Sister Maude

POEM TEXT

Who told my mother of my shame,
Who told my father of my dear?
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,
Who lurked to spy and peer.

Cold he lies, as cold as stone,
With his clotted curls about his face:
The comeliest corpse in all the world
And worthy of a queen's embrace.

You might have spared his soul, sister,
Have spared my soul, your own soul too:
Though I had not been born at all,
He'd never have looked at you.

My father may sleep in Paradise,
My mother at Heaven-gate:
But sister Maude shall get no sleep
Either early or late.

My father may wear a golden crown,
My mother a crown may win;
If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate
Perhaps they'd let us in:
But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,
Bide *you* with death and sin.

SUMMARY

Who told my mother about my shameful behavior? Who told my father about my secret lover? Oh, it was my sister Maude, who was always snooping around, spying on me.

Now my lover lies dead, cold as a stone, with his bloody hair fallen into moist clumps around his face. He's the most beautiful corpse in the world, fit for a queen to kiss.

You could have saved him, sister. You could have saved my soul, and saved your own soul, too. There was no point in ratting us out: even if I'd never been born, he would never have looked twice at you.

My parents might go to heaven some day, but my sister Maude will never sleep peaceful in her grave.

My father might win a heavenly golden crown, and so might my mother. If my lover and I knocked on the gates of heaven, we might get in. But not you, sister Maude: to hell with you forever.

THEMES

SIBLING RIVALRY

"Sister Maude" tells the tale of the speaker and her sister, the treacherous Maude. Readers get the distinct sense that there's never been any love lost between the pair. When the speaker has a secret love affair, Maude swiftly betrays her to their parents—out of envy, the speaker is quite sure. The speaker's rage—and Maude's cruelty itself—show that sisterhood is no guarantee of love. The poem suggests that relationships between siblings, and especially between sisters, can be fraught with competition, resentment, and hatred.

When the speaker finds that her parents know all about her lover, she immediately knows whom she blames for ratting her out: "Maude, my sister Maude," she says, must have been creeping around to "spy and peer" on what she was up to. Her bitter certainty suggests that this has long been the relationship between the two of them; Maude has always haunted the speaker's footsteps and tried to get her in trouble.

The speaker is also certain that Maude torments her this way out of pure envy. Scornfully, she tells Maude that there was no point in trying to come between her and her lover. "He'd never have looked at you" even if she herself had never been born, she declares. Perhaps Maude has always been the less attractive of the two sisters; perhaps the speaker is just saying this out of spite. Either way, these lines suggest that rivalry scars the sisters' relationship.

After Maude's betrayal, the speaker doesn't have a shred of familial affection left for her. For all she cares, Maude can literally go to Hell: she curses her to an eternity of "death and sin" for her treachery. Their sisterhood means nothing to her; in fact, it might be their close relationship that allows the speaker to despise Maude as thoroughly as she does. By presenting the constant opportunity for comparison and competition, sisterhood in this poem opens the door to the deepest hatred.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

THE DANGEROUS POWER OF PASSION

"Sister Maude" warns that passion—especially

repressed or forbidden passion—is a dangerous force. The two major characters in "Sister Maude" are women driven to desperate acts by their desire. The speaker becomes crazed with grief and vengefulness after her secret lover is discovered and murdered; her sister Maude (who betrays the couple) seems likely to have turned traitor because *she* desired the young man. Passion is so powerful, the poem suggests, that it can easily become destructive, burning through whatever and whoever stands in its way.

The poem's speaker is so head-over-heels for her forbidden lover that she's willing to have a secret affair with him—cause for "shame" in a world where young women clearly aren't supposed to have lovers at all, let alone clandestine ones. Her desire for him is so great, however, that she doesn't think twice about breaking societal (and parental) rules to be with him. Even after her beloved dies, her passion is unquenchable: she declares that his clammy corpse is *still* the most beautiful man she's ever seen, "worthy of a queen's embrace" even in death. For this speaker, desire overcomes sense and persists past reason.

