In an Artist's Studio

POEM TEXT

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more or less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

SUMMARY

There's only one person depicted in all of this artist's paintings, one model simply posing in different ways. We used to come to the studio and find this model concealed behind those privacy screens over there, where the mirror reflected her intense beauty. In the paintings, she's portrayed as a queen in shimmering jewel-colored dresses, or as a lovely, anonymous girl wearing bright green, or as a saint, or an angel: every single painting says the same thing about her, nothing more and nothing less.

The artist stares hungrily at her painted face all the time, and the portraits look gently and loyally back at him. In these paintings, the model is as beautiful as the moon and happy as sunlight. She's not pale from waiting around or muted by sadness. In the portraits, she's not the way she really is now, but the way she was when she was hopeful; she's not the way she really is now, but the way she is in the artist's dream-world.

THEMES

ART AND OBJECTIFICATION

The "Artist" of the poem's title paints the same model over and over, always giving his portraits of her "the same one meaning": she's always a "goddess" or a "queen," the perfect image of female beauty. But, as the poem's observant speaker notes, this is far from the truth about this model. While she was once young, lovely, and hopeful, now she's "wan" and full of "sorrow." The artist is portraying her "Not as she is," then, but rather "as she fills his dream." Caught up in his ideal, the artist objectifies his model, unable to see her as a real person—and leaves her alone with her all-too-real suffering. This poem is a criticism not of any one artist in particular (though the painter here does bear some resemblance to Rossetti's own brother!), but of a whole Victorian system of sexism that denied women their human complexity.

The poem's speaker, an observer who knows both the artist and his model, visits the artist's studio only to be overwhelmed by all the portraits of this one woman. The artist is clearly obsessed with this model's beauty—to the point that he can't see anything about her but her lovely exterior. The speaker underlines just how fixated on this one woman the artist seems to be by observing that there's "one face," "one selfsame figure," in "all his canvases." What's more, that face is always presented as a gorgeous "queen," "angel," or "nameless girl": in other words, an idealized Victorian icon of female beauty and virtue.

The speaker hints that there's a problem here when she notes that this face always has "The same one meaning, neither more nor less." The artist has looked endlessly at this one model's face, but he always sees the same thing there: perfect, uncomplicated gorgeousness. In his eyes, it seems, there's no other meaningful way for a woman to exist! In fact, there's not even more than one way to be beautiful.

The artist's fixation on this model's idealized beauty means that he misses (or ignores) some important truths about the real-life model's suffering. In the real world, this model, whom the speaker knows, has become "wan with waiting" and "dim" with "sorrow." But the artist either doesn't notice his model's suffering or doesn't care. He's busy "feed[ing]" on her painted face, like a vampire. Through his paintings, she becomes a mere decorative object, one he both "[feeds] on" and controls: in his portraits, she must always "[look] back at him" with the same "true kind eyes."

The artist's idealized, dream-world portraits of the woman capture all his attention: he sees her "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream." In other words, his obsession with her beauty leads him to objectify his model, seeing her only as the lovely goddess of his paintings rather than as a real, live person—and especially not as a real, live person he seems to have hurt!

In love with a reductive and sexist ideal, the artist can no longer see the living woman whose beauty he worships so faithfully. His blindness to his model's human complexity makes him unwittingly (or callously) cruel. He's an indictment of a Victorian perspective on women as a whole: if women must

only be beautiful, virtuous paragons, this poem suggests, they can't be full human beings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

This poem's title, "In an Artist's Studio," immediately places readers in a specific setting. The poem's first lines then make that setting feel both strange and intense. In this whole studio, there's only "One face" in any of the paintings. This artist, it seems, is a man obsessed with one single subject, one model.

The speaker seems as struck by this discovery as the reader might be. The first two lines here insist on the artist's obsession through repetition:

> One face looks out from all his canvases,
> One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

Here, anaphora of the word "one" and parallelism between these lines makes the poem reflect what it describes. These repetitions are a lot like the repetitions between the paintings, which show the "selfsame figure" as she "sits or walks or leans" in various poses. The language here captures this artist's obsessive focus.

