds* pleasant, and that's no coincidence! The poem's rich music makes its [imagery](#) striking and vivid, in turn relaying the intensity of the speaker's delight. The poet

Take the first stanza, which features:

- assonance of the /ah/, /ee/, and /uh/ sounds ("paddles," "halcyon," "gladder"; "sea," "these," "me"; "Because," "love," "come");
- lilted /l/ consonance ("paddles," "halcyon," "gladder," "love," etc.);
- resonant /d/, /m/, and /th/ consonance ("paddles," "gladder"; "than," "these"; "come," "me");
- and soft [sibilance](#) ("singing," "nest," "shoot," "halcyon," "sea," "shell," etc.).

In sum, the stanza sounds gentle, pleasant, and positively lovely. Some of these moments of sonic play specifically bring to life the image at hand, as with the alliteration of "boughs are bent": here, heavy /b/ sounds evoke the way those branches sag under the weight of ripe, delicious fruit. Similarly, the sibilance of "halcyon sea" suggests the gentle, swishing motion of those peaceful waters.

The second stanza is even more jam-packed with euphonic sounds. There's:

- resonant /d/ alliteration ("dais," "down," "dyes," "doves");
- buzzing /v/ consonance ("vair," "Carve," "silver," "leaves");
- crisp /p/ alliteration ("purple," "pomegranates," "peacocks") and consonance ("purple," "grapes");
- firm /g/ alliteration ("gold," "grapes");
- fluid /l/ consonance ("gold," "silver," "leaves," "fleur-de-lys");
- and rhythmic /ay/, /ee/, /i/, and /uh/ assonance ("Raise," "dais," "Hang"; "leaves," "fleur-de-lys"; "my life," "Because," "love," "come").

The lines are positively decked out in pleasant sounds, seeming as elaborately ornamented as that "dais" itself.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

IMAGERY

The vivid [imagery](#) of "A Birthday" conveys the delight of being in love. The poem's descriptive language makes it easy for readers to sense the speaker's immense joy. Take that tree in line 3, for example:

My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;

The tree's branches are heaving under the weight of those ripe, juicy apples—an image that, in turn, reflects just how full the speaker's heart is. The next lines feature an image of a delicate "rainbow shell," its iridescence perhaps shining the sunlight as it bobs along the calm, tranquil waters of a "halcyon sea." The image is one of utter serenity. That little shell might reflect the fragility of the speaker's heart; both are prone to shattering, perhaps, but they can relax in the warm, tranquil waters of love.

The imagery in the second stanza focuses on a magnificent "dais" fit for a king. This will be a feast for the eyes, draped in rich "purple" fabrics, carved with "doves," "pomegranates," "leaves," and "silver and gold grapes"; adorned with "peacocks," whose feathers appear to have "a hundred eyes." These lines appeal not just to the readers' sight, but also to their sense of touch: the dais will feature soft, sumptuous materials like "silk and down" and gray-blue "vair" (squirrel fur). These lines convey both grandeur and tender craftsmanship. The speaker wants the "dais" to be like no other, the poem implies, because their "love" has no equal. Its opulence reflects the value the speaker places on this "love."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-14

PARALLELISM

[Parallelism](#) makes the speaker sound jubilant and enthusiastic—they're happy and they want to tell the world over and over again!

The lines of the first stanza can be divided into pairs, the first three of which feature near identical syntax (or word order): "My heart is like + [noun from the natural world] + Whose/That [description of an aspect of that noun]." For example:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;

The repetition of the phrase "My heart is like" is an example of [anaphora](#) (a specific type of parallelism); this draws repeated attention to the speaker's "heart." The broader parallelism of this list, meanwhile, suggests that the speaker is desperately, exuberantly searching for the perfect comparison for what their heart actually feels like. Repeating the same grammatical pattern adds weight and urgency to this task, making the poem sound more dramatic.

Parallelism appears in the second stanza too, where multiple lines open with a command:

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
[...]
Work it in gold and silver grapes,

Again, parallelism makes the poem feel more intense. It conveys the speaker's passion and their deep desire to honor the arrival of their love. Like a devoted parent preparing the house for their kid's birthday party, *everything* has to be perfect.

Finally, parallelism appears in the phrases "my life is come" and "my love is come." Repeating "is come" builds rhetorical power and emphasizes just how big a moment this is for the speaker. The repetitive language also hammers home the connection between "life" and "love" (as does the [alliteration](#) of these words); to the speaker, life only begins when love does.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "My heart is like a singing bird / Whose nest is in a water'd shoot; / My heart is like an apple-tree / Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit; / My heart is like a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea;"
- **Line 9:** "Raise"

- **Line 10:** "Hang it"
- **Line 11:** "Carve it"
- **Line 13:** "Work it"
- **Lines 15-16:** "my life / Is come, my love is come"

SIMILE

"A Birthday" opens with three [similes](#) that convey the speaker's immense joy now that "love is come." Each simile compares the speaker's heart to some part of nature and, in doing so, suggests that the speaker's love itself is something natural. These similes also illustrate the innocence, comfort, and richness of the speaker's love:

