Song (When I am dead, my dearest)

POEM TEXT

1   When I am dead, my dearest,
2   Sing no sad songs for me;
3   Plant thou no roses at my head,
4   Nor shady cypress tree:
5   Be the green grass above me
6   With showers and dewdrops wet;
7   And if thou wilt, remember,
8   And if thou wilt, forget.

9   I shall not see the shadows,
10 I shall not feel the rain;
11 I shall not hear the nightingale
12 Sing on, as if in pain:
13 And dreaming through the twilight
14 That doth not rise nor set,
15 Haply I may remember,
16 And haply may forget.

SUMMARY

When I'm no longer alive, my darling, don't sing any sorrowful songs for me. Don't plant any roses or shade-giving cypress trees by my headstone. Just let the grass be green above me, and wet with rain and dew. And if you remember me, then remember me. And if you forget me, then forget me.

I won't see the gloominess. I won't feel the rain. I won't hear the nightingale singing as if it were hurting. When I'm dreaming in that half-light of death, which that doesn't grow brighter or fade into darkness, maybe I'll remember, and maybe I'll forget.

THEMES

LOVE, DEATH, AND MOURNING

The speaker of "When I Am Dead, My Dearest" tells a loved one not to worry about remembering her after she has died, because she won't be able to tell the difference: in death, the speaker says, she will be far removed from the concerns of this world, with no awareness as to whether or not her "dearest" mourns her. The speaker isn't even sure if *she* will remember her beloved in the mysterious "twilight" of death. For this speaker, the usual ceremonies around death and

grieving are done more for the *living* than the *dead*—on whom there's simply no point in wasting too much energy.

The poem begins with the speaker addressing a loved one who would mourn her if she were to die. With a striking lack of sentimentality, the speaker instructs this person *not* to grieve her when the time comes. This person should "Sing no sad songs" to mark the speaker's passing, nor plant "roses" and "cypress tree[s]" (plants often planted to commemorate the dead) by the speaker's grave.

Instead, all the speaker needs above her grave is green grass, wet with rain and dew. In other words, nothing special! This growing grass reflects the natural world moving on above the speaker's grave, unaffected by her passing. Symbolically, it also suggests that the speaker hopes her beloved will likewise move on—that this person will focus on *living* rather than on mourning the dead.

The speaker goes on to say that whether she's remembered or forgotten doesn't really matter, given that she won't be around to notice. After death, the speaker will no longer "see the shadows," "feel the rain," nor "hear the nightingale" singing.

Whether this is because her spirit will have moved on to better things or because she has simply ceased to exist, the speaker doesn't anticipate a lingering attachment to this world. Instead, the speaker imagines death as "dreaming through [a] twilight / That doth not rise nor set"—a kind of eternal sleep, in which she'll be unaware of what's happening on earth.

The speaker also doesn't know whether she'll be able to *remember* life on earth while in this endless slumber. The speaker ends the poem by saying they may "Haply [...] remember" or "haply [...] forget" the things that happened while she was alive. The word "haply," which means by chance or luck, implies that the speaker isn't sure what will become of her *own* memories after she dies. In a sense, she's telling her beloved that it's okay to forget her without knowing for certain that the forgetting will be mutual.

The poem ultimately suggests that the mysteriousness of death justifies not wasting what little time one has on earth. It's important not to expend too much energy on those who won't be around to appreciate it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

> *When I am dead, my dearest,*
> *Sing no sad songs for me;*

The poem begins with the speaker addressing someone "dear[]" to her. (Note that the speaker doesn't need to be interpreted as a woman, but for clarity's sake, we will be referred to as "she/her" throughout the guide).

This loved one, the speaker says, should "Sing no sad songs" in the event of the speaker's death. It isn't clear *why* the speaker is thinking about death, but what *is* immediately clear is her lack of sentimentality on the subject. She doesn't want her loved one to feel obligated to mourn her.

Ironically enough, the speaker uses a *song* to implore her "dearest" not to sing for her once she's died, almost as if she is mourning her own death in advance. Perhaps, then, she is a *little* sentimental after all!

