

## Analysis

[Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel"](#) might be intimidating at first to the modern reader. "[The Blessed Damozel](#)" is quite different from contemporary poetry in its form, its vocabulary, and its intentions. It's important to note that the way that things are said is equally important as what is said in a poetic work like this one. When tackling a poem like this, keep a dictionary handy, and don't fret if you don't understand it right away. In particular, the Oxford English Dictionary can be very helpful, because it contains a timeline that tells you what certain terms meant at the time that the poem was composed. You can also refer to the Glossary section of this guide for a definition of all of the most difficult terms in this poem. Finally, as the scholar D.M.R. Bentley notes in "'The Blessed Damozel': A Young Man's Fantasy," the language that Rossetti used in this poem was antiquated even when he was writing it in the mid-nineteenth century—no one was still using language like "ungirt" and "Herseemed" back then, either.

Rossetti gives us bold depictions of Heaven in this poem, and the speaker traverses grand expanses of space. In that sense, Rossetti is asking readers to make an act of faith and suspend their disbelief while they read this poem. In other words, it's not going to be the easiest read if you try to take it literally. Starting with the larger ideas at play will help us to unfold the meaning of the individual lines and phrases in all their complexity.

The most important thing to remember about "The Blessed Damozel" is that, in a sense, there are actually three speakers in this poem. The first speaker can be seen as a floating persona who can see everything that the damozel does in Heaven and everything her lover does on Earth. We can see this speaker from the very first line as he witnesses the damozel lean out from Heaven. The second "speaker" is the damozel herself, who takes Stanzas XII-XIV and XVIII-XXIII to state her own desperate wishes for her lover to join her in Heaven. We know when the damozel is speaking because her sections are marked off by quotation marks. Finally, the third "speaker" in this poem is the damozel's lover on Earth. His pleas to be reunited with the damozel are set off by parentheses (see, for example, Stanza IV).

The main speaker of "The Blessed Damozel" is an omniscient and sympathetic narrator who can traverse huge expanses of space and time to see both the damozel and her aching lover. The speaker's job is to present a "picture" of the damozel for the reader and to imagine the words and feelings of the damozel and her lover. The damozel and her lover, each of whom get an opportunity to speak for themselves in this work, are haunted and self-conscious. They are overcome by longing for each other. The damozel and her lover seem connected to each other, which torments them even more in their distance from each other. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker sees the damozel smile and hears her sobs, as if they were on the same plane of reality.

Over the years, less-than-careful scholars have conjectured that either the speaker or the lover in this poem stands for Rossetti himself. Readers have thought this because Rossetti himself lost his wife, Lizzie, to suicide in 1862, when Rossetti was 34 years old. Rossetti first published "The Blessed Damozel," however, in 1850, nearly 12 years before Lizzie's death. However, as D.M.R. Bentley points out, "The Blessed Damozel" was revised twice after its original publication date, in 1870 and 1873. This means that any changes Rossetti made over the

years might have been influenced by the death of this beloved wife. Bentley keeps these dates in mind when writing his essay—"The initial question in dealing with 'The Blessed Damozel' thus comes to the fore: in this 'young man's fantasy,' is it possible to differentiate fully and finally between the narrator and the author?" This question perhaps will never have a real answer, but it isn't hard to imagine the personal connection that Rossetti would have found in this work in the years after his wife's death.

The title of "The Blessed Damozel" introduces us to one of the major tensions that will be at play throughout the poem: that of religion and sensuality. The title only contains three words: a definite article ("the"), an adjective ("Blessed"), and a noun ("Damozel"). The word "blessed" immediately conjures associations of Christianity, Heaven, and the Bible—Jesus famously says "blessed are the meek," for example, in Matthew 5:5. "Damozel," on the other hand, brings up associations of antiquity, even for the readers that would have been Rossetti's contemporaries. "Damozel" is a kind of reading of the word's Early Middle English and Old French forms, *dameisele* and *demoiselle*, respectively. In other words, "damozel" is merely an old way of saying "damsel," but it carries some older, more ornate associations. A "damsel" is generally an unmarried and virgin woman, originally one of noble or gentle birth. Thus, the title itself plays with different associations: "blessed" conforms to "saintly" while "damsel" conforms to something more like "virgin." This becomes complicated in a poem that is about two young lovers—and that is so focused on the body.

The first two stanzas of "The Blessed Damozel" introduce us to the main character of the poem and give us insight into her physical beauty. The speaker's first impulse upon seeing the damozel is to compare her to the natural world, but even the natural world can't hold a candle to her: "Her eyes were deeper than the depth / Of waters still'd at even" (3-4). In these first few lines of the poem, the reader sees the damozel as if encountering her in a painting. In a way, these first two stanzas function as a still-life within the framework of the poem: they offer the reader the chance to get a first impression of this character before we get started on the rest of the poem. It should be noted that the detail that we are given in these first two stanzas is more *emblematic* than *sensual*. In other words, the speaker is not interested in the damozel's appearance because he is in love with her; instead, the speaker wants to emphasize the damozel's physical beauty and utter holiness at this moment. These first two stanzas set the tone for the rest of the poem. The deepness (as well as the imagined deep blue color) of the damozel's eyes evokes a melancholic mood.

