

REMEMBER
Christina Rossetti

Remember me when I am gone'

Gone far away into the silent land;

When you can no more hold me by the hand,

Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

Remember me when no more day by day

5

You tell me of our future that you planned:

Only remember me; understand

It will be late to counsel then or pray.

Yet if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

10

For if the darkness and corruption leave

A vestige of the thought that once I had,

Better by far you should forget and smile

Than you should remember and be sad.

Background notes of poet

Christina Rossetti was born in London in 1830. Her work covers a wide range of styles and forms, and she wrote ballads, sonnets, love lyrics, nonsense rhymes and children's books. She died in 1894.

Being remembered after death—it's just what makes the speaker of "Remember" tick. She keeps telling her beloved to remember her, because she's clearly somebody who is really thinking a lot about death.

This poem was written in the middle of the nineteenth century. People died much more suddenly, and much more frequently, than nowadays. Another reason may be because this speaker has a few hang ups. The speaker can be seen as realistic.

She's definitely a very caring person. The whole "remember me remember me remember me" might seem a tad selfish but, by the end of the poem, the speaker shows us how selfless she actually is. In the poem's final lines, she essentially says "On second thought, it's actually better if you forget about me, because remembering me will only cause you sadness." - the ultimate gesture of selflessness.

Title:

"Remember" - one word that summarizes the poem's major theme: remembrance. This is a poem spoken by a woman who is thinking about her death and wants to make sure that her beloved never forgets her. She's obsessed with making sure her beloved doesn't forget her. It's almost like she's worried that he might do exactly that.

It is a command, an order. The fact that an imperative introduces the poem, and that keeps popping up, confirms that the speaker is worried that her beloved will forget her, and is overcompensating.

Theme

"Remember" is an elegiac **poem**, focusing on the **themes** of death, remembrance, relinquishment, and forgiveness. The speaker is **Rossetti** pondering her impending death and releasing her lover from the responsibility of enshrining her in his memory because she fears it will cause him pain.

Tone:

- At first the speaker is distraught as she wants to be remembered, but from the volta the tone begins to change and the speaker's tone indicates that she has thoroughly confronted her feelings and fears about not being remembered, and came to the conclusion that forgetting is both necessary and good.
- In lines 13 – 14 a reconciliatory and comforting tone is used. The speaker is at peace with her impending death and separation from the physical world.
- The two contrasting ideas 'forget and smile' and 'remember and be sad' help to reinforce the tone of acceptance. The speaker wants her lover to live a fulfilled life and not be melancholic when he remembers her.

Content

- The poem could be interpreted as the speaker addressing a loved one directly, seen in the use of “you” (line 3) and “our” (line 6), in the form of a letter to be read after her death.
- The speaker focuses on memories of moments of their time spent together, revealing her concern that she wants to be remembered. This is highlighted by the repetition of the word “remember” throughout the poem.
- The couple anticipated that they would share a future together, but this was not to be. The speaker succumbed to some disease or “corruption” (line 11) that eventually led to her death. Neither prayers nor “counsel” (line 8) could change the outcome.
- The tone and focus shift over the course of the poem, signified by the word “yet” (line 9 - VOLTA). Where the first part of the poem looks back and clings to memories, the second part seeks to find a way to move forward.
- The speaker seems to be giving her partner permission to let go of the memories and his sorrow in order to “smile” (line 13) and live positively after her passing. She demonstrates the selfless depth of her love, as she is able to suppress the human need to be remembered so that her beloved has a chance at a happy life after her death, unburdened by guilt.

Form and structure

- ✓ Rossetti uses the form of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet to convey her message. The first two quatrains of this sonnet start with the word “remember” (lines 1 and 5), and the tone is mournful.
- ✓ The *c-d-d-e-c-e* rhyme scheme used in the sestet of lines 9-14 establishes a break from the octave. This break is also seen in the tone (now accepting / content) and content of the poem.
- ✓ Rossetti uses the octave to address memories and remembering, while the sestet focuses on the process of forgetting and moving forward.

Poetic / language devices

- ❖ Rossetti uses euphemism to discuss difficult subject matter: Death becomes “gone away” (line 1), while the afterlife is expressed as “the silent land” (line 2).
- ❖ The simple imagery of the physical linking of hands in line 3, as well as the speaker’s reluctance to be separated, underlines the strong connection between the speaker and her beloved.
- ❖ Notice that despite the use of words with negative connotations in the sestet, for example “grieve” (line 10), “darkness” and “corruption” (line 11), Rossetti establishes a lingering mood of positive acceptance. What might have been a depressing poem with sad content becomes a poem that ultimately celebrates life.

Sound devices

- The long syllables used in the opening lines force a slow, mournful reading of the sonnet. This is contrasted by the pace of lines 9 and 13, for example, which is more “upbeat” and positive.
- If we had to describe the sound of "Remember" in two words, those two words would be "commanding" and "consoling."

Symbol Analysis

It's only natural that a poem about death would have something to say about going away forever. The speaker seems to be saying something about going away, leaving, or not being around anymore.

Lines 1-2:

- In the first two lines the speaker says "gone away" and "gone far away."
- Clearly this is a metaphor for death.
- The speaker never really says she will be gone forever, so the metaphor makes death seem less permanent.
- The simple words she uses to describe death shows how she is trying to express in an uncomplicated way something that is impossible to fully understand.