A little context about this poem might give the reader an even more vivid picture of this studio. The author, Christina Rossetti, was the sister of a famous Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was indeed obsessed with one model: the unfortunate (and gorgeous) Lizzie Siddal. Siddal modeled for Dante Gabriel Rossetti (a dangerous profession for a woman in the Victorian era, when modeling was considered next door to prostitution), waited around for 10 years for him to keep his promise to marry her, and then promptly died of a laudanum overdose.

While this poem isn't explicitly about the relationship between Rossetti, her brother, and his model, a lot of the detail here hints that Rossetti has this sad story in mind—and that perhaps she, as a woman artist, feels a certain kinship with the artist's model. This will be a poem about the way male artistic ideals can trample on women's humanity.

LINES 3-4

We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

The speaker, readers learn in these lines, has been to this studio before, and often met the artist's model in person. She was once "hidden just behind those screens" when the speaker visited: in other words, sitting behind a privacy screen, posing for the artist. Those "screens" also suggest that she wasn't always wearing too many clothes!

As the model posed, the speaker goes on, a personified "mirror gave back all her loveliness." It's as if the whole room is a little in love with this model, not just the obsessive artist. But there's a hint of trouble in these lines, too. If the model is "hidden" behind those "screens," perhaps some part of her is also "hidden" behind the "screens" of the artist's paintings. (The reader might notice that "those screens" here could equally refer to privacy screens or to the "canvases" of the first line.)

These first four lines use steady iambic pentameter, a meter made of five feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

> We found | her hid- | den just | behind | those screens.

That meter, plus the ABBA rhyme scheme, show that this poem is going to be a sonnet—and not just any sonnet, but a Petrarchan sonnet. The medieval Italian poet Petrarch mastered and perfected this form in a sequence of poems addressed to his beloved Laura, an idealized beautiful lady. Perhaps this speaker's use of the Petrarchan sonnet form refers to the grand tradition of men making obsessive art about female perfection—and hiding real women behind the "screens" of their fantasies.

LINES 5-8

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more or less.

The speaker turns from her memories of the model to look around again at all the artist's paintings, and finds those paintings to be both gorgeous and a little trite.

In each of these paintings, the model isn't exactly herself. Instead, she's some kind of idealized female figure. She's a glorious "queen," a "saint, an angel"—and perhaps most tellingly, she's just some "nameless girl," an idea of girl-ness rather than a real person with her own identity.

These pictures are certainly sumptuous and beautiful, full of jewel-toned "opal," "ruby," and "summer-green" gowns. But these clothes, and the figures dressed in them, all communicate "the same one meaning, neither more or less." The most down-to-earth interpretation of that "one meaning" might be translated: *gee, this artist sure thinks his model is hot!*

But the artist also seems to feel that the model's beauty makes her *virtuous*. Her gorgeousness doesn't just cast her as an icon

of female beauty, but also as a "saint." These are pictures, not of this one real woman, but of an idealized and glamorized womanhood, the perfect blend of loveliness and goodness. And there doesn't seem to be room in these images for the model's humanity.

While the speaker is certainly impressed with the luxuriant beauty of these paintings (and the living model's "loveliness"), she also seems quietly impatient with the artist's rapturous idealizations. Take a look at how asyndeton, caesura, and repetition shape the speaker's tone in these lines:

> A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
> A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
> A saint, an angel—|| every canvas means
> The same one meaning, || neither more or less.

Asyndeton helps the speaker pile up these paintings one after the other, suggesting just how many of them there are. And as she gets toward the end of her catalog, she goes faster, moving from bright imagery of the paintings' colors into a plain list: "a saint, an angel." The reader can hear her gathering irritation in the assonance of "saint" and "angel": it's like she's drawing out that long /ay/ sound, rolling her eyes.

Then come two sharp caesurae, breaking from descriptions of these myriad paintings into a brisk summary of their "same one meaning." The polyptoton of "mean" and "meaning" only drives the speaker's point home more firmly: in this model's face, the artist can only see his own ideal of womanhood.

