



# The way images of death provoke our thoughts in Christina Rossetti's "Remember" and Mary E. Frye's "Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep".

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## Abstract

This paper explores the profound emotional and philosophical resonance of two iconic poems—Christina Rossetti's "Remember" and Mary Elizabeth Frye's "Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep"—which reflect on love, memory, and presence beyond physical absence. Though brief in form, these works offer lasting comfort in the face of personal loss and longing. Through an examination of their historical background, poetic structure, and symbolic imagery, this study reveals how both poets use a confessional voice to gently guide the reader from sorrow to serenity. The research further explores how such works continue to influence collective mourning practices and provoke individual reflection. By transforming farewell into remembrance and absence into enduring connection, these poems suggest that nothing truly vanishes—rather, it changes form and continues to live within us. Ultimately, the paper illustrates how poetic expression helps us navigate the invisible threads that bind the seen and unseen, and how art gives voice to what often feels unspeakable.

**Keywords:** Memory, Mourning, Poetic Expression, Loss and Comfort

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## ANALYSIS

The two poems "Remember" by Christina Rossetti and "Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep" by Mary E. Frye are short but they have a larger meaning. When loved ones are dreadfully missed, it seems like an appropriate time to remember these works. Conversely, the death of a loved one is considered to be one of the most excruciating human life experiences and perhaps, most importantly, many of us would prefer to die rather than face life without someone who meant so much to us. If, however, we consider that life is an institution and that every occurrence is an opportunity to move forward, there will be some very practical lessons to be gained even in this most unpleasant experience. These two poems are written through a confessional method to convey the message that, even though the people are gone, they do not wish their family any more pain as they are with them

forever. This research on how images of death provoke our thoughts focuses on the ensuing three questions:

### **What are the reasons behind the creation of these two poems?**

Like many literary masterpieces, the story behind the work is sometimes more interesting than the work itself. Christina Georgina Rossetti was an English poet born on 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1830 who wrote a variety of romantic, devotional and children's poems. She dictated her first story to her mother before she had learned to write. She is considered to be one of the leading women poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian period. She was influenced by the works of the Italian writers. "Remember" is a sonnet which

was written in 1849 when Rossetti was just 19 years old but was published in 1862 and appeared in her first volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. It is an Italian sonnet and has a rhyme scheme of a b b a a b b a c d d e c e. The Italian sonnet is divided into two sections by two different groups of rhyming sounds. The first 8 lines are called the octave and rhymes: a b b a a b b a and the remaining 6 lines is called the sestet and can have either two or three rhyming sounds, arranged in a variety of ways: c d c d c d, c d d c d c, c d e c d e, c d e c e d and c d c e d c.

On the other hand, Mary Elizabeth Frye was born on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1905 in Baltimore. A young German Jewish woman, Margaret Schwarzkopf, was staying with her and her husband whose mother was ill in Germany, but she had been warned not to return home because of increasing anti-Semitic unrest. When her mother died, the heartbroken young woman told Frye that she never had the chance to stand by her mother's grave and shed a tear. Frye had never written any poetry but in 1932 she wrote this hugely popular poem on the theme of bereavement called, "Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep" on the back of a brown shopping paper bag intended simply to comfort their houseguest. Later she said that the words "just came to her"<sup>1</sup> and expressed what she felt about life and death.

### What are the impacts of these poems in society?

"Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep" is a poem that is associated with Mary Elizabeth Frye, even though, critics challenge the authorship of this poem. The poem was introduced to many in Britain when it was read by the father of a soldier killed by a bomb in Northern Ireland. The soldier's father read the poem on BBC radio in 1995 in remembrance of his son, having left it in an envelope addressed 'To all my loved ones' in his personal effects. The authorship of the poem was established a few years later after an investigation by journalist Abigail Van Buren.<sup>2</sup> In Kelly Ryan's, based on her research and interview of Mary Frye of how the poem began to spread Frye says, "The poem's journey began at that kitchen table in Baltimore. Margaret took it to work with her, and gave it to friends there. One had a relative who worked in the Federal Printing Press in Washington. Copies were 'done up' and given away..."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mary E. Frye, *The Times*, November 5, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>

