

Between Life and Death: On the Sea Images in Christina Rossetti's Poems

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Abstract Death pervades in Christian Rossetti's poems, while the sea serves as an image to construct Rossetti's view of death. As a multidimensional image of profound implications, the unfathomable sea in Rossetti's poems is an integrated symbol of life, death, uncertainty, as well as the possibility of eternity. Most significantly, for Christian Rossetti, the sea itself is a junction where "death is the beginning of life and life the beginning of death." By studying the sea images in Rossetti's poems, the paper aims to shed new light upon the poet's view of death.

Keywords Christian Rossetti; view of death; sea images

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Introduction

Jan Marsh, the author of *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, correctly summarizes the impressive emotions that Christina's poems bring upon the readers: "Christina's poems are typically wintry... and death is always calling" (Marsh 174). Death pervades in Christina Rossetti's poems, which can be understood in the historical context when Victorian England suffered from the rampant spread of diseases and the communities dwelt on the omnipresence of death. Rossetti's obsession with the death-motif can also be attributed to "the long list of deaths" (W. Rossetti

vi-viii) of her relatives and friends who had a deep effect on her emotions. Thus, Marya Zaturenska regards Rossetti as primarily “the poet of death, the poet of the death-wish” (qtd. Yang 2). The existing researches on Christina Rossetti’s poems—though some have been done on the death-motif and the motif of love as well as her religious belief—might have not been very much concerned with the significant poetic image of the sea in her poems.

The imagery of the sea frequently occurs in her poetic reflection upon the ultimate question about death, contributing to the construction of her profound view of death. Despite some criticism about Rossetti’s obsession with the observation of death and accusation of her lack of intellectual reflection upon realistic issues, this thesis argues that it would be more appropriate to say that death is a most realistic issue confronted by 19th century England, and that most people were then enormously threatened by death and therefore would show reflection on the ultimate meaning of human existence. As one of the most important female poets of the 19th century, Christina Rossetti displayed her distinguished insight into the issue of life and death. Sea image constitutes a significant part in revealing Rossetti’s understanding of being and religious belief, and it bears much weight in terms of the poet’s view of the existence and destination of human beings. An analysis of the sea image in Rossetti’s poems may shed new light upon Rossetti’s unique view of death.

The Sea of Death

The image of the “sea” in the Christina Rossetti’s death poems often occurs in a metaphorical “voyage” closely related to death—a voyage towards death, or of death. One example is found in “The Hour and the Ghost” where confronted with the calling of the ghosts—“Come, our nest is newly made— Now cross the tossing foam” (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 66) , the woman cries to her lover : “O love, love, hold me fast, /He draws me away from thee;/ I cannot stem the blast,/ Nor the cold strong sea” (66). And it is more typically exemplified in the aforementioned poem “Wife to Husband,” as the dying wife says:

Good-by.
 I must drift across the sea,
 I must sink into the snow,
 I must die ...
 ...
 Blank sea to sail upon
 Cold bed to sleep in:

Good-by.

...

I must die. (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 100-101)

Death, as the separation with the beloved one alive, is put into a metaphorical framework of “voyage,” thereby turning into a departure for a destined “journey” upon the sea. The repetition of “I must” and “Good-bye” evokes the image of a sailor embarking on a voyage of no excuse to be postponed. It is worth noticing that although it seems to be self-motivated by the repeated use of the modal verb “must,” the verbs “drift” and “sink” here betray a sense of motivation of external forces before she begins to truly “sail” upon the blank sea. The subtle transition of diction here invites our close attention to the exact nature of this “departure” of death, which serves not as an end but as the beginning of a journey. Though death is scheduled to take place “with unready feet” of us, drifting us off the shore and sinking us into the snow, yet after that, one “sails upon” the ocean of death with neither complaint nor regret. In this way, Rossetti’s death poems show a calm acceptance of death and her illustration of the separation of loved ones is not the psychologically felt “coldness” by an analogy with sea-water and snow. Nor is it smothered by a mood of melancholy usually engendered by the chilling vision of death. Her death poems are, however, featured with a sense of broadness and transcendence endowed by the voyage towards an infinite width presented by the sea.

The Sea of Unfathomable Dreams

The image of voyage upon the sea recurs in another devotional poem of Rossetti, “Sleep at Sea,” which narrates the voyage of a ship of “sleepers” who are stuck in dreams, heedless of the physical dangers in coming and driving towards their fate of “vanity.”