LINES 9-10

> *He feeds upon her face by day and night,*
> *And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,*

These lines mark a transition in this sonnet's form as well as in its perspective. A Petrarchan sonnet divides into two sections: the first eight lines (or octave), which rhyme ABBA ABBA, and the last six lines (or sestet), which can use many different rhyme patterns. At the switch from the octave to the sestet comes a volta, or turn: a movement from one idea, theme, or perspective to another.

At this poem's volta, the speaker looks from the paintings to the artist who painted them. What she sees is not just a dreamy idealist lost in beauty, but a sort of vampire, who "feeds upon [the model's] face by day and night." The matching alliterative /f/ in "feeds" and "face" suggests just how intensely caught up in his own paintings this artist gets.

And make no mistake: it's his *paintings* he's caught up in, not the real live model's "face." In his paintings, the model always "looks back on him" with "true kind eyes." She's a constant, unchanging force of sweetness and loveliness.

While the artist might seem to be under his model's spell, he's really only lost in his own fantasies—and those fantasies have a lot to do with control. Remember, *he* painted all these pictures, and had total power over how his model appears in them. Even her look of love is his own invention.

LINES 11-12

> *Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:*
> *Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;*

While the model's painted face may always look back at the artist with the same "true kind eyes," the actual model herself is another story. The speaker here reminds readers that she knows this model personally, and that her experience of this model is rather different from the artist's.

The artist sees his model as "fair as the moon and joyful as the light." In these similes, the moon and the light are personified, like shining, heavenly goddesses. It's as if the artist sees his model as a living incarnation of all that is beautiful—as the very symbol of beauty itself.

But the real model, like any living human being, has a more complex experience. While she's certainly lovely, the speaker observes, she's also become "wan with waiting" and "dim" with "sorrow." The alliteration of /w/ sounds in "wan with waiting" sounds like a mournful wind, evoking the model's deep sadness.

There's a little hint here that the model might have been "waiting" for the artist to notice that she's really *there*, or even to marry her. Being a model was a pretty scandalous profession in Victorian England, when this poem was written and set. Victorian women were meant to be chaste and pure; modeling, using one's body to make money, was seen as next door to prostitution, and sex workers were condemned to lives of shame. Marriage was one of the only respectable "careers" available to women at the time.

If all this is true, then the model is in a real bind. The artist who paints her sees her as an ideal of perfect femininity, while the society around her sees her as at best suspicious, at worst as a "fallen woman," degraded and ruined. That's enough to leave anyone sorrowful and wan.

As we noted back at the beginning of the poem, there are many hints here that Rossetti is drawing on her own experiences (and her painter brother's behavior) in this poem. If that's true, and readers imagine the speaker is Rossetti herself or someone rather like her, she might feel a special sympathy with this model. A female artist herself, she knows all too well how male expectations entrap and repress women.

LINES 13-14

> *Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;*
> *Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.*

These closing lines bring the speaker's sharp criticism home with striking changes in the poem's meter and rhyme scheme. Much of the poem has used steady lines of iambic pentameter (five metrical feet, each with a da-DUM rhythm), and the sestet

(or last six lines) has so far been using a CDCD rhyme scheme. But look what happens here:

> Not as | she is, | but was | when hope | shone bright;
> Not as | she is, | but as | she fills | his dream.

Notice how the first syllable in both of these lines is stressed, rather than the second? That DUM-da foot is called a trochee, and it means that the word "Not" is front and center here. That heavy first stress insists that the artist just can "Not" see how the real, live model feels.

Here, too, the rhyme scheme doubles down on the artist's failure to connect with his model's humanity. From a steady back-and-forth CDCD pattern, the poem ends on a surprising new E rhyme: "dream." This is a slant rhyme, which shares some sounds with the D rhyme before it ("dim"), but not all. The artist's golden "dream" literally doesn't match the "dim" reality of the model's life!

