Remember by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti’s sonnet, “Remember”, begins with a simple request: for the listener to think of the speaker once she (the speaker) has passed away. As the speaker continues to verbalize her desire to be remembered, she wonders if it would be better for the listener to forget her instead, rather than he “should remember and be sad.” The speaker is torn because, while she wants to be remembered, she also understands the importance of moving on from the loss of a loved one and does not want her memory to be a burden.

With its fairly strict iambic pentameter (5 unstressed then 5 stressed syllables in a line) and rhyme scheme, “Remember” is a sonnet. Like most sonnets, one of the major themes in this poem is love. The speaker (the “I” of the poem) speaks directly to the listener (referred to as “you”) in the imperative voice, creating an instant relationship between these two characters. She directly asserts that, once she is gone, she and the listener will no longer hold hands, indicating that the characters indeed share a romantic relationship. In fact, she demonstrates that this relationship is much more complex than simply two people in love by saying, “day by day/ You tell me of our future that you planned.” These characters are in a serious relationship and are at the level where they have spoken openly about their future together and even marriage yet the line could be interpreted that he is controlling as he is the one *telling* of *his* plans as if she has had no say in them.

The first two stanzas adhere to the rules of sonnet structure, following the typical ABBAABBA rhyme scheme and imitating the romantic ideas of a classic Italian sonnet. During these first two stanzas, the speaker describes holding hands, daily visits, and creating a future life together—all romantic images. These images create emotion in the poem by appealing to the reader’s traditional definition of a romance. However, this poem ends with a CDDECE instead of a CDECDE rhyme pattern, which suggests that, like the sonnet itself, the relationship is not perfect. This imperfection in the rhyme scheme draws attention back to the not-so-idealized images in the first two stanzas: when describing what will no longer happen when she is dead, the speaker says, “Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.” In this line, it seems as though there have been moments where the speaker has wanted to leave and end the relationship, yet she never can. This fluctuating relationship is not the ordinary sort of love described in a standard sonnet.

Also, the different interpretations of the line “Only remember me” further demonstrate the atypical nature of this relationship. In the traditional sonnet style, this phrase reads, “Only *remember* me,” suggesting that the speaker simply wants to be remembered by her loved one. However, this phrase has a completely different meaning when read outside of the iambic pentameter. If interpreted, “*Only* remember *me*,” the phrase means that the speaker wants the listener to remember her as a person and to overlook the negative aspects of their relationship. With the emphasis on “me,” the line connotes that there were problems in the relationship that she wants the listener to forget when she dies.

Unlike traditional sonnets that are quick paced, “Remember” is slow moving. The lines in the first two stanzas all naturally follow the same, steady and slow rhythm and each line is either punctuated at the end or has a naturally occurring caesura at the line break. The pace is further slowed by the punctuation marks within the lines, which give the poem a halting feel, much like a funeral procession. This slow pace creates a solemn tone, adding to the concept of death and loss portrayed by images such as “the silent land."

The third stanza has a different feel than the rest of the poem. Unlike the first two stanzas, it does not start with “Remember me,” but rather, with “Yet”—a clear indication of a change in mood in the poem. “Yet” signifies that the speaker is about to say something different than, even contradictory to, her earlier thoughts. Also, this third stanza varies from the first two in that it does not conform to the sonnet rhyme scheme, further suggesting that the subject matter will contrast the earlier ideas.

Finally, instead of following the steady, slow and halting pace created in the earlier part of the poem, the final stanza changes speed. The speaker deviates from the original tempo when she says, “For if the darkness and corruption leave/ A vestige of the thoughts that once I had.” The enjambment of these two lines quickens the speed of the poem because there is no stop until the end of the sentence. However, the poem grinds to a halt when the speaker says, “Better by far you should forget and smile/ Than that you should remember and be sad.”

This change of speed, in addition to the variations in rhyme and introductory phrase, highlights the last two lines that contain the theme of the poem. The speaker comes to the final conclusion that she does not want her memory to cause him more sorrow. He should not feel guilty for forgetting her if remembering her causes him more pain. However, like the earlier dual interpretations of the line “Only remember me,” this final couplet leaves the audience with a question that remains unanswered: would the listener be sad because he simply grieves his lost love, or is he mournful because he remembers how the relationship was failing?

The poem "Remember Me" by Christina Rossetti is one about love and death. The relationship in this poem is between Rossetti and a lover, or family member. She is telling them to remember her when she dies, but not to grieve too much. It is a sonnet in octave and sestet form that makes it seem even and finished.