Given that this poem is a "song," it makes sense that its language is rhythmic and musical. These lines are written in [ballad](#) [meter](#), a bouncy meter made up of alternating lines of [iambic](#) tetrameter (four iambs, feet with a da-DUM rhythm, per line) and trimeter (three iambs per line):

> When **I** | am **dead**, | my **dear**est,
> Sing **no** | sad **songs** | for **me**;

The meter isn't totally regular, however, as readers can see right away here. For one thing, the speaker leaves off the final stressed beat in line 1, a variation she will return to throughout the poem. Still, there's a clear, steady rhythm to these lines.

The [consonance](#) and more specific [sibilance](#) of these lines add yet more music still. Note all the repeated /s/, /d/, /m/, and /ng/ sounds:

> When I a**m** **d**ea**d**, **m**y **d**ear**e**st,
> **Sing** no **s**a**d** **s**ong**s** for **m**e;

LINES 3-6

> *Plant thou no roses at my head,*
> *Nor shady cypress tree:*
> *Be the green grass above me*
> *With showers and dewdrops wet;*

The speaker goes on to instruct her loved one further: this person should "Plant [...] no roses" or "shady cypress tree" at her grave.

Roses and cypress trees are both traditionally linked with grieving. The ancient Greeks noticed that when one cuts a cypress tree too far back, it won't regrow; for this reason, they

associated it with the underworld and death, and it has since been planted in cemeteries throughout European and Muslim countries to honor the dead.

But the speaker isn't interested in these rituals of mourning. Instead, she says that the "green grass" will be enough for her. She doesn't need her beloved's tears, either; natural "showers and dewdrops" will do just fine. This water will nourish the grass, the "green[ness]" of which evokes life and vitality—and the importance of moving on:

- Grass needs rain to go, but such rain also eventually must give way to clear skies and sunshine.
- In this way, the grass [symbolizes](#) the speaker's hopes for her loved one: that this person will be able to move on with their life once she is gone.
- In other words, the living must go on living, and part of doing so means letting go of the dead.

The bold, throaty /gr/ [alliteration](#) in "**gr**een **gr**ass" brings its vitality to life on the page, while broader [consonance](#) ("**W**ith," "sho**w**ers," "de**w**drops," "**w**et"), and [sibilance](#) ("**sh**ady **c**ypre**ss**," "gra**ss**," "**sh**ower**s**," "dewdrop**s**") again fill the lines with music.

LINES 7-8

> *And if thou wilt, remember,*
> *And if thou wilt, forget.*

The poem's first stanza ends with the speaker giving her loved one permission to "remember" or "forget" her as they see fit. The poem uses [parallelism](#) to emphasize the importance of this person's "will," or choice ("wilt" is an archaic form of the word "will"):

> **And if thou wilt,** remember,
> **And if thou wilt,** forget.

The speaker is saying that it doesn't matter to her whether this person remembers or forgets their time together. What matters is that whatever her beloved chooses, that choice helps this person keep living their own life.

The word "wilt" not only implies that it is up to this person whether they will remember or not, however. It also, [paradoxically](#), suggests the opposite:

- "Will" can [connote](#) the occurrence of inevitable events.
- In other words, on the surface, the speaker is basically saying, "do what you need to do to carry on living," but at the same time, she's implying that people *don't* always get to decide what they remember or forget! Perhaps that's because time fades even the happiest and most sorrowful of memories.

The sounds of the poem here (specifically its consonance and end rhyme) seem to suggest that the speaker is more inclined to believe she will be forgotten than remembered. Crisp /t/ sounds ("wet," "wilt," "forget") and the rhyme between "wet" in line 6 and "forget" in line 8 emphasize the final word of the stanza, so that "forget" has a little more weight than "remember."

LINES 9-12

I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:

In the second stanza, the speaker elaborates on why it doesn't really matter if her loved one remembers or forgets her after she dies: she won't be around to notice either way.

These lines feature anaphora (in the repetition of "I shall not") and broader parallelism (that "I shall not" gets followed by a sensory verb each time: "see"/"feel"/"hear"). Such devices help to hammer home the speaker's point that, in death, she is cut off from life: she won't experience sight, sound, or feeling at all:

> I **shall not** see the shadows,
> I **shall not** feel the rain;
> I **shall not** hear the nightingale

The imagery the speaker uses here is bleak and suggestive of mourning: "the shadows," "the rain," "the nightingale" (a kind of songbird) singing "as if in pain." Yet the speaker reiterates that this is unnecessary; she simply won't be there to appreciate it. The alliteration of quiet /sh/ sounds in "shall" and "shadows" evokes the stillness and quiet that the speaker expects in death, far removed from all the ups and downs of the world of the living.