These are elegant, subtle moments of poetic artistry—and they make a claim for women's full humanity as much as the poem's content. If this speaker has as much in common with Rossetti as she seems to, she's also an artist. And as a woman poet writing in a male-dominated world, the speaker is the same boat as the model, doomed to be simultaneously put on a pedestal, underestimated, and reviled. But she also knows that she can see things that the male artist, blinded by his sexist visions of perfect loveliness, simply cannot. She communicates her vision through her own art, through this poem: art that's both beautiful in itself, and more truthful than the painter's fantasies.

SYMBOLS

THE PAINTINGS

The paintings in this "Artist's Studio" symbolize the sexist male gaze. These paintings are physical representations of an unpleasant inner truth: caught up in his model's beauty, the artist can no longer see her as a real person. Instead, he paints an endless series of portraits in which the model is an idealized figure: a queen, a saint, an angel, and perhaps most painfully, a "nameless girl"—the *idea* of girlness rather than a living, breathing woman. These paintings might capture the model's beauty like a mirror, but they're also a lot like the "screens" she used to pose behind, concealing rather than revealing her real self.

The paintings thus stand for a way that women could expect to be treated in Victorian society (and, alas, sometimes in contemporary society): as ideas or ideals, not people.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-7
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 10-11

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Moments of alliteration give this poem both music and meaning. On the one hand, alliteration simply sounds good—but, being a little different from everyday speech, it also attracts *attention*, directing the reader to important moments in the poem.

Early on in the poem, for example, sibilant alliteration evokes the harmonious beauty of the artist's portraits. Look at the way the /s/ sound travels through this line (as both alliteration and consonance): "One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans": the initial /s/ alliteration of "selfsame" and "sits" chimes in with subtler internal sibilance to evoke these pictures' quiet beauty. Those /s/ sounds make it seem as if the speaker can almost hear the model's silky dresses rustling as she poses for painting after painting.

All that gentle beauty gets disturbed with a very different moment of alliteration in line 9, in which the artist "feeds upon [his model's] face by day and night." That brisk /f/ alliteration frames an already alarming metaphor, in which the artist seems to become a sort of beauty-vampire, endlessly drawn back to "feed" on his model's painted perfection. And by the end of the poem, when the model is "wan with waiting," that /w/ alliteration makes it seem as if wanness (or paleness) and waiting around go hand in hand.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "selfsame," "sits"
- **Line 6:** "girl," "greens"
- **Line 8:** "meaning," "more"
- **Line 9:** "feeds," "face"
- **Line 12:** "wan," "with," "waiting"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem a gentle, reflective music. But it also draws attention to important moments—particularly moments in which the speaker seems more than a little irritated with the artist's blindness.

For instance, when the speaker is running through a list of all the artist's lovely "canvases," her eventual irritation with their never ending worshipful sameness appears in the assonant /ay/ sounds of "a saint, an angel." The reader can almost hear her stretching those long vowels out in exasperation—maybe

rolling her eyes a little. That /ay/ sound then pops up in "same" in the next line, and in "face" and "day" in the line after that. The repeated return to this sound reinforces the sense that the speaker is exasperated with the monotony of the artist's work.

At the end of the poem, the speaker brings her point home even more forcefully with the /ee/ assonance of "not as she is, but as she fills his dream." Here, that /ee/ links the model directly to the artist's "dream" of her, drawing attention to the contrast between the model's real life and the artist's vision.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "figure," "sits"
- **Line 7:** "saint," "angel"
- **Line 8:** "same"
- **Line 9:** "face," "day"
- **Line 10:** "kind," "eyes"
- **Line 13:** "hope," "shone"
- **Line 14:** "she," "dream"

CAESURA

This poem's caesurae draw attention to the contrast between the artist's dreamy visions of his model and that model's real life.

Some of the most pointed caesurae here turn up in the last two lines, when the speaker describes the difference between the model herself and the artist's paintings:

> Not wan with waiting, || not with sorrow dim;
> Not as she is, || but was when hope shone bright;
> Not as she is, || but as she fills his dream.

Those last two mid-line breaks, in particular, help to hammer the speaker's point home: they literally *separate* descriptions of how the speaker really is from descriptions of how the artist portrays her.