The poem deals mostly with love.

."..when you can no more hold me by the hand..."

Here she is telling her lover to try and let go of her and the memories that he holds of her.

."..nor I half turn to go yet turning stay..."

Rossetti is saying here that when her time comes, she is going to have to go. She will be unable to avoid her death, and she will take it as it comes.

."..only remember me; you understand

It will be late to counsel then or pray..."

She is saying here that her lover should only remember her. He shouldn't pray or cry for her, as it isn't going to bring her back.

."..if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve..."

Here, Rossetti is telling him that he shouldn't feel guilty for not grieving for her, or forgetting about her. She wants him to carry on without her.

."..vestige of the thoughts I once had..."

Rossetti is telling her lover to remember her for the things she did and they did together, rather than the things that she didn't do, or the things they didn't do together.

."..better by far you should forget and smile

Than that you should remember and be sad..."

## Here, Christina Rossetti is telling her lover that she would rather he moved on without her, forgot about her and was happy, than spending his whole life grieving for her and being miserable.

## Rossetti composed *Remember* in 1849 and published it in the first, non-[devotional](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/devotional), half of her volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. It is a [sonnet](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) that subsequently appeared in numerous poetry anthologies and even today is often read at times of bereavement.

## Synopsis

The poem’s speaker appears to be approaching death and addresses the beloved who remains, telling him/her to remember the speaker. If, however, the beloved momentarily forgets the speaker, s/he should not feel guilty – the speaker would rather that the beloved was happy in forgetting than made sad by remembering.

**The sonnet form**

## A sonnet is a poem with a special structure. It has fourteen lines which are organised in a particular manner, usually characterised by the pattern of rhyming, which changes as the ideas in the poem evolve.

## Language and tone

**Repetition**

The term ‘remember’ runs, like a refrain, throughout the [sonnet](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet). However, its power seems to decrease through the poem, rather as if the voice and memory of the speaker is fading from life:

* The first two imperative verbs are placed at the start rather than the end of the first and fifth lines
* In the middle of the seventh, the strength of the request is modified by the word ‘Only’ on its third appearance
* It is further qualified in adverbial sub-clauses by ‘And afterwards’ and ‘Better .. you / Than .. you’ in the sestet, losing its association with ‘me’.

Further repetition with variation is seen in:

* ‘gone away / Gone far away’, which reinforces the distance that is growing between the speaker and her lover and emphasises the boundary that exists between life and death
* ‘if you should forget / Better … you should forget’, which turns the possibility of forgetfulness into an imperative.

**Tone**

The voice of the speaker is controlled but increasingly tentative, revealing as well as concealing meaning. The certainties of being able to remain with the beloved (l.4), of audible advice and prayer (l.8) are replaced by vestiges of memory amidst increasing forgetfulness. The speaker even changes the message s/he wants to give to the beloved. The command to remember is replaced by the suggestion s/he is happy for the beloved to forget.

**Investigating language and tone**

* What indications are there that the speaker’s statement (that it would be better for the beloved to forget than to remember and be sad l.13-14) is genuine?
* How would you describe the tone of the speaker?
  + Can you identify any places where the tone changes?
* What is the effect of using direct and simple language?

**Structure and versification**

**Turning**

The act of turning forms a key structural pattern in *Remember*. In the first line, the speaker asks the beloved to remember the speaker once s/he has ‘gone away’. It is not until the mention of the ‘silent land’ in the second line that it appears this is a [euphemism](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/euphemism) for death. S/he recalls how, in previous meetings, there was reluctance to turn away from the beloved, yet this is now a necessity that they both must deal with. Alternatively, the idea of ‘staying’ can be seen as a reference to remaining in the memory of the beloved.

**The volta**

In line 9, the [volta](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/volta" \o "volta) (or turning point of the [Petrarchan](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Petrarchan) [sonnet](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet)), the speaker’s tone changes. Turning from the instruction to remember, s/he suddenly chooses to accept that s/he may be forgotten and declares that it would be far better that the beloved forgot and was happy than remembered and was sad. At the same time, the assumed happy past of the lovers is perhaps shaken by the idea that the thoughts the speaker ‘once ... had’ should be forgotten because they were not entirely positive.

***More on the volta:*** A volta is a term that is used to describe the shift in ideas as a sonnet moves from the octave to the sestet. Often, the six line sestet presents an answer or a solution to the problem outlined in the eight line octave.