Losing your head in love isn't the only danger of passion. As Maude's side of the story shows, lust can overwhelm not only reason, but morality and loyalty. The speaker's sister becomes a traitor out of sexual jealousy: frustrated in her own desire for her sister's lover (who, the speaker cruelly assures her, would "never have looked at you"), she's willing to betray her sister *and* the man she desires to find some outlet for her powerful envy and longing.

Throughout the poem, then, passion is overpowering, corrosive, and menacing. It can't be contained by any walls the world tries to put round it: not morality, not reason, and certainly not the bonds of sisterhood. Try to thwart passion, and it will only curdle into lies, treachery, violence, and acid hatred.

The poem's focus on two *sisters* in particular further warns that a world that tries to quash or control the desires of half the population might be setting itself up for trouble. Try though it might, society can't fully repress or control women's desire—and efforts to do so only spawn misery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Who told my mother of my shame,
Who told my father of my dear?
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,
Who lurked to spy and peer.

This poem's speaker unveils her dramatic predicament in two short, sharp lines:

Who told my mother of my shame,
Who told my father of my dear?

There you have it: the speaker had a secret lover, and someone told her parents about it. If this affair is a matter for "shame," then she was *very much not supposed* to have a boyfriend. Readers can guess that the poem takes place in an earlier time, perhaps Christina Rossetti's own 19th century England—a period when premarital sex was off limits for respectable women.

The speaker is not at all pleased that she's been found out; already, her anaphora on the question "who told" makes her sound eager for vengeance. As it happens, her question is rhetorical. She thinks she knows exactly who betrayed her: "Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude," she spits. Her certainty suggests that Maude has always been one to "spy and peer," a thorn in the speaker's side for as long as she's lived. Perhaps there wasn't much love lost between these sisters even before Maude proved herself a rat.

This dramatic monologue (that is, a poem presented in the voice of a particular character) will be a tale of passion, treachery, and bitter sibling rivalry. In both its tone and its shape, it will fall somewhere between an old murder ballad—like "The Twa Sisters," which might be a model for this poem—and a tale ripped from the pages of a penny dreadful:

- Like a ballad, the poem will use quatrains (mostly) and an ABCB rhyme scheme. It will also use a ballad-like mixture of iambic tetrameter (lines with four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Oh who | but Maude, | my sis- | ter Maude") and iambic trimeter (lines with three stresses, as in "Who lurked | to spy | and peer").
- *Unlike* a ballad, this poem will break from all these conventions unpredictably, adding extra lines and refusing to stay within the bounds of its meter. The poem's raggedy form will make the speaker sound not just furious and vengeful, but crazed.

LINES 5-8

Cold he lies, as cold as stone,
With his clotted curls about his face:
The comeliest corpse in all the world
And worthy of a queen's embrace.

The speaker, it transpires, isn't only furious at Maude for ratting her out to their parents and bringing an end to her secret affair. She's furious because someone has since killed her lover. The speaker heavily implies that his death was a consequence of Maude's betrayal—though who exactly murdered him, she

doesn't reveal.

As the speaker laments her dead love, the poem leaps into a more macabre, even Gothic world. Take a look at her imagery here:

> Cold he lies, as cold as stone,
> With his clotted curls about his face:

The old simile the speaker uses here—the corpse "cold as stone"—could come straight out of a ballad. Her queasy picture of his "clotted curls," on the other hand, is all her own. If these curls are "clotted," they're lying in moist clumps, perhaps soaked in the lover's clotted blood, or in congealed corpse-fluids, or both. The word "clotted" also suggests chunky spoiled milk; this body, in other words, is a little *off* by now.

This horribly specific vision doesn't deter the speaker one bit. Even if her lover lies dead, bloodied, and rotting, she says, he's still the "comeliest corpse in all the world" to her, the handsomest dead body anyone ever saw. Her intense /c/ alliteration all through this stanza—"clotted curls," "comeliest corpse"—makes her sound both insistent and a little crazed.