- First, the speaker compares their heart to a bird happily singing in its nest. More specifically, this nest is a "water'd shoot": a young branch that's nourished by water much like the speaker's heart is nourished by love. The bird sings because it's safe and sound in a healthy tree—a vision that suggests domestic bliss. The speaker can "sing"—express immense joy—because they have a safe "nest," a supportive home, in their beloved.
- Next, the speaker compares their heart to an apple tree whose branches are weighed down by "thickset fruit." This image of abundance reflects just how full the speaker's heart feels. The mention of ripe fruit might also make readers think of procreation. Again, the poem links love to creation and sustenance.
- Finally, the speaker compares their heart to "a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea." Like the bird and tree, this [personified](#) shell seems to be in its element, happily bobbing along in a calm, beautiful sea. The speaker's heart feels the same; it, too, may be delicate, but being in "love" is like floating on gentle, wonderful waters.

Of course, the speaker ultimately dismisses these similes in the stanza's final lines. However marvelous, none of these things can quite match the joy in the speaker's heart. Their heart is "gladder than all these," the speaker says, revealing that their "love" is without compare.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "My heart is like a singing bird / Whose nest is in a water'd shoot; / My heart is like an apple-tree / Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit; / My heart is like a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea;"

**VOCABULARY**

Water'd shoot (Line 2) - A *shoot* here refers to a young

branch—something that, like the speaker, has been recently "born." This shoot is water'd" (a contraction simply meant to communicate that "watered" should be pronounced with two syllables), or nourished by water. Likewise, the speaker is nourished by love.

Boughs (Line 4) - Branches.

Thicket (Line 4) - By this, the speaker means that this branch is positively packed with fruit.

Halcyon (Line 6) - Happy, calm, and peaceful.

Dais (Line 9) - A raised platform meant for a throne (or other seat of honor).

Down (Line 9) - Soft feathers that grow as an insulating layer beneath a bird's outer feathers.

Vair (Line 10) - Soft fur from a squirrel.

Fleurs-de-lys (Line 14) - A decorative shape based on the lily, strongly associated with royalty (especially French royalty).



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Birthday" contains two octaves, or eight-line stanzas. The poem divides neatly in half: the first octave focuses on the speaker's "heart" while the second concentrates on the "dais," or the throne platform the speaker wants erected to celebrate their love. The poem also uses a steady [meter](#) (specifically, iambic tetrameter) and [rhyme scheme](#). Altogether, "A Birthday" sounds like the speaker is firmly in control.

One might also consider "A Birthday" an example of occasional verse—that is, poetry written to commemorate a particular occasion. The event in question isn't an *actual* birthday but the speaker's *re-birth* thanks to their newly arrived "love."

METER

"A Birthday" is written in [iambic](#) tetrameter. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern (da-DUM); tetrameter simply means there are four of these iambs per line. Here's how that meter sounds in the poem's first four lines:

My heart | is like | a sing- | ing bird
Whose nest | is in | a wat- | er'd shoot;
My heart | is like | an ap- | ple-tree
Whose boughs | are bent | with thick- | set fruit;

This iambic meter fills the poem with a confident march. It propels the poem forward, its steadiness helping to convey the speaker's newfound sense of purpose and completion now that "love is come."

The speaker plays with the meter in the poem's second half,

however, while issuing instructions as to how the "dais" raised in honor of their love should look. Lines 9-11 and 13 swap iambs for [trochees](#) (whose syllables follow a stressed-unstressed pattern) in their first feet:

Raise me | a dais | of silk | and down;
Hang it | with vair | and purp- | le dyes;
Carve it | in doves | and pom- | egranates,
[...]
Work it | in gold | and sil- | ver grapes,

All those front-loaded stressed beats reflect the strength and urgency of the speaker's commands. The speaker knows exactly what they want, and they want it now!

RHYME SCHEME

At first, each four-line chunk "A Birthday" appears to follow the [rhyme scheme](#) of a ballad: ABCB. Lines 2 and 4 rhyme with each other ("shoot"/"fruit"), as do lines 6 and 8 ("sea"/"me"). This familiar pattern, common in Victorian poetry, adds to the poem's overall [euphony](#)—its steady, pleasant music.

Look more closely, however, and one will notice that the rhyme scheme is actually a little less straightforward than it first appears. That's because the second half of each octave *repeats* rhyme sounds from the first: "sea" and "me" (the "B" rhymes above) *also* rhyme with "tree" (the "C" rhyme)—and they form a [slant rhyme](#) with "these" (the "F" rhyme)! As such, the rhyme scheme technically runs: ABCBDCEC. (Including the slant rhyme, it would be: ABCBDCCC.)

The second stanza works similarly. Again, the general pattern here is ABCB: the first and fourth lines of the stanza rhyme ("dyes"/"eyes"), as do the sixth and eighth ("-lys"/"me"; the "s" in "lys" is silent). The second half again repeats rhyme sounds, as "life" forms a slant rhyme with "dyes"/"eyes." And, of course, "me" in line 16 echoes "me" in line 8.

