

WINTER: MY SECRET

TEACHING NOTES

CONTEXTUAL:

First published in Goblin Market and Other Poems – a non-devotional collection published in 1862 – Rossetti's first public collection.

NARRATIVE:

A speaker to an unknown listener, explaining why she won't be telling her secret – if there is even a secret to tell.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE:

Winter: My Secret.

Given that Rossetti doesn't really do excellent titles (often) her choice is interesting; it implies it's something intriguing, to be explored – developing the theme of curiosity immediately. (Dinah Roe)

Winter: connotations of cold, depression – a refusal to warm up.

Colon: indicates relationship “my secret” is an elaboration on the “winter” – which isn't enough on its own to stand as the title. Pauses are inherently dramatic, making us wait for what follows.

My secret: creates curiosity and intrigue; anyone hearing of a secret wants to know what it is! “My” also indicates a speaker who is the subject of the poem – intimate and personal. BUT will we be allowed to get close? Not really; “my secret” only suggests there is one, but it's a false sense of intimacy.

The original title in manuscript was *Nonsense*. Is this an indication that there is in fact no secret at all? Is the poem more about the art of secret-keeping and illusion?

Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry:

“Throughout the poem, the existence of the secret remains ambiguous and its content uncertain. Indeed, in the manuscript version of the poem, an empty space serves as a placeholder for the very word “secret”: “Only my < > mine...” Even while the poem holds forth on the secret, it therefore withholds it as well.”

STANZA ONE:

**¹I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,
And you're too curious: fie!
⁵You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell. –**

Speaking to an unseen listener (who becomes more insistent as the poem continues). Playful and questioning tone established by the repeated rhetorical questions.

Intention clear on line one – she **will not** tell her secret; yet we continue to read (like the listener) certain that she will, eventually, give up her information to us.

But not today – her intent is clear from the outset.

Winter: connotations of cold, harsh, distant and unloved. A perfect time for concealment, and trial. The snow is potentially destructive – it will come and freeze her to death if she'll let it so she needs to protect herself against it.

“You're too curious: fie!” → theme of curiosity is frequent (In *Goblin Market*, it's Laura's downfall); links to the religious undertones – the curiosity of mankind losing them the Garden. The aggressive “fie!” could be read as defensive; is her listener becoming too insistent on her giving up her secret? Are we actually witnessing a sexual encounter here, or at least an attempt at one?

The caesura on line 5 -Well:/only my secret's mine” implies a teasing hesitation as though for a moment she's considering it; the beginning of what Dinah Roe terms the “verbal striptease” going on throughout the poem.

Constant personal pronouns – “my”/ ”mine”/ ”I” – indicate her possessive nature over her secret; she will not share with anyone. Creates a sense of personal identity; the secret is hers and hers alone.

STANZA TWO:

**Or, after all, perhaps there's none:
Suppose there is no secret after all,
But only just my fun.
¹⁰Today's a nipping day, a biting day;
In which one wants a shawl,
A veil, a cloak, and other wraps:
I cannot ope to everyone who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling thro' my hall;
¹⁵Come bounding and surrounding me,
Come buffeting, astounding me,
Nipping and clipping thro' my wraps and all.
I wear my mask for warmth: who ever shows
His nose to Russian snows
²⁰To be pecked at by every wind that blows?
You would not peck? I thank you for good will,
Believe, but leave the truth untested still.**

Another layer of intrigue: perhaps there is no secret at all – yet still we stay and hope she'll give it up. The “fun” highlights the teasing tone of the poem.

Begins to be more under attack; language of cold gets more aggressive “nipping”, “biting”.

Clothing → lends weight to the speaker being a female (“veil”, “shawl”) but more importantly has a hiding function; she can wrap herself in multiple layers and hide herself and her secret away. The “mask for warmth” is comforting to her – sometimes having a secret makes you feel special, loved, comforted and special. The clothing's almost theatrical; why does she shroud herself in so much of it?

Dolores Rosenblum's 'Christina Rossetti: the Poetry of Endurance' (1988):
“more importantly, the speaker, the owner of the “mask” asserts her right to speak her own thoughts.”

Metaphor of the door: “I cannot ope to everyone” → sense of her vulnerability; once the secret is out, it is gone and may as well be everyone's. It will cease to give her warmth and protection – she'll be vulnerable to “draughts” and “Russian snows”. The metaphor of the door being opened to a knocker – echoes throughout Rossetti's poetry but the door is usually being opened rather than held fast shut.