The speaker closes out this macabre vision of her dead beloved with a little daydream. Even in the tomb, she declares, he's still certainly so beautiful that he's "worthy of a queen's embrace." The idea of royalty rushing into tombs to embrace corpses introduces a medieval note to the proceedings, or even something fairy-tale-ish. The speaker's vision of the lover's clotted body is all too accurate; the idea that he's still a perfect beauty that a tragic queen might weep over is pure fantasy.

Grief-stricken and enraged, the speaker seems stuck between coping with horrible reality and fleeing into dreamland. It's as if she's telling herself, *I was in love with Prince Charming himself, and then Maude had to go and ruin it all!*

Aside from anything else, this stanza suggests that the speaker—and Maude, too—are painfully young. This idealized love affair seems likely to have been the speaker's first and only.

LINES 9-12

> *You might have spared his soul, sister,*
> *Have spared my soul, your own soul too:*
> *Though I had not been born at all,*
> *He'd never have looked at you.*

Her lament for her dead lover complete, the speaker turns back to Maude with a hiss, telling her:

> You might have spared his soul, sister,
> Have spared my soul, your own soul too:

These sibilant lines (listen to all those snaky /s/ sounds) make it clear that the speaker blames Maude completely for the lover's death (though there's still no word on who actually killed him).

The speaker doesn't stop there, though. She declares that Maude has sliced through not one soul, but three: the lover's by bringing about his death, the speaker's by scarring it with grief and hate, and her own by committing such a heinous betrayal.

The speaker's very Dantesque take on treachery paints it as the worst possible moral crime. By the standards of Rossetti's time, remember, Maude is in some sense doing the proper thing by ratting her sister out, putting an end to a forbidden love affair. By the speaker's standards, however, Maude's tattling is both cruel and *sinful*, soul-eroding.

The speaker isn't being pious here, however. She's just setting up a vengeful insult. The reason Maude could have spared everyone's soul, she goes on, is that:

> Though I had not been born at all,
> He'd never have looked at you.

That is, *You might have spared yourself the trouble: you* never *could have had him, even if I weren't around*. This stinging insult suggests that Maude became a traitor out of sexual envy: she wanted the lover for herself, couldn't have him, and acted out her frustration in the only way she could.

Taken at face value, these lines might suggest that Maude has always been rather the less attractive of the two sisters, the hanger-on who could only "spy and peer" while her sister had all the fun. It's also possible, of course, that the speaker is just lashing out in fury or in self-defense; perhaps she secretly worried that Maude *could* have stolen her lover away.

A lot of dramatic monologues reveal their speakers' characters by letting them tell on themselves—for instance, by listening in while a dying bishop's obsessive anxiety about his fabulous tomb reveals his cowardice, selfishness, and greed. In other words, readers get a pretty clear sense of who the speaker is and how they interpret and misinterpret the world around them.

Here, the dramatic monologue form does something trickier. Readers are *closed into* this speaker's perspective. There's no way to tell whether her accusations are accurate or not. Maude might be an unrepentant envious traitor, or she might be worried for her sister's safety and horrified at the consequences of her actions; she might be unattractive, or she might be perfectly charming. All that readers can know for sure is that her enraged and grief-stricken sister hates her like poison.

LINES 13-16

> *My father may sleep in Paradise,*
> *My mother at Heaven-gate:*
> *But sister Maude shall get no sleep*
> *Either early or late.*

The poem's first few stanzas have been full of wild melodrama.

In this, the second-to-last stanza, the speaker starts to move into an icier, more controlled mode as she calls down an eternity of misery on her treacherous sister.

Listen to her parallelism in these lines:

> My father may sleep in Paradise,
> My mother at Heaven-gate:
> But sister Maude shall get no sleep

The shape of these lines draws on the ballad tradition, using a repetitive pattern to build up to a surprise: father might go to heaven, mother might go to heaven, but Maude will have no such luck. (For just one comparison, see a verse from the murder ballad "Matty Groves.") As compared to the venomous-but-casual language of the previous stanza ("He'd never have looked at you"), these lines feel formalized and ancient: the speaker seems to be calling down an old, old curse.