Back in lines 7-8 caesura does something even subtler, evoking the speaker's impatience with the artist's idealized visions of his model:

> A saint, || an angel || —every canvas means
> The same one meaning, || neither more or less.

After six free-flowing lines without any mid-line breaks, the caesurae here suggest that the speaker is briskly summing things up—perhaps growing a little weary with all these almost-identical pictures. The caesurae here break these lines into shorter, curter sections, and draw attention to the speaker's major point: all these lovely paintings say exactly the same thing about the model, "neither more nor less" than that the artist sees her as the ideal of womanhood.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "saint, an," "angel—every"
- **Line 8:** "meaning, neither"
- **Line 12:** "waiting, not"
- **Line 13:** "is, but"
- **Line 14:** "is, but"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem's end-stopped lines add to its slow, dramatic pace. If the speaker used lots of enjambments, the poem would likely feel passionate and emotional, as if her thoughts were rushing quickly on. Instead, end-stops help the speaker come across as careful and controlled—as if she sees the artist's work more clearly than the artist himself can.

For instance, take a look at the steady pace of the speaker's first four lines:

> One face looks out from all his canvases,
> One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
> We found her hidden just behind those screens,
> That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

Each of these lines is a self-contained thought, a complete sentence that comes to a firm end. The lines make the poem move as steadily and thoughtfully as the speaker's gaze as she looks over the artist's studio.

Later, a solid period closes the long passage in lines 5-8 in which the speaker describes all the different (and yet eerily similar) roles the model plays in the artist's portraits. This period makes the speaker sound emphatic; all these different paintings, she firmly concludes, are saying exactly the same thing:

> [...] every canvas means
> The same one meaning, neither more or less.

Then, at the end of the poem, a string of end-stops come all in a row between lines 11 and 14:

> Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
> Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
> Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
> Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

That colon in line 11 marks a transition between the artist's idealized portraiture and the model's difficult lived reality. And the semicolons make it clear that here, again, the speaker is using variations on one idea to make her criticisms of this artist clear. In fact, she's using his own technique—repeated variations on the same theme—against him!

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "canvases,"
- **Line 2:** "leans:"
- **Line 3:** "screens,"
- **Line 4:** "loveliness."
- **Line 5:** "dress,"
- **Line 6:** "summer-greens,"
- **Line 8:** "less."
- **Line 9:** "night,"
- **Line 10:** "him,"
- **Line 11:** "light:"
- **Line 12:** "dim;"
- **Line 13:** "bright;"
- **Line 14:** "dream."

PERSONIFICATION

Moments of subtle personification evoke the intense dream-world inside the artist's studio.

In line 4, for instance, the "mirror" is presented as a generous, loving friend, who once "gave back" all the model's "loveliness." Here, it feels as if the model is so beautiful that even inanimate objects adore her, laying her own beauty before her like a gift.

But perhaps there's also a hidden sadness in this image. If this generous mirror "gave back" the model's loveliness, it did so in the past. Perhaps it would give her something different if she sat down in front of it now, "dim" with "sorrow" and "wan with waiting."

Later, in line 11, the speaker sees the painted model as "fair as the moon and joyful as the light." In this simile, the personification of the moon as "fair" (or beautiful in a human way) and the light as "joyful" make them seem like goddesses—and, by extension, make the speaker herself seem rather goddess-like. Here, rather than making a non-human object more human, personification curiously makes a human—the model—*less* human. If these paintings depict a gorgeous goddess, like the personified moon or the light, they're depicting a figure a pretty far cry from the sad, pale creature the speaker sees. Here, personification helps to illuminate the artist's inability to see what's right in front of him.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "That mirror gave back all her loveliness."
- **Line 11:** "Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:"

ASYNDETON

A long passage of asyndeton in the middle of the poem conjures both the lavish beauty and the irritating monotony of the artist's many portraits.

In this passage, the speaker lists the roles in which the artist has cast his model, one by one:

> A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
> A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
> A saint, an angel [...]