<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1076614.ece>>, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Broadcast on CBC Radio in 2000,

<[http://www.radio.cbc.ca/programs/ideas/poetic\\_journey/](http://www.radio.cbc.ca/programs/ideas/poetic_journey/)>, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

Frye's obituary in *The Times* made it clear that she was the author of the famous poem, which has been recited at funerals and on other appropriate occasions around the world for seventy years.<sup>4</sup>

To coincide with the National Poetry Day in 1995, the British favourite book programme, *The Bookworm*, conducted a poll to discover the nation's favourite poems and this poem was found out to be the nation's favourite.<sup>5</sup> In 2004 *The Times* wrote: "The verse demonstrated a remarkable power to soothe loss. It became popular, crossing national boundaries for use on bereavement cards and at funerals regardless of race, religion or social status".<sup>6</sup> On 2-11-1997, Col. C E Welch CBE MC OC 'C' Squadron SAS, N. Rhodesia 1960-63, read a version of the poem at the memorial service for fallen SAS soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Robert Prizeman, the musical director of the choirband, Libera, set this poem to music. The song used the same title as the poem and was first published in 2004 in Libera's album *Free*.<sup>8</sup> Japanese Singer-songwriter Man Arai translated this poem into Japanese and composed the song "千の風になって" (translation: "Become A Thousand Winds"). In January 2007, it became the first classical music piece to top the Oricon yearly singles chart. A paraphrased version titled "Alicia's Poem" is available as a quest item in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, memorializing a 28-year-old player named Dak "Caylee" Krause who died of leukemia on August 22, 2007. This poem has been translated into several languages, such as Dutch, Korean, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Tagalog and Spanish and also several Swedish versions exist. When someone young has died unexpectedly, this poem seems to bring some degree of comfort to the bereaved family in Swedish morning papers (such as *Svenska Dagbladet* 2010-08-14).

Likewise, in his book, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, author Antony H. Harrison discusses the poet's work and the "dominant tensions upon which it is constructed: between beauty and death; between love of man and love of God; between the ephemeral and the eternal; between the sensory and the transcendent."<sup>9</sup> Critic Basil de

<sup>4</sup> London Magazine, December/January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> BBC Books. *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, 1996, ISBN 978 0 563 38782 4.

<sup>6</sup>

<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1076614.ece>>, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.therhodesiansas.com/rohpost1980.php>>, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Libera - Free - Boy Choir and Soloist Directory.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.enotes.com/remember>>, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

Selincourt stated that she was "all but our greatest woman poet ... incomparably our greatest craftswoman ... probably in the first twelve of the masters of English verse"<sup>10</sup> Critics generally consider Rossetti's poetry superior to her later non secular prose works. Modern critics, including Constance Hassett and W. David Shaw have focused studies of Rossetti on what is unsaid or uninterpreted to in her works.<sup>11</sup> In *Blackwood's Magazine* on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1854, Rossetti stresses her own true identity as a poet, explaining: "I hope that I shall not be misunderstood as guilty of egotism or foolish vanity, when I say that my love for what is good in the works of others teaches one that there is something above the despicable in mine; that poetry is with me, not a mechanism, but an impulse and a reality; and that I know my aims in writing to be pure, and directed to that which is true and right."<sup>12</sup>

### Can images of death create an impact in our minds?

The author of the poem "Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep" states that what he/she is saying is that after you die you are not necessarily dead, but you can make the most of your after life, it is what you do before you die that matters. Frye uses a simple narrative structure, a range of metaphors and imagery to create a calm mood throughout the poem. These elements all make the reader feel comforted and perhaps even optimistic towards death. This attitude is better understood from the example of the story of the "bird on the branch" from the book *Contemporary Parables* by Robert Najemy. A tired bird was resting on a branch for support. It enjoyed the view from the branch and the safety it offered from dangerous animals. Then a strong wind started blowing and the branch started swaying back and forth, with such great intensity, that it seemed that it was going to break. But the bird was not in the least worried for it knew the important truth about life that even without the branch it was able to fly and thus remain safe through the power of its own two wings. On the other hand, speaking about a mixture of happiness and depression tends to run throughout Christina Rossetti's poem "Remember" which begins "Remember me when I am gone away," which implies immediately a loving, yet sad, last request. The speaker of this poem tells the listener in the voice of a deceased person about how he/she wants him/her to react to his/her death.