The poem's mention of a "nightingale / [singing] as if in pain" is most likely an allusion to the Greek figure of Philomela:

- According to the story, King Tereus of Thrace raped Philomela and then cut out her tongue when she threatened to tell everyone what he had done.
- The gods transformed Philomela into a nightingale so that she might escape Tereus's wrath.

Because of this myth, the nightingale has long been a symbol of lament—a passionate expression of grief and sorrow—in classical literature. But the nightingale isn't *only* associated with grieving: its song is also considered one of the most beautiful in nature. As such, it has also become a symbol of poetry itself.

This suggests that, when the speaker dies, it's not just the pain and sadness of this world that she'll no longer be able to experience: she'll also be cut off from beauty and joy. In this way, the poem itself is a kind of lament: the speaker is confronting the specter of death and grieving the fact that she will someday leave this world, even if at the same time she is arguing that such grief is wasted on the dead, who cannot feel it.

LINES 13-14

And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,

After listing the things she will no longer experience when she is dead, the speaker goes on to describe what she thinks death will be like. She imagines herself "dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise or set." In this metaphor, being dead will be like being asleep in a kind of eternal half-light.

On the surface, this is a very simple comparison: after dying, the speaker will finally be at rest, asleep to the cares of this world.

Yet, despite the simple language and straightforward imagery, this metaphor is actually quite complex. The word "dreaming" suggests a certain in-betweenness, a place that exists somewhere between the real and the imagined. The speaker doesn't *really* know what death will be like, and so can only compare it to what she *does* know: the strange, half-aware state that is dreaming.

Similarly, she imagines that she will exist in a kind of "twilight," the hour between light and dark. She says that this twilight will not "rise or set," but that doesn't necessarily mean she will be suspended there forever. It could be that she imagines waking from this dream at some point. The poem is concise (and vague) enough to invite interpretation. The speaker thus isn't entirely rejecting the possibility of an afterlife, even as she insists that she will lose any sensory connection to the world of the living after death.

LINES 15-16

Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

Finally, the speaker says, when all is said and done, she "may remember" her life on earth—perhaps as one remembers things in dreams, in vague fragments that come and go—or she "may forget" it altogether.

The poem's ambiguity is consistent with the fact that the speaker simply doesn't know what happens beyond death. She can *imagine* that death is like an eternal "twilight," but there's no way for her to know for sure. And so she makes room for both possibilities: that she may have the capacity to remember, and that she may not.

The poem's use of diacope in these final lines mimics the parallelism at the end of stanza 1:

> Haply I **may** remember,
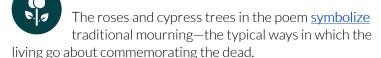> And **haply may** forget.

Just like with that parallelism, the effect of the diacope here is that the repetition of the words "Haply" and "may" draw attention to the uncertainty the speaker is feeling regarding what will happen after she dies. This uncertainty, for her, is the justification behind her telling her loved one not to mourn her passing:

- If people can't know for certain that death is anything more than an eternal slumber in which the sleepers recall nothing, then it only makes sense for the living to focus on living.
- After all, their *own* time on earth is limited, and if the dead can't appreciate their gestures, then they might as well focus on whatever it is that will help them carry on with their own lives.

SYMBOLS

ROSES AND THE CYPRESS TREE

The roses and cypress trees in the poem symbolize traditional mourning—the typical ways in which the living go about commemorating the dead.

This symbolism has deep roots: the ancient Greeks and Romans associated the cypress tree with death because of its inability to regrow if cut back too much, and it's one of the most common trees planted in cemeteries across European and Muslim countries. Roses, of course, are linked with love and are often placed at loved ones' headstones.

Importantly, roses and cypress trees are also *alive*. In a way, then, they also represent the idea that the mourning rituals people partake cannot reach the dead. Such rituals stem from the world of the living, and are done for the living *themselves*.

That's why the speaker of this poem asks that she *not* be mourned with roses and cypress trees. As far as she can see, there's no point in these rituals because once she's dead, she won't be around to appreciate them. She would rather her loved one move on, regardless of whether that means remembering or forgetting their time together.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Plant thou no roses at my head, / Nor shady cypress tree:"

GREEN GRASS

The "green grass" here symbolizes the way that life carries on in the face of death. Such grass will grow and thrive above the speaker's grave, and this speaks to the way that the world will keep on turning after the speaker dies.

