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### Practice exam question

# ‘Hope deferred’ or ‘eternal longings’

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Guidance for the question on p. 8 of the magazine.

### The opening of an answer

Love is often presented as something recalled and lost, rather than felt and enjoyed in Christina Rossetti's poetry. The speaker is invariably on the outside of others' fulfilled love, looking on, as in 'An Apple-Gathering'. Julian Thompson suggests that one way in which early poems such as 'Remember' (1849) operate for the reader is that they are dramatised, as if observed, measuring their distance from the outcome. The speaker of this sonnet directs her beloved that it is better to forget her than to grieve and be sad. By contrast, 'Maude Clare' (1858) is a sharply dramatised ballad, with the scene enacted at the church door as Maude Clare gives her former lover Thomas her broken and ironic wedding gift, while he can barely speak in reply. Nell, Thomas's bride, concludes the poem with two defiant stanzas to answer Maude Clare's scornful dismissal. The two poems were written ten years apart, the second more complex than the first in tone and mood and more strikingly explicit in its presentation of sexual love and the strained conventions of marriage. The natural imagery of the sixth and seventh stanzas suggests that she and Thomas were lovers, whereas the relationship in 'Remember' is restrained within the sonnet form and the perspective of a single speaker. The contrast between the two poems perhaps suggests the difference between Rossetti at seventeen — marked by the tragically brief engagement to her first love, James Collinson, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood — and Rossetti at twenty-eight, friends with the social reformer and women's rights campaigner, Barbara Bodichon, and on the eve of her work at the Diocesan Penitentiary for Fallen Women at Highgate. There is an air of mystery in both poems, inviting us to speculate and imagine what is hinted at. This sense of what John Bayley calls 'missingness' is central to what makes Rossetti's love poetry so compelling for the reader, giving her presentation of human love a richly ambiguous tone, in contrast to the only enduring love for Rossetti, that of God, as found in 'Twice'.

'Remember' is a strange sonnet that offers little consolation of the shared experience of love, although it *appears* to console. The voice of the speaker, as Thompson notes, is a controlling female one. It instructs the beloved to remember her at the moment of losing her 'When you can no more hold me by the hand,/ Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay', which suggests an almost playful game of leave-taking, marked by the shift from a running rhythm, to a jig-like iambic line, the only word longer than a monosyllable is 'turning'. The second quatrain also unsettles, as the speaker detaches herself from the lover's solipsistic planning 'You tell me of our future that you planned'. The pronouns are revealing here, as is the insistent repetition, enclosing the spondaic 'no more' phrase: 'Remember me...Only remember me', recalling the words of the Ghost of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*, a disturbing echo. The 'you understand' anticipates the future, and instructs him once more on the futility of his actions

(whether to counsel or pray). The volta between octave and sestet alters the tone and perspective of the sonnet, signalled by 'Yet if'. The final lines are often read as generous and loving, yet there is something strange, even 'weird', as Thompson argues, in the sonnet's pleasure, not in reassurance but in the unattainability of consolation through earthly love. The straightforward and detached instruction to get on with life reduces the significance of their love; the 'vestige of the thoughts that once I had' isolates the lovers from each other once again.

Yet 'Maude Clare' overturns a reading of Rossetti's love poems that focuses on lament. Bayley argues that her love poems are 'always grave and unselfconscious, impersonal, calm with sorrow and with belief' but none of these terms fit 'Maude Clare', which is closer to social satire and laced with bitterness. It echoes traditional ballads such as 'Lord Randall' but with significant differences, such as the startling break in the syllabic voice, what Bayley calls 'the catch in the throat', that occurs here in the eighth stanza:

He strove to match her scorn with scorn,  
He faltered in his place:  
'Lady', he said, — 'Maude Clare,' he said —  
'Maude Clare:' — and hid his face.