Notice, too, that these lines raise a mystery. If the speaker imagines her father and mother might sleep peacefully in Heaven, she doesn't blame *them* for her lover's death, though they must have had something to do with it; after all, they're the ones Maude tattled to. As far as the speaker is concerned, Maude bears all the guilt here.

On the other hand, the speaker only says her parents "may sleep in Paradise," not that they *will*. That ambiguity will be important in the closing stanza.

LINES 17-22

> *My father may wear a golden crown,*
> *My mother a crown may win;*
> *If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate*
> *Perhaps they'd let us in:*
> *But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,*
> *Bide*
> *you*
> *with death and sin.*

The poem's long closing stanza at first carries on in that classic ballad form, repeating language between stanzas and within lines:

> My father may wear a golden crown,
> My mother a crown may win;

Notice that "may": once again, the speaker isn't saying that her parents will certainly make it to heaven, only that they *might*. It's not out of the question. Whatever they've done, God might forgive it.

Her next lines introduce a surprising new emotional note:

> If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate
> Perhaps they'd let us in:

Now *that's* a different tune. So far, all the speaker has had to say about herself and her lover is:

- Maude has cruelly wronged them both.
- Her lover was basically an angel, a perfect beauty, the "comeliest" boy in all the world.

Here, that "perhaps" suggests that she also feels a touch of guilt! She and her lover, she suddenly seems aware, might have done wrong, too. She doesn't even imagine that the two of them might ever win the metaphorical "golden crown" of salvation, just that they *might* creep through "Heaven-gate," maybe.

Notice that she doesn't imagine that perhaps *God* will forgive them and accept them, but that "perhaps they'd let us in"—a "they" that presents the guardians of Heaven as a kind of unified judgmental force, like society itself. (See Edward Lear for lots of comparable examples of the repressive Victorian "they.")

The stanza doesn't end there, though. The speaker retreats from these uncomfortable thoughts into an extra two closing lines that echo the first stanza:

> But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,
> Bide *you* with death and sin.

Hearkening back to the diacope on "sister Maude" that she used at the beginning, the speaker brings this poem full circle; turning this last stanza into an emphatic sestet, she sounds more vehement than ever. No matter what, she concludes, neither she nor the great "they" of Heaven will forgive Maude. Her sister's treachery is the worst possible crime.

Perhaps, though, Maude is simply a scapegoat, a punishable person in the speaker's reach. Maude was certainly treacherous. In a world where young love can lead to condemnation and death, though, her snitching might not be the *fundamental* problem. Someone else actually killed the lover; someone else decided that this relationship was unacceptable in the first place. The societal "they" who decree that women must repress and deny their sexuality might be the real villains of this story. Inexpressible and unallowable passions force both the speaker and Maude into a corner, turning them against each other.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetitions help to give the poem its sinister air, evoking both the circling language of old ballads and the speaker's obsessive hatred.

One of the creepier repetitions in the poem appears in the first

stanza:

> Who told my mother of my shame,
> Who told my father of my dear?
> Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,

The speaker's diacope as she spits Maude's name drips with hatred: she knows *exactly* who betrayed her, and she's not going to forget in a hurry.

That gets even clearer when she repeats this repetition! Take a look at these lines from the *last* stanza:

> But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,
> Bide *you* with death and sin.

This echo brings the poem back to where it began; the speaker, it seems, is unlikely to move far from her ferocious hatred of Maude so long as Maude lives (which, if the speaker got what she wanted, might not be all that long).

Other repetitions connect this poem to the ballad tradition; ballads often use repetition for structure and emphasis. When the speaker describes her dead lover by declaring, "Cold he lies, cold as a stone," she both doubles down on his deathly chilliness and gives her line a swinging rhythm.