**Metre**

The traditional metre of a [sonnet](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sonnet) is [iambic](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic) [pentameter](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter). Used here, the regularity of the iambic beat reinforces the sense of control the speaker attempts to establish over the matter of death and the beloved’s reaction to this, something s/he suggests s/he has little control over. The inversion of the first foot in l. 2, 7 and 13 hints at the passion which is fighting for expression. However, the strict pentameter lines convey the enclosure and restraint of the speaker as s/he suggests that s/he has more to express but cannot find the appropriate words in which to do so.

The iamb is a rising foot and its consistent use emphasises the progressive movement of the speaker’s thoughts as s/he comes to a realisation that s/he may be forgotten. Throughout *Remember*, Rossetti combines the repetition of words with the effect of the metre to highlight several important movements. For instance, whereas the pronoun ‘I’ is stressed twice in the octave (lines 1, 3), it remains unstressed in the sestet and the word ‘had’ is stressed in its place, highlighting the passing of a particular identity (line 12).

**Rhyme**

The [rhyme](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme) scheme of the [octave](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/octave) consists of two enclosed [quatrains](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/quatrains): abba, abba. The enclosure of the rhyme scheme reflects the retention of a person’s ‘thoughts’ that the speaker describes as existing in the memory of the beloved.

The rhyme scheme of the [sestet](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/sestet) runs cddece. By beginning with a cdd rhyme and then breaking into a different pattern, it emphases the shift of the speaker’s thoughts. The disruption of the expected pattern may also hint at the intrusion of uncomfortable ‘thoughts’ of the speaker (proceeding from a ‘dark’ place), the memory of which would sadden the beloved.

By joining ‘had’ and ‘sad’ (lines 12, 14), Rossetti structurally highlights the disjunction between remembering and forgetting.

## Imagery and symbolism

**The hand** - The speaker anticipates a time when her lover will no longer be able to ‘hold’ her ‘by the hand’ (line 3). The image of holding hands is one which is employed throughout the poetry of Rossetti’s brother, Dante Gabriel, and is often used to indicate the first manifestations of love between a man and woman. By using the image of hand-holding in *Remember*, Rossetti suggests a kind of possession. By indicating that her lover will no longer be able to hold her by the hand the speaker suggests that he will no longer have any part in her or be able to possess her in the same way as he was perhaps used to.

**Darkness and corruption** - The speaker foresees a time when, once the ‘darkness and corruption’ that are associated with grief and death leave the beloved, only a ‘vestige’ or trace of the speaker’s presence will remain. S/he does not specify what constitutes this ‘darkness and corruption’ but it may refer to the speaker’s physical state after death – ‘corruption’ was a term often used in the [Bible](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Bible) to refer to the physical decay of death as well as moral decline (see [Acts 13:36-37](http://m.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Christina-Rossetti/28/1853#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_1&fireFunction=initTranslations), [Isaiah 38:17](http://m.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Christina-Rossetti/28/1853#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_2&fireFunction=initTranslations)), whilst ‘darkness’ was associated with [hell](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/hell)([Matthew 8:12](http://m.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Christina-Rossetti/28/1853#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_3&fireFunction=initTranslations)). In that sense, there is a cloud cast over the ‘vestige of ... thoughts’.

The word ‘vestige’ indicates something (often material) which remains after the destruction or disappearance of the main portion of something. By applying the word to the memory of the speaker’s thoughts in the mind of the beloved, the word is given a more abstract meaning. Thoughts and feelings will remain even after the speaker’s presence is in ‘darkness’ or no longer visible.

**The ‘silent land’ (l. 2)** - The speaker anticipates entering the ‘silent land’ which s/he perceives to be ‘far away’ from life on earth. As well as indicating physical distance, the phrase ‘far away’ is also suggestive of quite obvious differences. It is hinted that the land to which the speaker looks forward to going, is very different from the land the beloved is used to inhabiting.

The idea of silence can suggest both positive and negative associations:

* Rest, sleep and tranquillity. The final book of the [New Testament](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/New-Testament), [Revelation](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/bible-books/Revelation), describes [heaven](http://m.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/heaven) as a place of rest for all who enter ([Revelation 14:13](http://m.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Christina-Rossetti/28/1853#TB_inline?height=400&width=500&inlineId=tt_4&fireFunction=initTranslations))
* Absence of life and communication. It is a place where there can be no more intimacy, talking of future dreams or holding hands.