However, the message of these two poems is similar, they both say not to shed tears when someone is gone but to smile as an alternative because he/she had once lived. The poems say not to pray to God that the person will come back but to see that what the person has left behind. Death is not the end of it at all. It is only like slipping away into the next room. These poems are like a belief which makes a special connection with the person who is no more now, neither does this mean that we have got the person, nor does it mean that we have lost the person but it seems like the person is present everywhere around us. Both the narrators of these poems say to call them after their death by their old familiar name, speak to them in the easy way they always used to before, put no difference into their tone and laugh as they always laughed at the little jokes they always enjoyed together. Why should the dead person be out of the mind because he/she is out of sight? He/she is waiting for us for an interval, somewhere very near. The narrators' state that nothing is past, nothing is lost but one brief moment and people will be as it was before.

Moreover, going back to the title of this research paper, the word 'provoke' came from Anglo-French 'provocher' but the root is from Latin 'provocare' which means pro-voice. It means something which controls you by standing behind your mind. There are so many examples of how these poems create a positive impact in our mind and provoke our thoughts but for me the frequent example is my own self. Sometimes I lose control over myself. Everything I have kept buried inside came rushing to the surface. I am simply not able to resist that and then this provocation came and takes its control over my mind. When you lose someone, it stays with you, always reminding you of how easy it is to get hurt. When I first read these poems for the first time in a long while, I felt good. I remember, when I went to school, one of our teachers asked us to write about what I wanted to be when I grow up. I wrote down "happy". I used to be more fun and I talked a lot but everything changes with the death of the person and after that I just wanted to sleep and never wake up because nothing left in this world could replace what has been taken away. We met, we talked and it was epic but then the sun came up and reality set in. These poems are like escaping into a world where all is rhythm and the beat goes on and on. Even today when I get upset and think that my life may not be complete living with him but at least it would be a life then these poems actually provoke my thoughts and I started thinking that there is a long way for me to go and it is just the beginning. Obviously, images of death create impacts in our minds. For example, we all assume that we will have a lot of time to say what we want to say to someone but we are wrong. We lost that time with someone's death. These poems remind us that time means 'now'.

<sup>10</sup> Marsh, Jan. *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life*. (New York: Viking, 1994) xvii – xxxiii.

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.enotes.com/christina-rossetti-criticism/rossetti-christina>>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>12</sup>

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/harrison2/1.html>>, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

If you want to say something, say it now. If you want to ask for forgiveness, ask for it now, or else years later you will find yourself at a cemetery asking for forgiveness from a beloved who is gone.

Thus, the vibrating but shocking theme of death and its images compel us to ponder deeply. Has anyone ever had gloomy thoughts that are not necessarily scary? As for myself I keep having the same thoughts over and over again each day about somebody and we are no longer together and every day I have words, phrases and places where we were together keep going over and over. We might feel anger towards God when our loved one leaves his or her physical body. When we lose our faith in the wisdom and justice of the universal laws and we cannot accept that this event could have been a part of a greater plan simply because it was not a part of our own plan. Nor can we envision this event as essential to our evolutionary process. It is a long journey between acknowledgement of someone's death and saying goodbye. Society also gives us lots of other pressure too. For example, do not cry, bear up well, depression is unacceptable, accept the loss, do not be angry...do not...do not... do not. Most of these contribute to obstacles of the grief journey. Things would never get normal. Normal takes on a different picture after a death. The thought-provoking poems help us to learn about having belief and understanding that there must have been a reason for this event. I have no idea about how many times have I thought about the lost person and these lines put me forward "Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die."

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