



## Activity 4: The World

In this activity we will be looking at 'The World' by Christina Rossetti.

Christina Rossetti's sonnet 'The World' also features an encounter with 'naked horror':

### The World

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:  
But all night as the moon so changeth she;  
Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy  
And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.  
By day she woos me to the outer air,  
Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:  
But through the night, a beast she grins at me,  
A very monster void of love and prayer.  
By day she stands a lie: by night she stands  
In all the naked horror of the truth  
With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.  
Is this a friend indeed; that I should sell  
My soul to her, give her my life and youth,  
Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?

By **Christina Rossetti** (1830–1894; 'The World' was written in 1854 and published in 1862)

### Glossary

**changeth:** old form of 'changes'

**leprosy:** disfiguring numbing disease

**satiety:** satisfaction

**void:** empty

**cloven:** hoofed, like a goat's hooves

### Structure

'The World' follows the structure of a **Petrarchan sonnet**: it has fourteen lines, with a 'volta' or twist at the end of the eighth line. If you follow the line endings, the rhyme pattern is abbaabbaccdede (unlike a **Shakespearean sonnet**, in which the rhyme scheme is ababcdcdefef). A Petrarchan sonnet usually celebrates romantic love: the form is named after the Italian poet Petrarch (1304–1374), who wrote a sequence of sonnets in praise of his (highly idealized and romanticized) love named Laura.

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### **Context**

Christina Rossetti was devoutly religious, and would often renounce activities that she enjoyed, like chess, because she felt that this would express her devotion to her faith more strongly.

She wrote:

all our lives long we shall be bound to refrain our soul and keep it low: but what then? For the books we now forbear to read, we shall one day be endued with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not listen to, we shall join in the song of the redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn, we shall gaze unabashed on the Beatific Vision. For the companionship we shun, we shall be welcomed into angelic society, and the communion of triumphant saints. For the amusements we avoid, we shall keep the supreme Jubilee. For the pleasures we miss, we shall abide, and forever abide, in the rapture of heaven.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Christina Rossetti believed that renunciation in life – and turning away from worldly pleasures – would lead to greater joys in the afterlife. The author Virginia Woolf wrote of Christina Rossetti in 1935: ‘You carefully ignored any book that could shake your faith or any human being that could trouble your instincts’, and that ‘your God was a harsh God, your heavenly crown was set with thorns’:

Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave. And then, incongruously, a sound of scurrying and laughter is heard. There is the patter of animals’ feet and the odd guttural notes of rooks and the snufflings of obtuse furry animals grunting and nosing. For you were not a pure saint by any means.<sup>13</sup>

Christina Rossetti’s brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was an artist of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelites were known for painting in a style that was hugely detailed and drawn from nature, creating a heightened realistic effect, which they then applied to subjects from literature and the Bible. Finally, Christina Rossetti was well aware of the situation of so-called ‘fallen women’ – women who had sex outside wedlock, and were subsequently disowned by their families – in Victorian London. From 1859–1870 she volunteered at St Mary Magdalene House, a refuge for ‘fallen women’ and women working in the sex trade, where she was known as ‘sister Christina’.<sup>14</sup>

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### Tasks

1. Is 'The World' a celebration of romantic love?
2. Do Virginia Woolf's views of Rossetti's religious beliefs correspond to what you see in her poem 'The World'?
3. You can see and read more about Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings [here](#). Do you see any similarities between Dante Gabriel Rossetti's style of painting, and Christina Rossetti's 'The World'?
4. How might Christina Rossetti's knowledge of the difficulties of 'fallen women' living in London have affected a poem like 'The World'? See also her poem *Goblin Market* (1862).
5. 'The World' is often assumed to be written in the voice of a male speaker, facing 'the world', who takes the form of a woman, tempting him (much like Adam and Eve in the Bible). Is this the only way that you can interpret this poem? Would it change the effect of the poem if we imagined a female speaker?