The effect of all these "extra" rhymes is that the poem sounds even more emphatically musical. It's as though the speaker simply can't contain their delight.



SPEAKER

The speaker is someone who is absolutely delighted by the arrival of their "love." They try to articulate their joy in a series of [similes](#) comparing their "heart" to different happy, contented parts of nature, but no comparison will do; their "heart is gladder than all these."

Understandably, the speaker wants to celebrate the arrival of this love. They demand that a "dais"—a platform fit for a throne—be built and ornately decorated. The speaker isn't insisting on a literal platform; rather, these commands illustrate how much they value their love, the arrival of whom signifies

"the birthday of [the speaker's] life." In other words, the speaker's life has only truly begun now that their "love is come." The poem never tells readers anything about the speaker's identity, nor does it even specify what kind of "love" this is. It could certainly be romantic, but it could also refer to the birth of a child, whose arrival fills the speaker's heart to bursting. Or, given poet Christina Rossetti's deep Christian faith, this "love" could be God: Christ is the king for whom that ornate "dais" is being built.



SETTING

"A Birthday" is set on "the birthday of [the speaker's] life." This isn't a birthday with cards, cake, and candles, however. Instead, this is a figurative birthday: a day on which the speaker feels reborn, like they've become a totally new person and their life has finally begun. That's all thanks to the fact that "love" has arrived.

Depending on how readers interpret that "love," the poem's setting perhaps becomes more specific:

- It might take place shortly after the speaker has met the love of their life or gotten married.
- It might take place after the birth of the speaker's child (whose literal birthday sparks the speaker's metaphorical one).
- Or, given that much of the poem's [imagery](#) can be interpreted through a distinctly Christian lens, this birthday could relate to the Second Coming: Jesus's return to establish God's kingdom on earth.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was one of the most important poets of the Victorian era. A popular writer of strange and fantastical verse, Rossetti contributed to a growing 19th-century vogue for fairy tales and old romances. This poem first appeared in her 1862 collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, the [title poem of which](#) tells the tale of two sisters' sinister adventures in fairyland.

Rossetti was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an artistic movement dedicated to recapturing the beauty of a (much-mythologized and romanticized) Middle Ages. Her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founder of the group, was also an accomplished painter, poet, and [wombat enthusiast](#). Rossetti was also influenced by [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#)—another popular female poet with strong ties to Italy—and some of her contemporaries saw her as the older poet's natural successor.

In some ways, "A Birthday" is a mysterious poem. Does the celebrated "love" relate to romance, or is the speaker talking about communion with God? Another of Rossetti's poems, "[From House to Home](#)," directly calls the Second Coming (the return of Jesus to earth) a "birthday." But even Rossetti didn't necessarily know what makes her speaker so happy! She once said about the poem, "I have more than once been asked whether I could account for the outburst of exuberant joy in this celebrated lyric; I am unable to do so."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti lived in a world marked both by revolutionary change and reactionary conservatism. The Victorians were innovators and empire-builders, and England reshaped itself considerably under the reign of Victoria, its first truly powerful queen since Elizabeth I. A primarily rural population made an unprecedented shift to the cities as factory work outpaced farm work, and writers from [Dickens](#) to [Hardy](#) worried about the human effects of this kind of change.

Perhaps in response to this speedy reconfiguration of the world, Victorian social culture became deeply conservative. Women were expected to adhere to a strict code of sexual morals: a woman must be chaste, pliant, and submissive, and any deviation could mean social exile. But within this repressive landscape, women writers began to flourish, asserting the complexity and meaningfulness of their own lives. Rossetti's work was part of a tide of bold and moving poetry and fiction by Victorian women; [Charlotte](#) and [Emily](#) Brontë and [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#) are only a few of the writers whose work achieved contemporary recognition against the odds.

Additionally, the Rossetti family was swept up in the Oxford Movement, a mid-19th-century revival of Catholicism in Britain that sought to restore older Christian traditions. Many of its prominent practitioners, known as Tractarians, were poets, such as John Henry Newman and John Keble. Rossetti was deeply religious and her faith played a major role in her poetry.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Rossetti's Portraits](#) — See images of Rossetti throughout her life. (<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp03876/christina-georgina-rossetti>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) — Listen to a reading of "A Birthday" by James Earl Jones. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5jRA9tkaYo>)
- [A Brief Biography](#) — Learn more about Christina Rossetti through the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti>)

- [Goblin Market and Other Poems](#) — Take a look at an early edition of the collection in which "A Birthday" first appeared. (<https://www.bl.uk/works/goblin-market>)
- [In Our Time: Christina Rossetti](#) — A 45-minute podcast episode in which literary scholars discuss Rossetti's life and work for BBC Radio 4. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017mvwy>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- [An Apple Gathering](#)
- [Cousin Kate](#)
- [Echo](#)
- [In an Artist's Studio](#)
- [Maude Clare](#)
- [No, Thank You, John](#)
- [Remember](#)

- [Sister Maude](#)
- [Song \(When I am dead, my dearest\)](#)



HOW TO CITE

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