
“LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS” (1885) BY CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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Rossetti, Christina, editor, Simon Humphries. *Christina Rossetti, Poems and Prose* (Oxford World's Classics), “Love Came Down at Christmas” (Kindle Locations 6927-6932). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.

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Britannica at “Christina Rossetti”¹ –

Christina Rossetti, in full **Christina Georgina Rossetti**, pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, (born Dec. 5, 1830, London, Eng. — died Dec. 29, 1894, London), one of the most important of English women poets both in range and quality. She excelled in works of fantasy, in poems for children, and in religious poetry.

Christina was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti and was the sister of the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Wikipedia –

¹ Bryson, J. "Christina Rossetti." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 1, 2021.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Christina-Rossetti>.

“Love Came Down at Christmas” is a Christmas poem by Christina Rossetti. It was first published without a title in *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* in 1885. It was later included in the collection *Verses* in 1893 under the title *Christmastide*.

The poem has been set to music as a Christmas carol by many composers including R O Morris, Harold Darke, Leo Sowerby, John Kelsall and John Rutter and is also sung to the traditional Irish melody "Garton". More recently, the poem was given a modern treatment by Christian band Jars of Clay on their 2007 album, *Christmas Songs*. American composer Jennifer Higdon set the text for solo soprano, harp and four-part chorus. A new setting by the British composer David J Loxley-Blount was performed in Southwark Cathedral on 8 December 2014 by the Financial Times Choir conducted by Paul Ayres. It was repeated by the Trafalgar Square Christmas Tree on 11 December 2014.

Performances: *The John Rutter Christmas Album* with Stephan Varcoe directing The Cambridge Singers; John Rutter directing the City of London Symphony (released 2002); Point of Grace, *A Christmas Story* (released 1999) – “When Love Came Down” (this is a Carol that takes from Rossetti only the line “When Love came down at Christmastide”); Jars of Clay, *Christmas Songs* (2007), “Love Came Down at Christmas” (this version arranged by Shawn Colvin and Doug Petty); Christmas Choir and the London Fox Choir, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* (released 2012) – “Love Came Down at Christmas”; Shawn Colvin, *Holiday Songs and Lullabies* (released 1998) – “Love Came Down at Christmas”.

SIBLINGS

From an article called “A Little Society” by Casey N. Cep, republished by the Poetry Foundation website. It is an article about literary siblings in English literature.

Unlike the Lambs and the Wordsworths, pairs of siblings in which the brother’s reputation far exceeded the sister’s, one Victorian family produced a daughter whose fame has outlasted that of her brother. **Christina Rossetti is considered one of the greatest Victorian poets, while her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti is remembered more for his status as sibling than painter or poet.**

Born to an accomplished poet and Dante scholar, Christina and her brother were the “two storms” in a family of four children whose other dyad was known as the “two calms.” **All four of the Rossetti children had accomplished careers as writers and critics, encouraged by a childhood filled with arts and letters. As teenagers, they played rounds of *bouts-rimés*, racing against one another to**

write sonnets with specified forms and rhymes; Christina was the youngest, but is said to have excelled most at the game.

While Dante Gabriel founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to surround himself with other artists, Christina found support from the Portfolio Society, a group of female poets. Despite their esteemed position in literary society, they remained each other's best critics. Exchanging letters almost daily for years, they critiqued one another's work, suggested new topics and themes, and helped to organize poems into volumes for publication.

THE POEM

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 384 CE:

For us and for our salvation
He came down from Heaven,
And by the Holy Spirit was incarnate

[τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν **κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν** καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου²]

of the Virgin Mary
And became a human being.

Love³ came down⁴ at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,

² J. N. D. Kelly, [*Early Christian Creeds*](#), Third Edition. (London; New York: Continuum, 2006), 297.

³ “**Love**” – This noun is repeated *ten times* within this poem, lest we miss that LOVE is her most important insight about Christmas, that we overlook that LOVE is what God meant and means.

⁴ “**came down**” – The geometry of the spiritual life: God is “up” and we are “down.” I continue to think that the reason for this comes from the impact on human beings of the night sky, during the endless ages before the dominating presence of electric lights at night in cities obscured the night sky. There is of course the account in Luke’s Gospel about the “angel hosts” – Luke 2:15 - When the angels went away from them **to heaven**, [New American Bible, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Lk 2:15.]

Love was born at Christmas⁵,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,⁶
Worship we our Jesus, -
But wherewith⁷ for sacred sign?

Love⁸ shall be our token⁹,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love the universal sign.

⁵ “**Love was born at Christmas**” – In one way, we could consider this an astonishing claim, because it suggests that LOVE had not existed before, or that (and I think this the more important point) it remained *hidden* from our view (as is a child in the womb). If we take Rossetti’s metaphor – “birth” – in this way, then we are asked to consider that the Old Testament was but the “womb” inside of which LOVE was gestating, awaiting “the fullness of Time”, God’s time, for LOVE to be “born”, to become perceivable and available to us in a “language” we could understand (not a theological virtue – Love – but a loving, breathing, divine Person become fully human).