The grass, then, is also a symbol of what the speaker hopes for

her beloved: that this person will continue to grow and flourish in her absence.

The color green itself often symbolizes youth, spring, and rebirth. Perhaps, then, the green grass here further suggests that the speaker will be reborn in some way, existing in some kind of afterlife where she may or may not remember her time on earth (or simply that her body will nourish the ground on which the grass grows).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Be the green grass above me"

THE NIGHTINGALE

The nightingale (a kind of songbird) has been a symbol of lament (a passionate expression of grief, sorrow, or mourning) in classical literature since the ancient Greeks first associated it with Philomela.

According to myth, Philomela was a princess of Athens who was raped by her sister's husband, King Tereus of Thrace. When she threatened to tell everyone about his crime, Tereus cut out her tongue. Later, she exacted revenge on him (there are many variations of this part of the story), and when he came after her in a rage, the gods turned Philomela into a nightingale so that she could his wrath.

In this poem, the speaker says that once she is dead, she will no longer hear the nightingale's lament. On the surface, this paints death as a kind of relief from the pain and sorrow of this world. Yet, at the same time, the nightingale's song is also renowned for its beauty. It commonly represents not just sorrow, but also the beauty of nature and the artistry of poets. As such, the nightingale in this poem is a symbol of all the things the dead can no longer feel once they are gone: sadness and beauty and sorrow and joy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "I shall not hear the nightingale / Sing on, as if in pain:"

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses frequent parallelism and anaphora (which is a specific kind of parallelism) in order to build her argument.

Take lines 2-3, for example, which follow the same general structure as the speaker tells her beloved not to do something mourning-related on her behalf:

Sing **no** sad songs for me;

Plant thou **no** roses at my head,

That parallelism makes the lines feel all the more insistent: the speaker isn't being coy, but truly doesn't want her "dearest" to do these things.

Lines 7-8 contain more parallelism, as the speaker repeats the phrase "And if though wilt" at the start of each (an example of anaphora):

> And if thou wilt, remember,
> And if thou wilt, forget.

This anaphora draws attention to the repeated phrase, emphasizing the fact that the speaker doesn't care so much whether or not her loved one remembers or forgets her; what she cares about is that this person does what is best for *them*. Their "wil[l]," or choice, is what matters to her.

The next three lines feature yet more anaphora and parallelism. The speaker opens each line with the statement "I shall not," which is then followed by a sensory verb ("see"/"feel"/"hear") and a noun drawn from the natural world:

> I shall not see the shadows,
> I shall not feel the rain;
> I shall not hear the nightingale

The repetition of "I shall not" again feels insistent; the speaker is trying to convince her loved one that she won't be around to notice anything that they do after she dies. These lines also reiterate the sense of disconnection that the speaker believes is part of death. Her earthly senses won't be working.

Finally, the poem echoes the first stanza's closing lines in those of the second. Again, the speaker opens each line with a repeating phrase ("Haply I may"/haply may"). Like "And if thou wilt" from the first stanza, this phrase implies that forgetting/ remembering isn't entirely within the speaker's control, and thus not worth worrying about: maybe she'll remember, and maybe she won't—she just doesn't know!

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Sing no sad songs for me; / Plant thou no roses at my head,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget."
- **Lines 9-11:** "I shall not see the shadows, / I shall not feel the rain; / I shall not hear the nightingale"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget."

CONSONANCE

Consonance helps to elevate the poem's language, adding the

musicality and rhythm that makes this "Song" a song.

Take the first two lines of the poem, for example, which containing echoing /s/, /d/, /m/, and /ng/ sounds:

> When I a**m** **d**ea**d**, **m**y **d**eare**st**,
> **S**ing **no** **s**ad **s**on**g**s for **m**e;

All these sounds combine with the poem's bouncy iambic meter (that da-DUM rhythm) to make this opening feeling intensely song-like. The sibilance here (all those /s/ sounds) also creates a hushed, quiet atmosphere—appropriate for a poem about death!