**Analysis**

Christina Rossetti was known for her contrasting themes of love and death that she put in most of her poems: “Remember” exception. From the first line, you can see Rossetti’s conflict between love and death and she continues to battle with it throughout the entire poem. She continues to switch back and forth line after line, for example “silent land” to “hold me by the hand”. Rossetti’s life followed a similar pattern: falling in live with Charles Cayley, calling off their engagement, and publishing Goblin Market and Other Poems, which was her greatest collection of work. The struggle between the good times and the bad in “Remember” could almost be a mirror image of the events of her life. [(Source 4)](http://www.guideto.com/education-1/arts-literature/poetry/remember-by-christina-rossetti-a-poets-love-affair/)

In the poem, she is clearly talking to a loved one saying that no matter what happens, whether it is death or separation, she wants the loved one to remember her. This poem was written during the period in which Rossetti was in love with Cayley, and it seems as if she is trying to tell him to always be prepared for the worse. “Remember” appears to be a pessimistic poem because Rossetti is acting as if she will die any day. She gives the impression that the end is near when in reality, she doesn’t die for another 32 years. [(Source 5)](http://www.enotes.com/remember)

The octave of the poem is set up with the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA, but it is also set up because it has a sort of demanding tone. Three times throughout the first 8 lines, Rossetti says, “Remember me,” in what feels like a commanding manner as if she wants her legacy to live on through the ones she loves. Rossetti points out all the things they won’t be able to do when she is gone, and how awful it will be without her.

The first line of the poem is the most paradoxical line throughout the piece. As said before, Rossetti combines the elements of love and death into much of her poetic works. Here she is imploring that the lover always hold her close to his heart. It also begs the question, in 1862 when the poem is written, does she know that eventually she will call off her engagement to Charles Cayley? It makes one think that in a way she is both preparing for her death or for their separation.

“The silent land” could possibly allude to a religious land such as heaven, hell or purgatory. Because Rossetti was so close to her mother, who was very religious, some of that may have rubbed off on Rossetti and she decided to put it into her poem. Also the reference to “the silent land” cancels out the possibility that she is talking about a separation between her and he loved one. By talking about heaven or hell, she is most definitely referring to death.

 The next line reverts back to the love side of the poem when Rossetti says, “hold me by the hand.” This illustrates her passion for the loved one she is talking to in the poem, presumably Cayley. The switch back to love goes back to what was said earlier about being a mirror of her life: constant struggles intertwined with relentless frivolities.

 Often in society, people argue about the difference between the heart and the soul, but in line 4, Rossetti says that they are completely different, sometimes having opposite inclinations. “Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay,” conveys the message that the heart and the soul have opposite intentions here. The soul must turn to go and return to where it belongs whether that is heaven or hell. However, the heart knows where it belongs and that is to stay right along side the loved one. The heart does not want to leave this earthly world yet, nor does it want to leave its beloved behind. This could also be interpreted as, it is said that two hearts beat as one. So if one heart is leaving because it is dying then its other half is staying. The hearts don’t want to be separated, but they have been forced to by nature.

 “No more, day by day, you tell me of our future,” refers to the future she had planned with Cayley. At the time the poem is written they are in love and like people in love do, they talked about their future together and what they might have in store. But, obviously, if she dies then they can’t have a future together. She asks him to remember what they talked about and what they had planned. Although those plans will do him no good with her being dead, she wants him to think about how great it could have been, how much fun they would have had, and how much their love would have grown.

 Lines 7 and 8 seem to be transition lines. She still uses the command, “Remember me” in line 7 but right that, at the end of line 7 and in line 8, she says, “You understand it will be late to counsel then or pray.” It’s almost as if Rossetti is starting to get closer to her death as the poem progresses. She is starting to realize that she’s going to die and there is nothing that will stop that. Line 8 shows her acceptance of death. By accepting death, that opens her up to a whole new view of life. At the beginning of the poem, Rossetti bosses her loved one around and leaves final commands for him. But when she is finally staring death right in the face and she’s on the brink of death, she understands that’s not what it’s all about. Line 8 is a shift in the poem; it is the end of the octave and the beginning of the sestet.

 The sestet seems to shed some more light on the imploring octave. The sestet has a CDDECE rhyme scheme which explains the sestet in itself. The sestet shows that Rossetti had a change of heart from the octave; she has scratched the original idea and gone with a new approach (and a new rhyme scheme). Instead of bringing up everything they can’t do when she is gone, she talks about going on without her and how everything will be okay. In line 10, she says, “do not grieve,” this shows her change of heart. Instead of demanding that she be remembered, she is saying that she wants to be remembered, but if her loved one is busy, she will understand that. Rossetti explains in the sestet that in the octave she was so demanding because she knows that she loved him (Him being Charles Cayley) so much. She now realizes that it is better for him to continue enjoying life with her in the back of his mind (but not erased from it) than to live in sorrow and never experience the true beauty that life has to offer.