Putting all these images in a row without conjunctions to connect them, the speaker suggests that she's looking quickly from painting to painting, taking in all these portrayals of the model—and finding that they all look exactly the same. While the speaker can appreciate the lush, jewel-toned beauty of the model's "opal," "ruby" and "summer-green[]" clothing (a beauty readers can also imagine clearly if they take a look at some Pre-Raphaelite art), she also gets increasingly impatient with these gorgeous depictions. By the end of her list, she's moved from rich descriptions to a plain old list: "A saint, an angel."

All these different portraits, the asyndeton here suggests, can be lined up and categorized in short order. There might be a hundred of these paintings, but they're all saying exactly the same thing about their subject: she's ethereally beautiful, we get it!

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "A queen in opal or in ruby dress, / A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens, / A saint, an angel"

REPETITION

Repetition is both a theme and a technique in this poem. As the speaker looks at the artist's repetitive portraits, all depicting the same idealized vision of his model, she uses repeated sounds and phrasings to insist that he's not seeing all there is to see here.

There's a clear example in the first two lines, which use both anaphora and parallelism:

> One face looks out from all his canvases,
> One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

Here, the fact that the second line is really only delivering a slight variation on the first mirrors what the speaker is describing: a series of portraits that all say the same thing about the same model. That repeated "one" drives the point home: yes, really, just this one woman, in painting after painting. (The polyptoton on "means" and "meaning" in lines 7-8 makes the same point!)

At the end of the poem, the speaker uses similar techniques to insist that the artist can't see the model as a real person. In his paintings, the model is:

> Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Again, parallelism and anaphora work together to make the speaker's point crystal-clear.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "One face looks out from all his canvases, / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:"
- **Line 5:** "A"
- **Line 6:** "A"
- **Line 7:** "A," "an," "means"
- **Line 8:** "meaning"
- **Line 12:** "Not," "not"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright; / Not as she is, but as she fills his dream."

SIMILE

The poem's single simile conjures the artist's dreamworld—the world in which the model is nothing but an icon of eternal beauty.

In this artist's pictures, the speaker observes, the model is "Fair as the moon and joyful as the light." These similes make the model's beauty a powerful elemental force, almost as if she were an ancient goddess—and not just any goddess, but a goddess of the moon or the sun, a celestial being, high above lowly mortals. The artist, the speaker suggests, sees his model not as a human, but as a supernatural image of beauty itself.

Paradoxically, though, this supernatural creature is very much under the artist's control. He gets to paint her gorgeousness, and to make her seem to "[look] back on him" with tender love. His worship of this goddess is secretly a power trip.

There might be a further sneaky criticism of the artist's perspective going on here, too. Similes comparing a beloved lady to the moon or the sun are well-worn clichés; Shakespeare, for instance, put them in the mouths of his besotted young lover Romeo some 250 years before this poem was written. Perhaps, this line suggests, the artist's dream-vision is part of a longer tradition of men going goofy about female beauty—and forgetting, in the process, that women aren't glorious goddesses to be put on a pedestal, but living, breathing humans.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors draw attention to the sinister quality of the artist's obsession with his model—and to the model's real-life suffering.

The first of these metaphors appears in line 9, in which the artist seems to become a beauty-vampire. He doesn't just look lovingly at his portraits of his model: he "feeds upon her face by day and night." There's a double meaning here. Not only is the artist eating the portraits up with his eyes, he's also feeding on the model's actual face as he transforms it into his idealized visions. He may be wrapped up in beauty, but the metaphor of "feeding" suggests that there's something cannibalistic about his attitude towards those seemingly ethereal visions.

The model, for her part, is losing her metaphorical "light." In the poem's last few lines, the speaker imagines her growing "dim" with "sorrow" while the artist's portraits show her as she was before, when "hope shone bright." This image of hope and joy as a light suggests that the model's inner glow is flickering and fading—and also hints that her physical beauty might be just as transient. She, unlike the artist's portraits of her, can suffer, and will eventually grow old. The metaphors here imply that the artist neither notices nor cares about this human reality.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "He feeds upon her face by day and night,"
- **Line 12:** "not with sorrow dim;"
- **Line 13:** "Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;"

VOCABULARY

Canvases (Line 1, Line 7) - Paintings.