That sibilance pops up again in lines 4-7, where soft /w/ sounds also evoke the gentle natural beauty above the speaker's imagined grave:

> Nor **sh**ady **c**ypre**ss** tree:
> Be the green gra**ss** above me
> **W**ith **sh**owers and de**w**drops **w**et;

There's some subtle irony in the speaker's use of a song to request she not be sung about after her death; perhaps part of her understands that mourning isn't so much about honoring the dead as it is giving expression to the feelings of the living.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "am dead, my dearest"
- **Line 2:** "Sing," "sad songs," "me"
- **Line 4:** "shady cypress"
- **Line 5:** "green grass"
- **Line 6:** "With showers," "dewdrops wet"
- **Line 7:** "wilt"
- **Line 8:** "wilt, forget"
- **Line 9:** "shall," "shadows"
- **Line 10:** "shall," "feel"
- **Line 15:** "may remember"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like consonance, adds musicality and intensity to the poem.

In the opening line, for example, the heavy /d/ alliteration in "**d**ead" and "**d**earest" emphasizes two of the key concepts in this poem: death and love. The speaker isn't just saying that she doesn't want to be remembered after she dies; she is specifically telling someone she *loves* that they have no responsibility to mourn her when she dies.

Later, in line 5, the bold, throaty /gr/ alliteration in "**gr**een **gr**ass" evokes that grass's strength and vitality. In doing so, the sounds of the poem subtly highlight the fact that the world will continue to go on without the speaker in it (something she hopes her loved one can do, too).

Finally, in line 9, /sh/ alliteration in "**sh**all" and "**sh**adows" evokes the hushed feeling the speaker associates with death: she believes she will essentially be asleep, suspended somewhere where she cannot "see," "feel," or "hear" what's happening in the world she once inhabited.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dead," "dearest"
- **Line 2:** "Sing," "sad," "songs"
- **Line 5:** "green," "grass"
- **Line 9:** "shall," "shadows"

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery is simple yet effective, creating a picture for the reader of the world naturally, peacefully moving on after the speaker's death.

The speaker beseeches her loved one not to plant "roses" or a "shady cypress tree" at her grave, which brings to mind traditional images of mourning. Instead, she says, the "green grass" wet with "showers and dewdrops" will be enough for her.

By contrasting imagery associated with grief (cypress trees are traditionally planted for the dead, and flowers are commonly offered as a form of condolence) with imagery of a wet but thriving natural world, the speaker seems to suggest that death is natural and grief will give way to new life. The grass, then, becomes symbolic of the speaker's wish for her loved one to move on with their own life in the speaker's absense.

Some subtle imagery returns in the second stanza as the speaker envisions what death itself will be like. She'll be "dreaming through the twilight," she says, striking imagery that presents death as something far removed from life on earth but also peaceful and tranquil. She will be at rest; none of the sadness or grief associated with this world will be able to touch her there.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "Plant thou no roses at my head, / Nor shady cypress tree: / Be the green grass above me / With showers and dewdrops wet;"
- **Lines 13-14:** "And dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise nor set,"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a metaphor in lines 13-14 when saying that death will be like "dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise nor set." In other words, being dead will be like being asleep, and the speaker won't really be aware of what's happening around her.

This metaphor seems fairly straightforward on the surface, but its implications are delightfully vague. The word "dreaming," for instance, suggests that death is both real and unreal (in the sense that a dream is different from reality). This metaphor also might suggest that the speaker may in fact wake up—that death is only a state that exists between life and something else.

Likewise, the word "twilight" suggests both darkness *and* light, an in-between state. And when the speaker says that this twilight will not "rise nor set," that doesn't necessarily mean that she herself will always be "dreaming."

As such, there's some uncertainty for the speaker about what death will really be like, or whether there is anything beyond it. The ambiguity of the metaphor is mirrored in the uncertainty of the poem's ending, as the speaker isn't sure whether she will remember anything from her life on earth. It's her uncertainty that makes her request so poignant: she wants her loved one to live life to the fullest regardless of what it means for her.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "And dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise nor set,"

ALLUSION

In lines 11-12, the poem contains what is most likely an allusion to the Greek figure of Philomela. While there are many variations of the myth, the most common is that Philomela was a princess of Athens who was raped by her sister's husband, King Tereus of Thrace. When Philomela threatened to tell everyone what he had done, Tereus cut her tongue out so that she could not speak. After later exacting some kind of revenge on him, Philomela was turned into a nightingale by the gods. The nightingale's song has since been used in literature to symbolize sorrow and lament.