In the last two stanzas, meanwhile, the speaker uses the same turn of phrase twice as she develops a vengeful dream of the afterlife:

> My father may sleep in Paradise,
> My mother at Heaven-gate:
> [...]
> My father may wear a golden crown,
> My mother a crown may win;
> If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate
> Perhaps they'd let us in:

This repetition stresses the speaker's idea that just about everyone might get into Heaven—except for the treacherous Maude, that is. It also creates a sing-song, nursery-rhyme sound that strikes an eerie contrast with the speaker's wish that her sister might be eternally damned for her betrayal.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Maude," "Maude"
- **Line 5:** "Cold," "cold"
- **Line 9:** "have spared," "soul"
- **Line 10:** "Have spared," "soul," "soul"
- **Line 13:** "sleep"
- **Line 14:** "Heaven-gate"
- **Line 15:** "sleep"
- **Line 17:** "crown"
- **Line 18:** "crown"
- **Line 19:** "Heaven-gate"
- **Line 21:** "sister Maude," "sister Maude"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora frames and shapes the poem: repeated sentence structures subtly reflect the boundaries of the speaker's restricted and frustrating world.

Take the very first lines, for instance:

> Who told my mother of my shame,
> Who told my father of my dear?

These lines introduce the speaker's two stern guardians, the mother and father who have such power over her fate. But the intense anaphora focuses on a third, as-yet-unnamed character: "sister Maude," the one who squealed. The anaphora here works like a drumroll, leading up to the big reveal of sisterly treachery.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, where the speaker curses her sister to damnation, she again refers to her whole family, one by one:

> My father may sleep in Paradise,
> My mother at Heaven-gate:
> But sister Maude shall get no sleep
> Either early or late.
> My father may wear a golden crown,
> My mother a crown may win;
> [...]
> But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,
> Bide *you* with death and sin.

The parallel structure here echoes both within and across the stanzas. It's as if the speaker has to deal with all her family members one by one; wherever she turns, there they are, even in her visions of the afterlife. By turning readers' attention so pointedly back to the family over and over, the poem's anaphora suggests that an oppressive, restrictive, and sometimes out-and-out treacherous family is the speaker's biggest problem, the prison she can't escape.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Who told my"
- **Line 2:** "Who told my"
- **Line 3:** "Oh who"
- **Line 4:** "Who"
- **Line 13:** "My father may"
- **Line 14:** "My mother"
- **Line 15:** "But sister Maude"

- **Line 17:** "My father may"
- **Line 18:** "My mother"
- **Line 21:** "But sister Maude"

IMAGERY

A flicker of imagery in the second stanza gives this poem a macabre, Gothic air.

To reveal that her lover has been murdered, the speaker takes readers on a little tour of his tomb. There, she says:

> Cold he lies, as cold as stone,
> With his clotted curls about his face:

This grotesque image doesn't shy away from the physical realities of death. The speaker starts with an old simile: her lover's body is "cold as stone," as chilly as the tomb that he rests in. This is a traditional phrasing, even a cliché; bodies have lain "cold as stone" in ballads for centuries.

The speaker's next image, however, is a lot fresher and a lot fouler. His hair, she says, lies in "clotted curls": wet with gore, the leakage of a rotting body, or both, his once-lovely locks are reduced to moist clumps. Besides suggesting clots of blood, the word "clotted" raises images of lumpy sour milk, its nasty smells and gooey textures; this corpse is *spoiling*.

Moving from the formulaic "cold as stone" to the vividly disgusting "clotted curls," the speaker also moves from the stylized world of the murder ballad into a world of real-life horror, deeply and agonizingly felt. This shift also makes it even creepier when she declares that this clotted body would still be, to her, "the comeliest corpse in all the world," fit for a "queen's embrace" (if she weren't wearing her best dress, maybe).

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Cold he lies, as cold as stone, / With his clotted curls about his face:"

ALLITERATION

Moments of intense alliteration evoke the speaker's rage, horror, and malice.

Perhaps the eeriest example appears in the second stanza, in which the speaker describes her dead lover's corpse:

> Cold he lies, as cold as stone,
> With his clotted curls about his face:
> The comeliest corpse in all the world

That intense /c/ sound makes this passage feel heightened and stylized, like lines from an old, old ballad. It also draws attention to the speaker's horrific imagery and her queasy attraction to her "clotted," rotting beloved—still the "comeliest" (or loveliest) of all men to her, never mind that he's an oozing "corpse."