Selfsame (Line 2) - Identical.

Screens (Line 3) - Cloth-covered or wooden frames used to give a model some privacy—implying that she might have posed naked.

Wan (Line 12) - Pale and faded.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of Christina Rossetti's poems, "In an Artist's Studio" is a Petrarchan sonnet, also known as an Italian sonnet. Named for the medieval Italian poet Petrarch (an early master of the form), a Petrarchan sonnet uses 14 lines, divided into an octet (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the last six lines). The octet develops a theme, and the sestet introduces a volta, or "turn," which moves the poem in a different direction.

In this poem, the opening octet describes the artist's many portraits of the same beautiful model. The closing sestet has a darker feel, observing that the real-life model isn't quite so ideally happy and lovely anymore.

Rossetti's use of the Petrarchan sonnet form gives this poem some grandeur and weight, making it part of an ancient poetic

tradition. This form also speaks to her own history: her father was an Italian immigrant, and she and her siblings (including her brother, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who has a lot in common with the "Artist" of this poem) were immersed in Italian literature all through their childhoods.

METER

Like all sonnets, "In an Artist's Studio" uses iambic pentameter. That means that each line has five iambs, metrical feet that follow a da-DUM stress pattern. Take line 9:

> He feeds | upon | her face | by day | and night,

But like a lot of sonnets, this one often does some fancy footwork within its pentameter, moving stresses around to emphasize important moments. For instance, take a look at what happens at the end of the poem:

> Not as | she is, | but was | when hope | shone bright;
> Not as | she is, | but as | she fills | his dream.

These two closing lines start with trochees, feet that go DUM-da. That front-loaded meter makes the speaker's closing thoughts feel urgent and pointed: as she insists that these portraits show the model "Not as she is," she leans hard on the word "Not."

RHYME SCHEME

Petrarchan sonnets like "In an Artist's Studio" use a rhyme scheme that's both regular and flexible. The scheme here goes like this:

> ABBA ABBA CDCDCE

Almost every Petrarchan sonnet starts with that ABBA ABBA pattern in the first eight lines (or the "octet"), and then moves into a more variable and complicated pattern for the last six lines (the "sestet").

Here, the speaker does something especially clever in the sestet, using assonant slant rhyme to tie the whole poem up in a bow. The first four lines of the sestet uses a regular, back-and-forth CDCD scheme—one the reader might expect the last two lines to follow, too. But look what happens in lines 13-14:

> Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
> Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

The poem ends on a new rhyme, an E that doesn't match any word that's come before. But look closer: "dream" echoes both the consonant sounds of "dim" in line 12 and the /ee/ sounds of the B rhymes from the octet: "leans," "screens," "greens," and "means."

This "dream," then, is *connected* to what's going on around the artist, but also just a little bit out of whack: and that's exactly what's happening in the poem! This almost-rhyme reflects the artist's idealized, illusory dream-world.

SPEAKER

We've used female pronouns throughout this guide because the poem's speaker has so much in common with Christina Rossetti herself. Rossetti was a member of a big artistic family, and her brother Dante Gabriel was a famous Pre-Raphaelite painter, known both for his gorgeous portraits of beautiful women (especially Lizzie Siddal, the likely inspiration for the model in this poem) and his philandering. Rossetti had plenty of opportunity to visit her brother's studio, and to observe his many models' suffering.

If the speaker is indeed a self-portrait of Rossetti, she's also an artist in her own right, a poet. As both an artist and a woman, perhaps she has a special perspective on this situation: she's able to see the studio from both the artist's and the model's point of view.

But the reader doesn't have to interpret the speaker as a Rossetti-like figure (or even a woman) to get a sense of who this person is, which the poem reveals not through any direct description, but through what the speaker observes. She's a sensitive, thoughtful, and compassionate person. While she deeply appreciates the jewel-like beauty of the artist's portraits, she can also see past it to the real live woman who sat for these pictures. The artist might not notice that the model has become "wan with waiting," but this speaker sure does.