Rossetti would also have been familiar with "Ode to a Nightingale," a poem by English Romantic poet John Keats which also deals with themes of death and impermanence. In addition to remarking on the way that all things fade with time, "Ode to a Nightingale" also speaks to the seeming immortality of song—be it nature's beautiful lament in the form of a nightingale's singing or the "songs" of poets and artists. "Ode to a Nightingale," however, seems to accept that even the things people deem immortal will eventually be forgotten—something with which the speaker of this poem seems to be coming to terms.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "I shall not hear the nightingale / Sing on, as if in pain:"

VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 3, Line 7, Line 8) - An archaic form of the word "you."

Cypress tree (Line 4) - A kind of evergreen. In ancient Greece and Rome, the cypress tree was a symbol of mourning, and it is still the most popular tree planted in cemeteries in Europe and in Muslim countries.

Dewdrops (Line 6) - Drops of water that form on cool surfaces overnight.

Wilt (Line 7, Line 8) - An archaic form of the word "will."

Nightingale (Line 11, Line 12) - A nightingale is a kind of songbird. Its singing "as if in pain" is likely a reference to Philomela, a figure in Greek mythology who was turned into a nightingale.

Doth (Line 14) - Does.

Haply (Line 15, Line 16) - Perhaps; by chance, luck, or accident.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of two octaves, or eight-line stanzas. These can be further broken up into quatrains (four-line stanzas) based on their rhyme scheme (each set of four lines follows an ABCB pattern).

The lines also predictably vary in length: odd-numbered lines are generally a syllable or two longer than even-numbered lines. As such, readers might consider these to be loose ballad stanzas (four-line stanzas with ABCB rhyme schemes and alternating lines of eight and six syllables). This makes sense, given that the poem is a "song": ballads were often set to music.

METER

The poem is written in loose ballad meter (a.k.a. a less strict version of common meter). Odd-numbered lines use iambic tetrameter (four iambs, da-DUMs, per line) and even-numbered lines use iambic trimeter (three iambs per line). This meter is common in church hymns and adds to the musical feeling of this poem.

The meter isn't strict, however, as readers can see from the getgo:

> When I | am **dead**, | my **dear**- | est,

The poem starts out in a clear iambic rhythm, but it's missing its final expected **stressed** beat (the line has seven syllables instead of eight). In fact, there are only two odd-numbered lines in the poem that are true tetrameter: lines 3 and 11. (As such, the meter is something called *catalectic* iambic tetrameter here—which just means that the lines are missing their final

beats.)

The speaker also plays with the placement of stressed beats. While line 2 has the expected six syllables of an iambic trimeter line, readers might hear a stress on that third beat (creating a foot called a spondee):

> Sing **no** | sad **songs** | for **me**;

Readers might even hear a stress on that initial "Sing," adding yet more force to the speaker's instructions. The same thing happens in line 5:

> **Be** the | **green grass** | a**bove** | me

The first foot here is a trochee (DUM-da) followed by another spondee (and, like line 1, there's no final stressed beat here).

Moments like this add emphasis to the speaker's commands, granting the poem a sense of confidence and authority even as the speaker is asking for something quite untraditional: to be unmourned after she dies.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem has a specific rhyme scheme associated with ballads. Each quatrain, or four-line stanza, rhymes:

> ABCB

In other words, even lines rhyme with each other, while odd lines don't rhyme at all. In the first stanza, this means that "me" in line 2 rhymes with "tree" in line 4, and "wet" in line 6 rhymes with "forget" in line 8. These rhymes add musicality to the poem, making it all the more memorable and song-like.

It's also worth noting that, despite being a short poem, the speaker repeats a rhyme word: "forget." The repetition of this word at the end of both stanzas emphasizes the possibility of *forgetting* over remembering. It seems the speaker doesn't really imagine that she'll feel too attached to this world after she has died, and for this reason, she doesn't expect her loved one to spend too much time missing her.

SPEAKER

The speaker is someone who is imagining her own death and imploring a loved one not to mourn her when the times comes. She believes that she won't be around to appreciate the gestures of the living, and that the living have their own lives on which they ought to focus (seeing as their time on earth is also limited).

The poem doesn't tell readers anything about the speaker's age, gender, health, etc., which makes the poem's message feel universal: anyone considering their own mortality might identify with it.

