

HYMN INTERPRETATION

MARY KAY BEALL

"In the Bleak Midwinter"

When we consider the hymns that are associated with Advent and Christmas, we notice that there are many that seem to have become an integral part of the celebrations of these seasons in the church. However, the very best known hymns of Advent and Christmas have drifted over into a kind of sacred/secular netherworld. They have become so much a part of the secular celebration of the season that the actual meaning of the text may have become irrelevant. Then, of course, there are some Advent and/or Christmas songs that are sung only occasionally. It is interesting to wonder why certain songs of the season have such broad appeal and others go begging. I have chosen to take a closer look at one of those less visible Christmas hymns that may well deserve a bit of concentrated attention: "In the Bleak Midwinter."

The Text

The poet, Christina Rossetti (1830–1894), was gaining respect and recognition by the time she wrote this poem. "In the Bleak Midwinter" was written on request for the American magazine, *Scribner's Monthly*, and earned the writer what was considered at the time to be a generous advance of ten pounds.¹ It was published in January 1872 with the title "Christmas Carol."² The poem portrays a winter scene . . . icy, cold, and desolate. While we now realize that the birth of Christ happened in an altogether different climate and season, still there is in many of us the willingness to suspend reality in order to, at least for a time, envision a scene consistent with our December climate and our long-established Christmas celebration.

Christina Rossetti had a penchant for song-like use of words and irregularly rhymed lines³ and those characteristics are evident in this brief text. The metric scheme is categorized as "irregular." I wondered just how "irregular" it is and I found that the only consistency in the stanza meters is that the final line in each stanza has nine syllables.

Stanza 1	11.11.10.9
Stanza 2	12.13.12.9
Stanza 3	11.10.11.9
Stanza 4	9.11.11.9

Irregular meter in hymn texts seems to be a more common occurrence in recent years. Irregular meter can present a real challenge for the composer of a tune and makes it more difficult to interchange texts and tunes in hymns, as is a common practice in worship.

In the Bleak Midwinter

In the bleak mid-winter frosty wind made
moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak mid-winter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth
sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes
to reign:
in the bleak mid-winter a stable-place sufficed
the Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered
there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

Rossetti's later inclination toward the somber⁴ shows up in the scene she sets here, and I find myself noting that we do not often encounter words such as "moan," "iron," and "stone" in Advent and Christmas texts. These are not joyous, inviting, or celebratory words. Author Evelyn Bence noted that Rossetti used the image of the stone in another poem entitled, "A Better Resurrection," where she wrote "My heart within me like a stone is numbed too much for hopes or fears . . ." Bence believes that Rossetti's bleak setting highlights the universal truth that "Christ came to earth . . . for such a time as this: the blustery blizzards, the discontented winters."⁵ The repetition of the word "snow" in the first stanza . . . "snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow" seems to me to be a masterful illustration of word painting that captures the mesmerizing effect of a heavy snowfall. Rossetti's fascination with apocalyptic themes⁶ is evident in stanza two when she declares, "heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign." Stanza three opens with a grand panorama of angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, in startling contrast to the conclusion of

the stanza with the tender, intimate glimpse of Mary kissing her child. Suddenly in stanza four, the poem takes a new and very personal tone as Rossetti reflects on her own response to this wonderful event of Christ's birth. She asks herself what she can possibly offer to the child who she has declared to be "the Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ." She comes to the powerful conclusion that the best and only gift she has to offer is her heart.

This final stanza of the text has found its way into many poetry collections and often appears as a complete entity in itself, without the rest of the poem. I have sometimes wondered if Rossetti's verse might have provided a kernel of motivation for the popular Christmas Song "Little Drummer Boy" in which the lyric repeats again and again, "I have no gift to bring." In 1986, I wrote an original lyric for a Christmas anthem and I noted on the score that the text was directly inspired by Christina Rossetti's poem, "What Can I Give to Him?" Unfortunately, I did not realize at the time that this familiar verse was actually the final stanza of the hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter." My lyric was titled "When I Kneel at the Manger Tonight," and in it I expanded on Rossetti's question, "What can I give to him?" In the bridge, Rossetti's shepherd became a "shepherd boy" and her wise man became a "mighty king."

Christiana Rossetti was born in London, one of four children of Italian parents. Her family seems to have been blessed with abundant artistic gifts. All four children ultimately became writers and Christina's brother, Dante Gabriel, made his mark as a painter as well. Christina's mother, Frances Polidori, had served as a governess, and she chose to educate Christina at home. Both parents shared a love of poetry, and Christina was obviously influenced by the environment they provided. In addition, her Anglican mother's "devout evangelical bent" was likely the source of Christina's deep faith and influenced her toward sacred themes.⁷ There is some speculation that she inherited many of her literary gifts from her poet father, Gabriele Rossetti,⁸ who was Professor of Italian at King's College until he retired in 1845 with poor vision and failing health.

Rossetti wrote her first poetry in 1842 at the tender age of twelve and printed it on her grandfather's private printing press. In 1850, using the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, she submitted seven poems to a poetry journal published by her brother, William Michael, and his friends. Unfortunately the journal, *The Germ*, had a short life. (I have to wonder if the name of the journal may have contributed to its early demise.) Rossetti continued to write. She became more deeply religious and was strongly influenced by the Oxford Movement. She rejected two suitors for religious reasons and apparently never found a mate. With the exception of two brief trips abroad, she lived with her mother her entire life.⁹

When I Kneel at the Manger Tonight

What can I give to him, a heavenly King?
What can I give to him?
I have nothing to bring,
but I'll offer my heart
when I kneel at the manger tonight.