SETTING

As soon as they read the poem's title, readers know that this poem is set "In an Artist's Studio." This is a Victorian painter's workplace, with practical "screens" to shield naked models and a "mirror" in which they can fix themselves up before they pose. But it's also a dreamland. On every wall hang dozens of gorgeous portraits of the same woman, cast as a queen, an angel, or just an anonymous, beautiful girl. Readers who have looked at some Pre-Raphaelite art will be able to imagine just how rich, bright, and fantastical this room must look.

The enchanting beauty of this studio conceals a sad secret. Beyond all those beautiful pictures is the model: a real woman, now "wan" and sorrowful, a far cry from the shining joyful girl of the portraits. She may once have been literally "hidden just behind those screens," posing—but she's also *metaphorically* "hidden" behind the "screens" of all these idealized paintings.

The gorgeous studio and its "screens" are thus both a celebration of beauty and a warning against getting too caught up in an artistic "dream." Surrounded by portraits of the lovely model, the artist can no longer see her genuine suffering.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) lived and worked right in the heart of the Victorian Pre-Raphaelite movement, a circle of artists who wanted to bring back medieval ideals of art and craft—with their own luxurious contemporary twist. Rossetti was a member of a large and talented artistic family, the English children of Italian immigrants. She was particularly close with her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a painter whose life and work seem to have had a big influence on this poem.

While Rossetti was a popular and well-known poet during her lifetime, "In an Artist's Studio" wasn't published until after her death, when her brother William printed it in an 1896 collection called *New Poems by Christina Rossetti*.

This poem reflects Rossetti's life and work both in its shape and its themes. Rossetti's father was a scholar of Italian literature, so she knew the great Italian poets Dante and Petrarch from a young age. This is only one of Rossetti's many sonnets that use the Italian (or Petrarchan) form.

Rossetti also had plenty of opportunities to think about women's role in the art world. A popular woman poet, she was one of a rare breed in Victorian England. Many saw her as a successor to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, both because the two shared a fondness for sonnets and Italy, and because there weren't many other female poets around to compare her to! Rossetti was also surrounded by male Pre-Raphaelite painters, whose behavior was often much like that of the "Artist" in this poem: while they idealized female beauty, they weren't always kind to the actual women in their lives. Rossetti's poetic objections to this kind of treatment made her an inspiring early feminist figure. She's still studied (and revered) today, and her poetry has influenced writers from Virginia Woolf to Philip Larkin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Christina Rossetti was writing in the Victorian era, women simply were not expected to be artists. Rossetti was born into a deeply conservative England, a world in which women were still essentially seen as the property of their husbands and fathers. Women's options were few: wife, governess, servant, or prostitute were the four basic "career paths" available to most. (One notable exception to this rule, of course, was Queen Victoria herself!)

Within these narrow bounds, women were also expected to be chaste and submissive, and not to put a foot out of line. The model in this poem would have been considered more than a little scandalous: posing for male painters was seen as just next door to prostitution.

Somehow, within this repressive landscape, women writers still flourished (even if they sometimes had to take male pen names, as George Eliot did). Rossetti's work was part of a tide of bold poetry and fiction by Victorian women like Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning— art that's still respected and beloved today.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Rossetti's Life and Work — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Rossetti, and find links to more of her poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud—and see an image of one of the paintings Rossetti may have had in mind as she wrote. Rossetti's brother, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, initially modeled this painting on his mistress, Fanny Cornforth—and later painted over her face to make her look like another woman, Alexa Wilding! (https://youtu.be/QFzEExIC9qw)
- Pre-Raphaelite Models — Read up on the lives of the Pre-Raphaelite models, women sometimes known as the "Stunners." (https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/women-in-rossettis-art/)
- Gender and Power in Rossetti's Poetry — Read an article from the British Library on Rossetti's pioneering feminist vision. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/christina-rossetti-gender-and-power)
- Pre-Raphaelite Women — Read a review of an exhibit about women in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which quotes "In an Artist's Studio." (https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/16/pre-raphaelite-sisters-review-national-portrait-gallery-forgotten-women)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- Cousin Kate
- No, Thank You, John
- Remember

HOW TO CITE

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