Gerunds in second half – bounding, surrounding, buffeting, astounding, nipping, clipping, - create startling sense of immediacy, the vibrant urgency of the present tense. Is the listener becoming more insistent?

“Peck” is more vicious as well; a sign of the listener's impatience? Could also be sexual undertones (although again on the more unpleasant, painful side). Eating often features as a form of attack or punishment; here through pecking, nipping,

biting (contrast with *Goblin Market*?) However, are these verbs also indications of sexual playfulness?

Final three lines – listener rebuffs her. The rhetorical question seems to be an echo of their unheard response to her concerns; she thanks but insists she still does not trust his (?) good intentions and will not put them to the test.

STANZA THREE:

**Spring's an expansive time: yet I don't trust
March with its peck of dust,
²⁵Nor April with its rainbow-crowned brief showers,
Nor even May, whose flowers
One frost may wither thro' the sunless hours.**

Changing of the seasons – the relatively short stanza here implying her lack of trust and belief; she doesn't think they are as reliable as winter. Spring is “expansive” which has connotations of bombast, even arrogance – it literally means “frank and communicative” – the opposite of her wintry secret. Traditionally associated with birth and renewal; but she presents it as fleeting and untrustworthy. Are the spring flowers symbolic of the revealed secret – too quickly destroyed?

The speaker is untrusting, here using the changeability of the season as an excuse. March has the “peck of dust” – “peck now a noun, a flurry of unexpected snow. April has “brief” showers and the rainbow-crown, subverting the usual optimism of the rainbow into something more duplicitous. May is still susceptible to flower-killing frosts. Only winter remains reliable, solid, and expected.

STANZA FOUR

**Perhaps some languid summer day,
When drowsy birds sing less and less,
³⁰And golden fruit is ripening to excess,
If there's not too much sun nor too much cloud,
And the warm wind is neither still nor loud,
Perhaps my secret I may say,
Or you may guess.**

The conditional “perhaps” implies a sense of doubt here – but still maintains the tantalizing prospect of possibility. Summer is the opposite to the harshness of winter; languid, drowsy, but excessive – and therefore also not to be trusted. The sun, cloud and wind are too unreliable to be trusted with her secrets. Perhaps only when the listener has lost interest in the secret will she reveal it.

Rossetti often associates birds with divinity, inspiration and joy (similar to Keats in that regard)

The reference to eating – “golden fruit” but it ripens “to excess”, becoming spoiled and uneatable.

Repetition of “perhaps” towards the end adds to the playful tone. The final line is both tantalizing and infuriating; the final refusal to give up her secret – but we knew from the beginning she wouldn't – and the invitation to guess (as if she would say if the listener were right!)

The lack of closure is significant; Rossetti's poems often unsettle because of their internal contradictions and challenges – here she refuses to suggest a resolution. The open-ended, ambiguous nature of language itself suggests that there is a potential for a new, disorienting, world view - often the reader is delivered back to their world and the uncertainties of the new refuted. With a lack of closure, attention is drawn to the distance between the conventional and the new.

Anthony Harrison (Victorianweb): “Closure, however, very often embodies a literal resignation of the rebelliousness of language, themes, and characterization within the works, a giving over of the potential evoked in the poems for destabilizing the conventional world (of language, social expectations, literary conventions) in which the poems are usually set.”

THEMES:

- **Curiosity** – and its dangers
- **Seasons** (trust in winter, fickle nature of spring)
- **Religion?** Interpretations suggest the voice is god, the secret is linked with Eden
- **Gender** – is this an attempt to solicit sex by the listener and the “secret” is virginity?
- **Sexuality**
- **Secrets** (is the refusal to divulge the secret frustrating or enticing?)
- **The poetic voice**
- **The nature of art** –is the secret of key of art itself; that a piece of artwork always has a secret behind it (the ideas of its creator) but that a listener/audience needs to accept they will never truly understand it?)
- **Relationship between speaker/listener (reader)**
- **Moral lessons?**
- **Uncertainty / lack of resolutions**
- **Social roles and expectations**

WHAT IS THE SECRET? INTERPRETATIONS INCLUDE:

- Unrequited love (vulnerability)
- Pregnancy – using the shawl to conceal
- Feminine mystique – a mystery in the winter before she is married, springtime engagement and summer marriage (link Victorian values of conduct)
- No secret at all
- The power of art itself – always holding something back and not allowing the reader/audience to know everything; they have to simply accept and not be endlessly curious
- Emma Mason (critic): The speaker is God himself. (but this was a non-devotional collection)
- Heaven – is the speaker at the gate?
- Sexual abuse (Jan Marsh NB there is very little hard evidence for this claim, made by Marsh in her autobiography)

FORM AND STRUCTURE:

tone: ambiguous, playful and challenging. Coy and teasing, addressing an unseen listener.