What can I give to him, to honor His birth?
What can I give to Him?
I have nothing of worth
but I'll offer my heart
when I kneel at the manger tonight.

If I were a shepherd boy, I would give him a lamb.
If I were a mighty king, I would give him a
golden ring.

But what can I give to him? I have nothing at all.
What can I give to him?
Would my gift be too small
if I offer my heart
when I kneel at the manger tonight.¹⁹

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Rossetti's favorite writing themes seem to be "unhappy love, death and premature resignation."¹⁰ She was especially interested in the works of Augustine, Thomas á Kempis, George Herbert, and John Donne. Her best-known work, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, was published in 1862 and established her as a significant voice in Victorian poetry. Today we consider Rossetti to be one of the most important of English women poets.¹¹

Rossetti began to have serious health issues early in life, and by the 1880s she had become an invalid, suffering from Graves' disease, a debilitating thyroid disorder.¹² In 1891, she developed cancer and died in London on December 29, 1894. Toward the end of her life, she was considered for the prestigious position of Poet Laureate as a successor to Alfred Tennyson, but her illness seems to have been a deciding factor and Alfred Austin was given the appointment that Rossetti may well have earned.¹³

Her brother, William Michael, edited her complete works in 1904. He described his sister's writing habits as "spontaneous," saying that she was often compelled by a sudden motivation in which her mind seemed to fill with thoughts, which she then wrote down almost as if she were taking dictation.¹⁴

The only other Rossetti poem that commonly appears in hymnals is "Love Came Down at Christmas." "In the Bleak Midwinter" is found in many hymn books today, among them:

Voices United (1996)
The Oxford Book of Carols (1964)
Hymnbook for Christian Worship (1976)
The Hymnal 1982
Carols for Today (1986, 1987)
The United Methodist Hymnal (1989)
Presbyterian Hymnal (1990)
We Celebrate, Volume II (1994)
The Covenant Hymnal (1996)
The Book of Praise (1997)
Common Praise (1998)
Hymns of Heritage and Hope (2001)
Worship and Rejoice (2001).

It is interesting that only in the *Oxford Book of Carols* do we find Rossetti's original third stanza inserted between stanzas two and three. It reads as follows:


Enough for him, whom cherubim worship night
and day,
A breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay.
Enough for him, whom angels fall down before,
the ox and ass and camel which adore.¹⁵

The Tune

The tune, CRANHAM, seems to be firmly wedded to Rossetti's text. It was composed by Gustav Holst (1874-1934) specifically for "In the Bleak Midwinter," and the hymn made its first appearance in *The English Hymnal 1906*. The tune is named for Holst's birthplace, a village near Cheltenham. Gustav Holst was a prominent figure in twentieth-century English music and a colleague of Ralph Vaughan Williams. He was particularly interested in indigenous folk music and was anxious to find fresh avenues for musical expression. He taught music in several venues during his life: the James Allen Girls' School, St. Paul's Girls' School, the Morley College for Working Men and Women, and, during World War I, he performed for the troops in Asia Minor. In addition to hymn tunes and arrangements, Holst composed five operas, several instrumental suites, choral hymns, both vocal and instrumental chamber music, folk song settings and a large work for chorus and orchestra entitled, "Hymn of Jesus."¹⁶

When Christina Rossetti wrote "In the bleak midwinter" she was already a writer "of whom good work was expected."¹⁷ As I have previously noted, the content is somewhat unusual for a Christmas hymn. Fred D. Gealy said of the text:

"In the bleak midwinter" is not a prayer; it is not a "song with praise to God"; . . . it is a proclamation, a declaration, a witness to the amazing mystery of what the church when it spoke Latin called "incarnation," the Word becoming flesh, God becoming man, yet so that God remains God and man remains man.¹⁸

Rossetti's brother, Michael, wrote of his sister that "she was resolute in setting a demarcation line between poets and versifiers, unable to see 'any good reason why one who is not a poet should write in meter.'"¹⁹ It seems to me that perhaps we should take this qualifier to heart. In today's music for worship, there is an obvious overabundance of material that has very little to say that is original or thought provoking and that is, at best, theologically weak or even suspect. When we look at the work of the finer poets of the past, we would do well, I think, to place a higher standard on the texts that are currently being published and sung for worship. Poets like Christina Rossetti still have something to say that is worth saying and worth singing. There are certainly fine poets writing today for the church, but it is a struggle to hear their voices in the madness of the popular culture and its ever-increasing hunger for what is new, trendy, and instantly gratifying. 

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Notes

¹Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1994), 399.

²Carlton Young, Ed., "In the Bleak Midwinter" *The Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 431.

³_____, "Christina (Georgina) Rossetti" from the Internet site *Books and Writers* @ kirjasto.sci.fi/rossetti.htm., 2.

⁴*Books and Writers*, 1.

⁵Evelyn Bence, "In the Bleak Midwinter" *Spiritual Moments with the Great Hymns* (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997), 43.

⁶*Books and Writers*, 2.

⁷*Books and Writers*, 1.

⁸Glen Everett, "Christina Rossetti" from the Internet site *Poetsecr.org*, 1.

⁹*Books and Writers*, *Ibid*.

¹⁰*Ibid*.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²Marsh, 398.

¹³*Books and Writers*, 2.

¹⁴*Ibid*.

¹⁵Pearcy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, Martin Shaw, "Midwinter" *The Oxford Book of Carols* (London, England: Oxford University Press), 398.

¹⁶Carlton Young, Ed. "Gustav Holst" *The Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 770-771.

¹⁷Marsh, 399.

¹⁸Young, 431.

¹⁹Marsh, 538.