⁶ “**Love Incarnate, Love Divine**” – This is her version of the Creed’s articulation of the “hypostatic union” – the two Natures unified in the one Person. On the one hand, she gives the name “Love” as that which “hypostatically” unifies the two Natures of Christ, instead of using the word “person.” Yet, by doing this poetically, she captures the “two ways” of loving: the human way and the divine way, which finally are unified in a single Person.

⁷ “**wherewith**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adverb “**wherewith**” – An interrogative adverb: “With what?”.

⁸ “**Love**” – the four-fold repetition at the beginning of each line of the closing stanza is powerful, and insistent. It is here that I guess at her imitation of Julian of Norwich (see my quotation of her above).

⁹ “**token**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**token**” – “Something that serves to indicate a fact, event, object, feeling, etc.; a sign, a symbol.” However, in Old English, a “token” means an “ensign”. And an “ensign” means: “A signal; a rallying or battle-cry, watchword. Chiefly *Scottish*. *Obsolete*.”

JULIAN OF NORWICH

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., at “Julian of Norwich” -

Julian of Norwich (c. 1342 – after 1416), English spiritual writer. Little is known of her life, except that by 1394 she was an * anchoress, prob. at St Julian’s church, Norwich. Acc. to her own account, in May 1373 she received a revelation, consisting of 15 ‘showings’ (and one more ‘showing’ the day after). Her book, commonly known in modern times as *Showings* or *Revelation(s) of Divine Love*, survives in two recensions. The first draft (the **Short Text**) was prob. written soon after 1373, but it was not until 1393 at the earliest that she completed the **Long Text**, in which she expounds an original and competent theological vision of life, on the basis of the revelation and her reflections upon it.¹⁰

Julian at the end of the Long Text of her *Showings* writes:

This book is begun by God’s gift and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as I see it. For charity, let us all join with God’s working in prayer, thanking, trusting, rejoicing, for so will our good Lord be entreated, by the understanding which I took in all his own intention, and in the sweet words where he says most happily³⁹⁷: I am the foundation of your beseeching. For truly I saw and understood in our Lord’s meaning that he revealed it because he wants to have it better known than it is. In which knowledge he wants to give us grace to love him and to cleave to him, for he beholds his heavenly treasure with so great love on earth that he will give us more light³⁹⁸ and solace in heavenly joy, by drawing our hearts from the sorrow and the darkness which we are in.

And from the time that it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? **Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to**

¹⁰ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., [*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*](#) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 916.

³⁹⁷ See p. 157.

³⁹⁸ ‘With so great ... more light’ from SS; P, C omit.

you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love³⁹⁹. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.¹¹

RACHEL MANN

Rachel Mann. *In the Bleak Midwinter: Advent and Christmas with Christina Rossetti* (pp. 128-129). Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.

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One way of approaching this poem's lyric effects is to consider how Rossetti disobeys contemporary poetic conventions. *Contemporary Poetry 101* instructs the beginning poet to avoid abstract nouns. The emphasis is always on forming concrete images in specific settings. By contrast, Rossetti makes 'Love' the frame on which to hold this poem. To do so may leave readers – especially those who find themselves on the margins of faith – asking, 'Whose love?', 'What kind of love?', yet Rossetti more than gets away with her abstraction. The concrete context is provided by another word that for some is equally as nebulous as 'love': 'Christmas'. 'Love came down at Christmas' is simultaneously strange, abstract, yet utterly grounded in the particularities of good poetry: it leaves its readers in the company of Christ. (128-129)

The idea that love might 'descend' or 'come down' from heaven is one to conjure with. It immediately implies that before this incarnational moment, there was an impairment, a lack. Love was, in some sense, absent or less present. The construction invites the reader to re-interrogate the texts of the Tanakh/Old Testament for the traces of God's love and its limits; this, I hope, will lead to a variety of conclusions – not simply that the world was so broken before Christ that it was almost of secondary value. **The paradox of Christianity is that we say, with the writer of John's Gospel, that the Word was**

³⁹⁹ 'What did ... Love' from SS; P, C omit.

¹¹ Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 342.

from the beginning; in the incarnation, however, we see the fulfilment of the Law of Love, its utterly human face made present. If 'Love was born at Christmas' – a phrase that should arrest us with its bold claim, as Rossetti's speaker indicates – at the same time 'Worship we the Godhead'. (129)

As humans, we are caught between what the body can teach us and what symbol reveals, for we are creatures of both flesh and language. In Christ – a body, a particular person called Jesus – **we find our specific, definitive guide into the shape of love.** In Jesus Christ, love is **no longer nebulous or abstract.** We meet love in the gurgle and cry of a baby, but also in the facts of a baby's incapacity and vulnerability. We must change his 'nappy', we must hold him to our breast and feed him. (129)