After this highly alliterative lament, she turns to her sister Maude with a sibilant hiss:

> You might have spared his soul, sister,
> Have spared my soul, your own soul too:

All those /s/ sounds make this passage sound as if it's spoken in a chilly whisper, evoking the speaker's cold fury and spite as she tells her sister that her treacherous machinations were all in vain: even if the speaker "had not been born at all," she tells Maude, her lover would "never have looked" at Maude even once.

These alliterative moments help the poem to tread its strange line between stylized murder balladry and novelistic realism, making the speaker's voice sound both formal and alive.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Cold," "cold"
- **Line 6:** "clotted curls"
- **Line 7:** "comeliest corpse"
- **Line 8:** "queen's"
- **Line 9:** "spared," "soul, sister"
- **Line 10:** "spared," "soul," "soul"
- **Line 17:** "wear"
- **Line 18:** "win"

VOCABULARY

Lurked (Line 4) - Skulked around, waited in secrecy.

Clotted (Line 6) - This image could suggest that the lover's curly hair has become cold and moist as he decays or that his hair is clotted with blood—or both.

Comeliest (Line 7) - Loveliest, most attractive.

Bide (Line 22) - Stay, remain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sister Maude" is built from four quatrains (that is, four-line stanzas) and a grim closing sestet (a six-line stanza) that drives home the speaker's eternal hatred for her treacherous sister. Both in form and in content, the poem responds to folksong: it draws on an old murder ballad about rivalrous sisters, and it adopts some traditional ballad features (quatrains, an ABCB rhyme scheme) while reconfiguring others (adding that closing sestet, playing unsettling games with the meter).

Rossetti also innovates on the ballad form by presenting this poem as a dramatic monologue: a poem spoken in the voice of a character, like a speech in a play. This choice makes readers feel uncomfortably intimate with the crazed speaker's pain and fury.

By leaping off from the traditional ballad form (and a traditional story of deadly sisterly rivalry), the poem reshapes an old tale into something eerily contemporary and personal.

METER

"Sister Maude" uses an unsettling, herky-jerky meter that wrongfoots readers at every turn. For the most part, the poem is written in a mixture of tetrameter and trimeter: that is, lines with *four* strong stresses apiece and lines with *three* strong stresses. But exactly how and where those lines and their stresses fall isn't easy to predict.

Listen to the rhythm of the third stanza, for instance:

> You might | have spared | his soul, | sister,
> Have spared | my soul, | your own | soul too:
> Though I | had not | been born | at all,
> He'd nev- | er have looked | at you.

While the lines here are *mostly* iambic—that is, they're built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—they're far from consistent. In line 9, two stresses collide uneasily in "soul, sister"; in line 12, an extra skittery little unstressed syllable makes its way into "He'd *nev*er *have* looked." Here as in the rest of the poem, the meter never quite settles into an even pulse.

Notice, too, that line 12 uses trimeter while the rest of the stanza uses tetrameter. Shorter lines like this intrude throughout the poem, sometimes at the end of a stanza, sometimes in the middle.

All these uneasy irregularities keep readers from getting too comfortable—a fitting effect for a poem in which a vengefully raging speaker curses her treacherous sister to eternal damnation. Crazed with grief and hatred, she rants and raves, and the meter raves with her.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sister Maude" uses this singsong rhyme scheme:

ABCB

Or at least, it does so in the poem's first four quatrains. For the final stanza, in which the speaker relishes the thought of Maude languishing in Hell forever, the speaker adds another couple of rhymes to really rub the hatred in:

ABCBDB

The alternating rhymes reflect the poem's origins. Rossetti was retelling an old murder ballad, "The Twa Sisters," when she wrote this poem, and ballads often use an ABCB or ABAB rhyme scheme. The rhyme's simplicity and steadiness forms a creepy contrast with the poem's wavering meter, making the speaker sound both monomaniacal and crazed.