It is Maude Clare who opens the poem ('Out of the church she followed them') and she holds the floor until the last two stanzas when Nell, not Thomas, takes over. It is interesting the extent to which male experience is explained and explored by women in this cutting poem: Thomas's mother has two stanzas in which her comments are veiled, not just by her 'smiles, almost with tears', but her attempt to reassure her son:

Your father thirty years ago  
Had just your tale to tell;

But it falls flat. The reader assumes that her husband also had a lover whom he abandoned to make a better match (we wonder if Nell is a better match than Maude Clare) but we do not hear this tale and only assume it. The shared pallor of Thomas, Nell and Maude Clare intensifies the scene.

What makes the poem radical for the mid-nineteenth century and perhaps anticipates Hardy's portrayal of Tess in his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, is Maude Clare's gifts that plunge the reader directly into details of their charged and, it is implied, very recent, relationship:

Here's my half of the faded leaves  
We plucked from budding bough,  
With feet amongst the lily leaves, —  
The lilies are budding now.

The sexual wading 'ankle-deep' and the 'budding bough' recall a fading Eden, in which the lilies, associated with Mary, suggest purity, but in Greek mythology fertility. Her gift to Nell recalls Rossetti's own love poetry 'Tho' it were fruit, the bloom were gone, / Or, were it flowers, the dew', as at the end of 'An Apple-Gathering'. The reader wonders if Nell's robust claim rings true, or if it is Maude Clare's final words that dominate in their painful and absolute rejection of their 'fickle' and 'paltry' love. The echoing 'my half' and 'my share' takes us back to Thomas, who can do little more than say her name and gazes long on her *before* kissing his bride. The shadow Thomas has become through his falsehood is a powerful absence in the poem, another 'missingness' that transforms Rossetti's love poems into dramas of loss.

## Commentary

The answer addresses the terms of the question head-on in a critical and evaluative way, exploring the ways in which Rossetti's love poetry operates through a discussion of the given poem 'Remember' and the second poem chosen by the candidate, 'Maude Clare'.

The introduction places the two poems in their slightly different contexts, suggesting Rossetti's growing interest in the position of women in Victorian society in her twenties through her friendship with Barbara Bodichon and others. These readings are only touched on in the introduction but are developed further in the suggestion that 'Maude Clare' is partly a social satire on how women are abandoned by men, while society (here seen through the voices of the mother and Nell, the wife) does its best to cover this transgression up. By making Maude Clare the central voice of the poem, Rossetti is questioning convention in which the public face of marriage conceals such duplicity.

The answer's close reading shapes the response, with a sophisticated grasp of how Rossetti uses form, repetition, breaks in metre and tone to explore love. Although AO5 is not assessed for this paper, the use of Thompson and Bayley is helpful at pinpointing Rossetti's poetic voice.

The answer also succeeds in the way it contrasts the two poems, allowing the candidate to develop a reading of Rossetti's love poetry that does not simply repeat the same ideas across the analysis of the two poems. The brief mentions of the sonnet and ballad forms help to establish how the two poems differ. The reference to Hardy's 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* also helps to illuminate the discussion, although perhaps Hardy's poetry (for example, 'Tess's Lament' and for social satire 'The Ruined Maid') might have been even more productive.

What makes the answer particularly strong is its analysis of what is suggested but not made explicit in Rossetti's poetry, its 'missingness'. This acknowledgement of what Rossetti hints at but does not explain (for example, in 'Remember' her thoughts are referred to but not explored and his plans for 'our future' are unspoken) makes the answer more interesting for the reader. It engages the reader with the poems, for example, in whether Nell or Maude Clare holds our attention most in the final stanza of the second poem, allowing the poem's ambiguity to be discussed rather than flattened.

The answer only hints at Rossetti's religious poetry, but this emphasis on her as a religious poet might have been another way to tackle the question by choosing a poem that rejects earthly love in favour of heavenly, as in 'Twice', or that engages directly with the false temptations of earthly love, for example, in 'The World'.

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