Sound the deep waters:—
 Who shall sound that deep?—
 Too short the plummet,
 And the watchmen sleep.
 Some dream of effort
 Up a toilsome steep;
 Some dream of pasture grounds
 For harmless sheep.
 White shapes flit to and fro

From mast to mast;
 They feel the distant tempest
 That nears them fast:
 Great rocks are straight ahead,
 Great shoals not past;
 They shout to one another
 Upon the blast. (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 165-166)

Here, the word “sleep” frequently serves as an image in Rossetti’s poem of the state of death, which stems from her religious belief in the doctrine of “Soul Sleep” that illustrates a person’s state of sleeping or suspension in the period between death and the Great Advent or Second Coming of the Millennium, on the Last Day when the soul will receive its final reward “after breaking from the sleep” (McGann 135). However, the poem’s Gothic depiction of dream resembles that of the scene in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the dreams of these sleepers are depicted as false illusions, indicating that the “sleep” here is more of a parody rather than the true “Soul Sleep” that enables people after death to get a glimpse of the paradise of another world at the Second Coming.

So dream the sleepers,
 Each man in his place;
 The lightning shows the smile
 Upon each face:
 The ship is driving, driving,
 It drives apace:
 And sleepers smile, and spirits
 Bewail their case.
 The lightning glares and reddens
 Across the skies;
 It seems but sunset
 To those sleeping eyes.
 When did the sun go down
 On such a wise?
 From such a sunset
 When shall day arise? (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 166-167)

With attention paid to the grammatical tense used here, the sleepers question about

the historical happenings by “when did the sun go down” and ask about the futuristic event by “when shall day arise,” but lie themselves exactly in the middle of darkness where the sun is a mere illusion. Such illusions, closely related and even “induced” by the elements on the sea (i.e. “lightnings”), serve not only as a warning but also an indicator of a possible anxiety about this “voyage” on the death of sea: Are these paradisaical views visualized by people towards the after-life reliable, or “treacherous” as illusions?

They have forgotten sorrows
And hopes and fears;
They have forgotten perils
And smiles and tears;
Their dream has held them long,
Long years and years. (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 167)

If we take the image of the sea in the sense that its “broadness” and seemingly infinite “length” for traveling agree well with the need of human beings to seek the revelation of God on the Day of Judgement, Rossetti seems to remind us that this image of the sea in her poems is not a flat image, but an image of unfathomable depth. Do people lay their eyesight upon the width of the sea, the infinite length but no one to “sound the deep waters” ?—and human beings are short of doing so with the “plummet” they are equipped with—as people “sleep to death in dreaming,/ Of length of days” (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 169) when they still should remain “awake” (be alive) rather than “live in the death” yet to come, resting in desirous leisure before they should get the rest fulfilled by the Soul Sleep?

Jerome J. McGann rightly points out that Rossetti writes “as if she were herself aware of the treacherousness of her own most cherished dreams and ideals” (141), and she further suggests that Rossetti’s poems manifest “contradictions at her heart of her own deepest beliefs and commitments” through a “self-destruction of its own religious certainties” (141) with a sense of vanity, uncertainties and “inconsequence” that “haunted” in her other lines like the famous “When I am dead, my dearest.” As regards the image of the sea, with its unfathomable “depth,” it embodies, to some extent, such uncertainty of the internal vision which Rossetti resorts to for the visualization of the ending of life. At the end of the poem, the poet writes:

No voice to call the sleepers,
No hand to raise:

They sleep to death in dreaming,
 Of length of days.
 Vanity of vanities,
 The Preacher says:
 Vanity is the end
 Of all their ways. (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 169-170)

That the end of their journey is “vanity” refers to a disillusioned expectancy of arrival, the loss of a physically attainable “shore” on the other side that ends in nihilism. Such nihilism denies the spiritual transcendence over the body to decay, and constrains the perishable person in its limitations, and thus prolongs the journey of death itself into infinite darkness and hopelessness, and further blurs the border between death and life, making people sail on their ship of life over the sea of death without an end.

The Sea of Infinity and Eternity

Such images of the sea of death are frequently found in Rossetti’s poems for people to sail across, with its own end at the shore where mortals dwelt and the other stretching towards an “infinity” where God is expected to appear when the ship of mortal beings ever reaches there. Whether the sea holds in store the path of transcendence or hidden uncertainty, the death of the sea in Rossetti’s poems is never a simple and fixed image, but a complex one. It appears to be a calm and tranquil place for the birth of life in the poem “A Birthday” by “My heart is like a rainbow shell / That paddles in a halcyon sea” (*Goblin Market* 56), to be the place where life’s ship can journey on its course for exploration in “At Home” as “Said one: ‘To-morrow we shall be/ Plod plod along the featureless sands/ And coasting miles and miles of sea.’” (*Goblin Market* 35), and even accommodate the seemingly radical contradictions of death and life, which is exemplified in “By the Sea,” a poem foregrounding the sea itself while also revealing the interrelation between death and life contained therein.