“Yet if you should forget me for a while and afterwards remember, do not grieve.” This shows that Rossetti has become aware that it isn’t important if they are constantly missing you and that they are continuous miserable without you. She acknowledges now that it is okay to for her loved one to be happy even if she is not there. Rossetti adds the “do not grieve” to sort of cover up the commanding tone that she used earlier. By adding that in, she is admitting that she was wrong earlier in the poem about being demanding. Rossetti is saying don’t worry about it, it’s going to happen and it will be perfectly fine when it does.

 Lines 10 and 11 are basically an apology from Rossetti to her loved one. She realizes that she was being demanding and that she wants to take back any, “vestige of the thoughts that I once had.” She even admits that they were brought about through “darkness and corruption” and now she knows better. The closer she gets to death, the more loving and the more kind she becomes. This reaffirms the point about love and death being intertwined throughout Rossetti’s poems. As the feeling of death grows closer in Rossetti, the feeling of love grows stronger. Rossetti shows that love and death feed and thrive off of each other. Everyone that is loved will die and everything that dies was loved. They go hand in hand and Rossetti shows that in this poem.

 By the end of the poem, Rossetti has done a complete 180 degree turn. The words, “forget and smile,” are compassionate, loving, and caring; they aren’t commanding, threatening, or demanding. She’s is telling her loved one that she wants him to be happy. It is better to move on and look back fondly on what happened and to remember the good times for what they were than to hold on to them, never letting go, and wishing that you could have it all back. She’s telling him that it’s okay to let go and to move on, but when he does remember it, it’s okay to smile too. She doesn’t want him to ruin all the love they had by being miserable because he can’t bring that back. She wants him to be happy and to move on to do bigger and better things, taking the joys and the good times of his past with him as opposed to letting them drag him down.

 This poem connects to the Return Stage of the hero journey because the hero, in this case Rossetti, is on the back nine and is headed home. Rossetti sees the end in sight, but she doesn’t celebrate it until the second half of the poem. In the first half she is still rough and rugged from the Road of Trials, but in the end she realizes that the end is near. Because she realized this, it makes her a true hero and that is her gift that she brings back into the world: to live your life to the fullest. Rossetti is saying that you can’t wait to death is breathing down your neck to start living, you have to start today.

“Remember” is a bitter sweet sonnet written by Christina Rossetti. Christina suffered from ill health throughout out her life and so it is not surprising that she should explore the theme of death. As a Christian, Rossetti believed in the afterlife and so this poem is poignant with a sense of hope that death is not the end.

In the first line, which is the theme of the whole poem the narrator asks to be remembered.

“Remember me when I am gone away,"

This line sounds like someone pleading. She wants recognition. At this point it could be a couple separating or someone who has to go on a journey. It is only when reading on to the second and third lines that suddenly the reader is aware that it is about dying. It is described as a “silent land”.

When Christina writes,

“When you can no more hold me by the hand,” (Line 3)

The reader is made aware that this is a physical separation. The lines that follow on then reveal separation through death. It is the loss of a loved one and about deals with missing the physical contact such as holding onto that person. This then leads onto the loneliness of death when you can’t share your dreams with a loved one anymore, indicated when the narrator says,

“Remember me when no more day by day

You tell me of our future that you planned:” (Lines 5 and 6)

Even the ordinary becomes important when a loved one dies such as chatting about day to day events. Christina explores the grieving process within “Remember” after the shock and sadness of someone dying then there is the stage where the one who has died isn’t thought of constantly. The sadness and pain is still there but it isn’t as acute when it is forgotten for a moment. Even then she has advice for the bereaved person when she tells them; “do not grieve” (line 10)

The grief process follows on to the pain of thinking about a loved one and feeling pain because of the memories it evokes and the loss of them. In this case the narrator’s advice is to forget about her because she doesn’t want the person to “remember and be sad,”

Beautifully written, packed with emotional content of love and loss it is a hopeful poem. It is the type of poem that brings comfort at funerals. Hearing the words aloud somehow makes even more meaningful.  In a nutshell the narrator is asking to be remembered but ironically if the remembrance of her brings sadness she would rather be forgotten.