SPEAKER

The poem's nameless speaker is a woman consumed with vengeful hatred after her sister Maude rats her and her secret lover out to their parents. In this speaker's opinion, Maude only did it because she was envious and wanted the man for herself; spitefully, she tells Maude that she wouldn't have had a chance with her lover even if she herself had never been born, suggesting that Maude has always been the less attractive of the two sisters. Perhaps the sibling rivalry on display here has been a lifetime in the making.

Now that her lover is dead—how exactly the poem doesn't say, but the implication is that Maude's betrayal had something to do with it—the speaker seems mad with grief, about to throw herself on her lover's corpse like Romeo in the Capulet tomb. She's crazed enough to curse Maude, damning her own sister to Hell. The reader suspects she's preparing to get her vengeance here on earth, too.

SETTING

This poem could be set in any time and place when sisters envy each other and women's sexual freedom is restricted—that is, just about anywhere and anywhen. Readers might be inclined to picture the poem taking place in Christina Rossetti's own Victorian world, in which a young woman taking a lover might easily have been treated as a matter for stern parental intervention.

The implication that someone has murdered the young man over this affair also gives the poem a darkly medieval twist, perhaps reflecting Rossetti's deep education in the Italian classics.

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. The

Rossettis' Italian father gave his children a good education in his country's literature; this poem reflects the influence of the Dante for whom Rossetti's brother was named.

Many of Rossetti's contemporaries saw her as a successor to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the wildly popular and famous poet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Like Browning, Rossetti wrote movingly about her inner life (and had a fondness for Italy—Browning because she moved there, Rossetti because she was half-Italian). But Rossetti's poetry often followed a wilder and weirder path than Browning's, exploring visions both dreamy and nightmarish. Perhaps Rossetti's contemporaries *mostly* associated her with Browning because the two were those rarest of Victorian birds: celebrated, successful, widely-read poets who also happened to be women.

Today, Rossetti is often remembered as a proto-feminist figure for her poetry's explorations of women's hopes, sufferings, and longings—and the ways in which male shortsightedness and cruelty can smash women's lives. This poem, with its tale of sisterly envy and frustrated desire, is one of many Rossetti poems that reflects on the dark consequences of sexual repression.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alongside writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Bronte sisters, and George Eliot, Rossetti was part of a 19th-century upswelling of women's voices. Many women writers of the Victorian era struggled to find a place for themselves in a rigidly sexist society that saw women more as men's possessions than as independent people. "George Eliot," for instance, was the masculine pen name of one Mary Ann Evans, a mask that helped open the difficult door to publication in a world that mostly wanted women to keep quiet.

Respectable Victorian women were not expected to become writers; they weren't expected to do much at all, besides get married and have children. As this poem's plot suggests, 19th-century Englishwomen were expected to be modest, virtuous, and chaste. Premarital sex was considered a major sin and might easily ruin a woman's life. Victorian men, on the other hand, could mostly do what they pleased.

Poems like this one—in which young women's frustrated sexual desire generates a whirlpool of envy and murder—reflect Rossetti's sense that bottled-up female energy could breed monstrous consequences. Some scholars even see the two sisters in this poem (and in *lots* of Rossetti's other poetry—she wrote some very famous sisters) as embodiments of a struggle between two aspects of Rossetti's own personality: her sensuous side and her pious, disciplined side.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Rossetti's Portraits — See images of Rossetti throughout her life, from young poetic wunderkind to established literary giant. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp03876/christina-georgina-rossetti)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to actor Harriet Walter performing the poem. (https://www.thepoetryhour.com/poems/sister-maude)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Christina Rossetti through the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti)
- More Rossetti Resources — Find a wealth of information on Rossetti at the Victorian Web. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/)
- Goblin Market — Take a look at an early edition of Goblin Market and Other Poems, the collection in which "Sister Maude" first appeared. (https://www.bl.uk/works/goblin-market)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- An Apple Gathering
- Cousin Kate
- In an Artist's Studio
- Maude Clare
- No, Thank You, John
- Remember
- Song (When I am dead, my dearest)

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