By the Sea
 Why does the sea moan evermore?
 Shut out from heaven it makes its moan,
 It frets against the boundary shore;
 All earth’s full rivers cannot fill
 The sea, that drinking thirsteth still.

Sheer miracles of loveliness
 Lie hid in its unlooked—on bed:
 Anemones, salt, passionless,
 Blow flower—like; just enough alive
 To blow and multiply and thrive.
 Shells quaint with curve, or spot, or spike,
 Encrusted live things argus—eyed,
 All fair alike, yet all unlike,
 Are born without a pang, and die
 Without a pang, and so pass by. (C. Rossetti, *Poems and Prose* 92-93)

The sea, being “shut off from heaven,” seems to be part of heaven once upon a time, having no “boundary” but infinity, thus moaning for its limitation. Rossetti gives such an interpretation for the “bangs” of the sea-waves cracking on the seashore as a sound of personified mourning, and seems to pave the way for us to approach the sea—frequently to be the stormy “sea of death”— and to direct our vision towards things that “hid in its unlooked.” And what seems to amaze both the readers and the poet herself (who exclaims with admiration: “Sheer miracles”) is a miraculously lovely picture of the undersea world where “anemones” and other flowers “blossom, multiply and thrive,” as well as other living beings. One of the intriguing things to notice is the world “passionless.” It can possibly be attributed to the physical fact of the lack of sunshine in the depth of the sea, but the word itself contrasts quaintly with this prosperous image of life illustrated by words such as “blow, multiply and thrive.” The tension of such images in between the poetic lines inevitably arouses our curiosity: How can they “thrive in such limitations” posed by the depth of the sea? And how can the bounded and moaning sea breed such miracles of beauty composed by the passionless sea-lives?

Some may think the poet fails to respond to such inquisitive minds and simply hold that she stops merely at the description of the beauty of nature for the sake of appraisal of God's creation, but it seems more than that when it comes to the last stanza where the poet again resorts to her frequently-used duality in poetic narration—“alike” and “unlike,” “born” and “die.” These “live things” share the beauty of being alive while differing in their unique being, and moreover—echoing their “passionless thriving”—they “born and die” without “a pang.” These last three lines, simple and concise in diction, are profound in meaning. “Without a pang” repeats twice, and the word “pang” alliterates with the word “pass,” thereby composing a rhythmic “circulation” by the endless repetition of birth and death,

featured by a fast and light rhythm seemingly in imitation of the transient life periods of these “fair live things.” Such lightness in description of the transient death and life seems to entail something mournful about the transient beauty “alike but unlike,” but when attention is paid to the negated “pang” here, something more profound surfaces. Obviously, by such negation, the poet reminds us that the pang is left for human beings who keep asking God:

What need remains of death - pang yet to be,
 If all my soul is quickened in thy praise;
 If all my heart loves Thee, what need the amaze,
 Struggle and dimness of an agony?— (C. Rossetti, *Pageant* 197)

When it comes to these lives undersea, it is such a blurred border between life and death that exempts mortals from such pains caused by “waiting.” Death and life under the sea are so close to each other both in time and space that an excess of passion for being seems unnecessary. Therefore, in the unknown depth of the sea, there is an “absence both of great passion and anguish” that makes a continuum of “eternal beauty” possible by blurring the line between life and death (as every fair dies and gets substituted so soon that it seems to be a continuity by blurring with each other—Is it a possible explanation for “alike and unlike”?). Thus, there is something mournful about “being” illustrated by Rossetti’s sensitive mind. Virginia Woolf speaks highly of Rossetti and acclaims her as an “instinctive poet”:

Your instinct was so sure, so direct, so intense that it produced poems that sing like music in one’s ears—like a melody by Mozart or an air by Gluck. Yet for all its symmetry, yours was a complex song. When you struck your harp many strings sounded together. Like all instinctives you had a keen sense of the visual beauty of the world...your eye, indeed, observed with a sensual pre-Raphaelite intensity that must have surprised Christina the Anglo-Catholic. But to her you owed perhaps the fixity and sadness of your muse. The pressure of a tremendous faith circles and clamps together these little songs. Perhaps they owe to it their solidity. Certainly they owe to it their sadness—your God was a harsh God, your heavenly crown was set with thorns. No sooner have you feasted on beauty with your eyes than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and beauty passes. Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave. (Woolf 240-241)

However, in another sense, what the last three lines evoke is a sense mournful but beyond mournfulness: life is beautiful but short; however, despite of its transiency, life entails the possibility of transcendence and eternity. Obviously, by the “limitless” before being “welcomed by heaven” and the “pangs” in waiting, Rossetti shows her deep concerns for the condition of human beings, for the condition of being that is shut from eternity. Echoing her own belief, particularly in religious terms, a sense of “infinity” is always calling: The sea will finally come back to heaven, breaking the “bonds” and going back to eternity.