Line 3:

- Holding hands **symbolizes** physical presence and life—the very things that death eliminates.

Line 4:

- The speaker notes how she used to half turn to go, but also half stay. While just a narration of a past event, this little snippet is practically a metaphor for the speaker's feelings about death as well.
- This image signifies the speaker's suspended state ► a state of limbo
- She knows that she is going to die, yet she tries to prolong her life for as long as possible.
- For her death is merely a half turn away
- BUT her innate strength/ determination enable her to turn toward life in order to remain with her beloved for as long as she can.

Lines 5-8:

- Again, the speaker talks about death without talking about death.
- When she talks about not being around to hear her beloved tell him about his plans for the future, it isn't because they've broken up.

Lines 11-12:

- "Darkness and corruption"
* 'darkness' suggests death and the unknown. It conveys her

fear of death and the sense of foreboding of the desolation and despair that her passing might bring. * 'corruption' refers to the dreadful physical effects of illness which may alter the body after death; it also refers to the decay of the body after death. The speaker is concerned that witnessing the harsh physical manifestations of the illness will leave a sad memory of what she used to be. This might lead to a distorted image of her that would bring pain to her loved one. It is for this reason that she eventually says that he must rather forget her.

- The word "vestige" is key, as it refers to something left over after the speaker has gone away.
- Here, it is more or less a symbol of life, or of anything that defies death.
- "Remember" has something to do with memory.
- The speaker of this poem tells her beloved no less than three times to remember her.
- In a poem where death is a total separation, remembrance becomes a way of keeping somebody metaphorically alive.
- The words 'darkness' and corruption have negative connotations and refers only to the physical side of death ► death and decay of the body.

Lines 1-2:

- "Remember me" is **juxtaposed** with "gone away," which suggests that remembrance may be a **metaphor** for life.

Lines 5-6:

- The speaker repeats the same command as line 1 ("remember me"), and memory again appears to be a metaphor for life.
- It comes across as an antidote or compensation for the fact that she and her beloved can no longer hold hands and discuss a future together.

Lines 7-8:

- The speaker says "remember me" (metaphor) . A small ambiguity is worth noting.
- The "only" in "only remember" me could mean either "I only ask that you remember me" or "the only thing you should do is remember me."

Lines 9-10:

LINE 9 holds the change – VOLTA – in this poem

- Forgetting is a big part of "Remember." The speaker is obsessed with being remembered, except towards the end, where she changes her mind.
- At first she's all "Well, I guess it's okay if you forget me, as long as you remember me later," but then she essentially says, "Actually it's better that you forget me."

- Remembrance is associated with sadness and pain, and the speaker doesn't want this for her lover. So, she decides that she will deal with being forgotten, as long as her lover will remain happy.
- The speaker starts to change her mind a little bit here in line 9, a crucial point in any sonnet that is sometimes called the turn..
- Forgetfulness here is a **metaphor** for death, in some ways. If the beloved doesn't remember the speaker, she will be totally and completely dead.
- The speaker's concern with 'self' is evident when she commands her beloved to remember her after she dies ► 'I' indicates self absorption
BUT in the **sestet** her focus shifts from her selfish need to be remembered to a concern for her beloved's happiness.
- The use of 'you' and the transitional 'Yet' reflects the change in attitude

Lines 13-14: Now she says it's better for her beloved to forget her because remembering her will cause him too much pain. This change of heart **symbolizes** the speaker's love, as she would rather sacrifice her memory, or rather metaphorically kill herself, than ask her lover to endure any pain.

Imagery

Two contrasting groups of imagery:

First group:

About death and the unknown quality of death which is only described in terms of silence and darkness.

- 'the silent land' (line 2) which is 'far away'
- 'the darkness and corruption' of death (line 11) which may/ may not allow any 'vestige' of her to remain (line 12)

Second group: Simple everyday experiences which express what someone might miss most about someone who has passed away.

- physical contact: 'hold me by the hand' (line 3)
- making decisions: 'half turn ... turning stay' (line 4)
- the discussions she had with her beloved: 'tell me ... you planned' (line 6)
- The comfort they could bring to each other: 'to counsel ... or pray' (line 8)

'Turning' image creates unity between the two ideas of life and death:

- Speaker describes in line 4 how she would sometimes begin to turn away from her loved one – to go – but then turn to stay with him, and then turn back again
- In contrast to the literal image of turning away, death can be seen as figurative 'turning-away' from life and the living.
- By remembering those who have passed on it could be a way of keeping them alive – allowing them to 'stay' in some way, whereas 'turning' might represent forgetting.

Vocabulary:

vestige - remnant

Questions:

1. Provide a different euphemism that Rossetti could have used in place of “gone away” (line 1).
 2. Which line of the poem shows that the couple expected to share many years of life together?
 3. What does “to counsel” (line 8) mean in the context of the poem?
 4. What can you infer about the character of the speaker’s beloved? Support your answer with evidence from the poem.
 5. Suggest how the form of the poem contributes to its content.
 6. Which of the following descriptions best fit the speaker: *egocentric*; *self-sacrificing*; *thoughtful*? Use evidence from the poem to motivate your choice.
 7. Rossetti was a deeply religious person. Can you tell just by looking at this poem? What parts of the poem support your answer?
 8. The speaker seems worried. Critically discuss this statement.
9. The speaker has commands in this poem (“remember,” “remember,” “remember,” “do not grieve”). Critically discuss the tone of these commands.