RHYTHM: Scansion (the metrical character of a line) is elusive and evasive; difficult to pin down. Rossetti uses a range of iambic pentameter, trimeter and tetrameter; the iambic meter adds to the rhyme, as the stressed iamb always falls on the rhyming word.

RHYME: Use of rhyming couplets and triplets increases pace and adds to the playful nature; the pace increases as she answers more vehemently to the listener's unheard questioning/responses. Ruskin accused Rossetti of violating the common ear of meter (referring to *Goblin Market*) but she is always "violating with intent" (Roe).

Second stanza rhymes "as if they are being blown about by the wind they describe" (Dinah Roe). Second stanza is loaded with simple monosyllabic masculine rhymes; listeners try to identify the scheme, what should come next -but they're unable to follow and keep up, noting only once it has been revealed, and never able to predict.

Dinah Roe calls the entire poem a "verbal striptease": if she were to "ope" herself to all it would potentially be very dangerous. She reveals gradually, teasingly – and then uses the final provocative "guess".

Line 28 picks up stanza 2's abandoned f-rhyme (also "day") – a brief hint towards resolution, but remains unfulfilled.

The expression 'no rhyme or reason' comes to mind, but of course there is reason, or, as William Michael Rossetti puts it in his note about this poem's original title: 'If there is method in some madness, there may be nous in some nonsense'.

Nous (British: /'naʊs/; US: /'nu:s/), sometimes equated to intellect or intelligence, is a philosophical term for the faculty of the human mind which is described in classical philosophy as necessary for understanding what is true or real.

POSSIBLE PRACTICE QUESTIONS:

Discuss Rossetti's presentation of relationships in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss Rossetti's use of religious influences in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss the use of nature in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss Rossetti's creation of an imaginary persona in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss Rossetti's attitude to sexuality in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss Rossetti's representation of the seasons in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss the ways in which Rossetti present the covert and the overt in Winter: My Secret.

Explore the ways Rossetti explores the nature of art in Winter: My Secret

Discuss Rossetti's attitude towards women in Winter: My Secret

Discuss Rossetti's portrayal of secrets in Winter: My Secret

Discuss the ways in which people hide from one another in Winter: My Secret.

Discuss Rossetti's portrayal of her speaker's defensiveness in Winter: My Secret.

In your answer, explore the writer's use of language, imagery and verse form, and consider the ways in which you find the poem characteristic of Rossetti's work in your selection,

FEMINIST INTERPRETATION:

Simon Avery, British Library: "Behind this playfulness, however, is an intriguing study in the manipulation of power. For the speaker denies entry to the reader and instead metaphorically wraps herself in protective clothing which will keep others out. Her privacy is not to be intruded upon and she consequently leaves the reader guessing at her knowledge....This therefore becomes an intriguing poem about what is not said, where the speaker skillfully withholds power and control. The game is hers and she will only 'tell' when and if she chooses.

In poems such as these, then, Rossetti's speakers demonstrate both an awareness of, and resistance to, those social and political expectations which define acceptable roles for women and which potentially leave them powerless. While poems such as 'From the Antique' and 'In an Artist's Studio' emphasise the ways in which women might be trapped by convention, other poems such as 'Maude Clare', 'No, Thank You, John', and 'Winter: My Secret' reveal a much more complex negotiation of power which enables the women to achieve agency, equality and self-sufficiency. As such, Rossetti's poems make an intriguing contribution to those crucial debates around the Woman Question and gender relations which were central to the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond.

<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/christina-rossetti-gender-and-power#sthash.xeZy1lzx.dpuf>

WHICH IMAGE WOULD BE A MORE APPROPRIATE ILLUSTRATION AND WHY?

IMAGE A



Winter by Alphonse Mucha (1896) (Style: Art Nouveau)

IMAGE B



The Roseleaf by Dante Rossetti (1870) (Style: Pre-Raphaelite)

OR

Further reading:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_W_0K3fA9g

http://www.dinahroe.com/blog/winter_my_secret_analysis_part_1