Again, the sea serves as an important image in the breaking boundaries related with her religious belief, as she comments on the statement “no more sea” in Revelation: “At first reading ‘there was no more sea’, our heart sinks at foresight of the familiar sea expunged from earth and heaven; that sea to us so long and so inexhaustibly a field of wonder and delight” but then she explained in her reading of Revelation that “no more sea” as meaning that the sea does not vanish, but rather “becomes one with God” (qtd. Mason 171). In another poem “The Convent Threshold,” she describes the sea as “sea of glass” which is also “mingled with fire” (C. Rossetti, *Goblin Market* 119) (related to Revelation 4.6 and 14.2 in her vision of the new creation). What the sea dissipates is not everything of possibility that the sea has brought her, but rather, the “distinctions between the sea and land, nonhuman and human, rural and urban, divine and material, as things are reconciled to each other in a renewed creation” (Mason 172). Rossetti clearly confesses in *Seek and Find*: “Thus we shall not lose the translucent purity of ocean, nor yet a glory as of its myriad waves tipped by sunshine ... What shall we lose? A barrier of separation.” (108) By creating the image of the sea as a path to join God, Rossetti shows her philosophy of oneness in her poem “And there was no more sea”:

Voices from above and from beneath,
 Voices of creation near and far,
 Voices out of life and out of death,
 Out of measureless space,
 Sun, moon, star,
 In oneness of contentment offering praise.
 Heaven and earth and sea jubilant,
 Jubilant all things that dwell therein;
 Filled to fullest overflow they chant,
 Still roll onward, swell,
 Still begin,

Never flagging praise interminable.
 Thou who must fall silent in a while,
 Chant thy sweetest, gladdest, best, at once;
 Sun thyself today, keep peace and smile;
 By love upward send
 Orisons,
 Accounting love thy lot and love thine end. (C. Rossetti, *Face* 191)

These separate voices—obviously including those living beings in the depth of the sea, as well as the human beings sailing upon the stormy or tranquil sea—at the beginning of the stanza, though contradictory as they may be in terms of spatiality “above and beneath,” or “near and far,” or even “life and death,” all channel into a union in the new creation where “heaven and earth and sea” are jubilantly joined and merged. Observing Rossetti’s religious imagination, Emma Manson suggests that “Rossetti might have visualized the love of creation moving upwards towards God, but she imagined the dead—‘Thou who must fall silent’—participating in God in a new time that defied spatiality” (173) . In this regard, what makes Rossetti so different is her vivid visualization and philosophical reflection upon death in her poems, and most significantly, her meditation on the mysterious border between life and death.

Conclusion

Examining the imagination of the sea in Rossetti’s poems , one may behold a world of sea imagery which is complex, multidimensional and even dynamic. In fact, the sea images in her poems are neither stable settings nor merely elements of nature. The implications of the sea in Rossetti’s poems are abundant, serving as an organic part in her poetic construction. Moreover, the sea is an imaginative space for her reflection upon the ultimate questions about life and death. Paradoxically, we find that the cold sea of death in her poems is at the same time a place that gives birth to life, and that the sea of unfathomable depth contains uncertainty and possible vanity of crushing while entailing the possibility of “blurring” the border between death and life, the possibility of a joint eternity. Death initiates a voyage towards eternity, a natural pursuit of mortal beings, and even a voyage that we may have been already on at birth. In essence, the eagerness to “sail” on the “sea” and to “delve” into the depth of it for a glimpse of its unlooked beauty may derive from the fact that “the sea, celebrated by poets and scientists alike as the original site and source of life, eventually draws all life back to itself” (Krell, *Preface* i). The “passionless Anem-

ones, salt” which are just “enough alive” to “blow and multiply and thrive” deep under the sea as primordial forms of life—with closely joint death and life without “pangs” of being—constitute an eternal picture of beauty where human beings come from and are seeking to return to. “The destruction-and-death drives may be interpreted as the sea’s imperious summons to return whence we came” (Krell 12).

The sea in Rossetti’s poem is a junction point full of possibilities in the context of death and being. It is where a journey ends but a voyage begins, where life and death coexist and possibilities for eternity are bred. In this sense, the image of the sea sheds light on Rossetti’s view on death, which is fairly bright and transcendent beyond “boundaries,” as is illustrated by the following lines from her sonnet “Behold a Shaking” —

Here life is the beginning of our death,
And death the starting-point whence life ensues;
Surely our life is death, our death is life. (C. Rossetti, *Pageant* 185)

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