That said, it's worth noting the similarities between the speaker and the poet. Rossetti spent most of her life struggling with illness and had reason to contemplate her own mortality from a young age. She was only 18 years old when she penned this poem; by the time she wrote "Remember" a year later, a poem which deals with very similar themes, her attitude towards being remembered or forgotten after death seems to have deepened, though her general argument remains the same.

SETTING

In a way, the poem is set in the speaker's imagination: she's looking ahead to a time when she has passed from this earth. In this imagined future, the speaker wants her loved one to carry on with life and not bother with "plant[ing] roses" or "cypress tree[s]" at her headstone. As far as she's concerned, the "green grass" that will continue to grow above her body and the rain that falls on her plot of earth is enough.

She goes on to imagine a setting that she herself will not be able to "see," "feel," or "hear": she describes "shadows" and "rain" and a singing "nightingale," a kind of songbird, all of which she will be unaware. Instead, she will be "dreaming through [a] twilight / That doth not rise or set." In other words, she will be asleep to the world; regardless of whether or not she is able to *remember* it, she won't be able to *experience* it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was well-known in her lifetime, a rarity for poets, and particularly rare for a woman in Victorian England.

She began writing at an early age, finishing "Song (When I am dead, my dearest)" when she was only 18. A year later, Rossetti would revisit themes of death and mourning in her poem "Remember." In this second poem, she again urges a loved one not to worry too much about forgetting her after her death. Both poems would later appear in her first collection, "Goblin Market and Other Poems," which was published in 1862.

Many of Rosetti's poems focus on mortality, religious devotion, and the complexities of women's lives in a conservative Victorian society. She has often been compared to her predecessor Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose work shares some similarities with Rossetti's. However, Rossetti's work is generally considered to be less political and simpler in its language and expression of ideas. Other influences include Dante and Petrarch (her father's ties to Italy meant that she was well-schooled in Italian forms such as the Petrarchan sonnet), the Bible, and fairy tales and folklore.

Many of Rosetti's early poems were also imitations of other

poets' work, and "Song" has often been compared to John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," particularly in its attitude towards mourning. Its ideas also resemble some of those presented in John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale."

Rossetti wrote more than a dozen books over her lifetime. There was a resurgence of critical interest in her work towards the end of the 20th century as feminist scholars took interest in it. Part of her mass appeal has been what her brother, the famed Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, described as her talent for "artless art"—that is, art that appears simple and uncontrived on the surface, but which is effective, moving, and nuanced when readers dig deeper.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1843 Rossetti's father became ill and was unable to continue teaching and supporting the family. Rosetti was left at home to take care of her father, though she herself fell ill in 1845. This illness was diagnosed as a heart condition at the time, though a different doctor believed her symptoms were psychosomatic and that she was dealing with mental illness. In any case, according to her brother William in a posthumous preface to her poetry, she went from being a vivacious and passionate girl to a formal, controlled, and restrained adult.

Poems like "Song" and "Remember" reveal Rossetti's preoccupation with her poor health and her fear that she would die an early death. But she also lived in a world that was defined by drastic, revolutionary change and the conservative backlash that followed.

England reinvented itself under Queen Victoria, and while this time period prompted a great deal of expansion and innovation, it also saw the return to traditional family values. Women were expected to conform to strict expectations regarding everything from education to sexuality and marriage. In spite of—or, perhaps, in reaction to—these restrictive norms, female writers such as Rosetti began to write about (and receive popular and critical recognition for) their own lives, affirming the importance and meaningfulness of women's experiences.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Read Aloud — The poem as performed by Mairin O'Hagan. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8xorb0q6o8)

- Goblin Market — Scans of the second edition of Rossetti's collection Goblin Market, in which this poem originally appeared, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/second-edition-of-goblin-market-by-christina-rossetti-with-original-covers)

- Rosetti's Life and Work — A biography of Christina

Rossetti and additional poems from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti)

- A Musical Arrangement of the Poem — "Song (When I am dead, my dearest)" as arranged by Saskia Kusrahadianti, one of many musical performances of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eRVQfI2kvc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- Cousin Kate
- In an Artist's Studio
- Maude Clare
- No, Thank You, John
- Remember

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

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CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Song (When I am dead, my dearest).*" LitCharts LLC, June 3, 2021. Retrieved June 15, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/christina-rossetti/song-when-i-am-dead-my-dearest.