The beginning of "The Blessed Damozel" also introduces us to themes that we will see throughout the poem. The fact that the damozel is leaning on gold in the opening scene, for example, reflects her high stature and holiness throughout the poem. Additionally, the fact that she is leaning on a "gold bar" underscores how stuck she is in Heaven without her lover with her. This is also emphasized that we get an impression of the damozel's outward appearance before being able to see her character in this work. As her physical body is trapped on the page and described in excellent detail, her heart and mind are on Earth with her lover. At this point in the poem, the damozel is meant to embody beauty within the female figure. She is a saintly and magical figure.

You might have noticed that it is hard to pin down where exactly the setting is throughout the poem. There is an overall lack of concreteness when it comes to descriptions of landscapes or locations, which keeps the reader slightly distanced and confused throughout the poem. Jerome

McGann notes in “Dante Gabriel Rossetti and The Betrayal of Truth” that the places in “The Blessed Damozel” contain an “ambiguous condition” as they flit in and out of “abstract space.” He writes, “the scenes in the poem appear to float in a kind of abstraction, outside space and time.” For Bentley in “‘The Blessed Damozel’: A Young Man’s Fantasy,” Rossetti made the conscious choice to abstract the physical world in this poem as a way to enact a leap of faith with the reader: “In effect, [the speaker] forces the reader-spectator to relinquish the demand for a fixed point-of-view from which to perceive the external world and asks him to accept (by the willing suspension of disbelief that is the artistic equivalent to an act of faith) a medieval-Catholic awareness in which Heaven and Earth are simultaneously knowable, spiritual and flesh are identified, and so on.” In a sense, the question of where we are in “The Blessed Damozel” is answered by a sort of paradox: we are in a deeply personal space, yet it is abstract.

The lack of concreteness when it comes to setting is also due to the fact that the concept of “Heaven,” as presented in the Christian Bible, is remarkably abstract. “The Blessed Damozel” gives us clues into Rossetti’s conception of Heaven, which may be different from the imaginings of other artists. In Rossetti’s Heaven, there is a connection of Earth that seems both extremely distant and intimately close: to the damozel, the Earth looks like an anxious bug, but in the final stanza, her lover can hear her tears. Rossetti’s idea of Heaven refuses to be pinned down; there are even multiple descriptions of what surrounds it—first the damozel leans against a “gold bar” (2), then a “rampart” (25), and “golden barriers” (142). What we do know is that “The Blessed Damozel” contains a *huge* scope: we are both inside the Earth and so far away that the Earth looks like a little bug, the damozel can barely see the sun, and yet, the speaker seems to be able to see everything from Heaven to Earth.

Along with the ambiguous descriptions of Heaven, the way that time passes in Rossetti’s Heaven is open for interpretation. The speaker gives us the impression early on that time passes differently in Heaven and Earth: for the damozel, it seems like she has only been in Heaven for a day: “Herseem’d she scarce had been a day / One of God’s choristers” (13-4). On the other hand, the damozel’s family feels like she’s been gone for ten years (18), and for her lover, it has felt like “ten years of years” (19). These discrepancies in time imply that in a sense, the damozel is separate from the passage of time—time has slowed down for her as she spends a never-ending day waiting for her lover to arrive. However, by the middle of the poem, the reader’s understanding of the passage of time in Heaven is complicated even further. It seems that damozel has in fact been in Heaven longer than a day, because she has had time to see the “tides of day and night,” ebb and flow (33). Similarly, the damozel can see the physical effect that time has on the cosmos: “She saw / Time like a pulse shake fierce / through all the worlds” (49-51). In the end, it is up to the reader to take a leap of faith about the damozel’s setting and the way that time passes in this poem. Rossetti wants to place his Heaven beyond normal human understanding, and into a realm all its own.

The speaker’s depictions of time in “The Blessed Damozel” indicate the overall melancholic, sad, and lamenting mood of the poem. The first thing that we see the damozel do is “lean out” from Heaven—the fact that she is pulling away from what, in the world of the poem, is constituted as Paradise speaks to her emotional desperation in these lines. The damozel’s primary concern is a union with an unattainable man. She is in an impossible situation. She cannot enjoy Heaven until he arrives, but he may never arrive. The final stanza cements this mood and the reader takes it with them after they’re done reading the poem: we hear the

damozel's sobs, and they are echoed by her desperate lover. Janna Knittel writes about this final moment in "Knocking at Paradise: Christina Rossetti Rewrites 'The Blessed Damozel'": "Rather than being free in heaven, released from a world of pain and suffering, [the damozel] is, instead, trapped (as the 'golden barriers' suggest), unable to feel the joys of heaven without her lover there." Ultimately, the mood of "The Blessed Damozel" is meant to leave the reader questioning: is the damozel in Hell instead of Heaven? Is she more miserable than she ever was on Earth? Will her torment ever end? Will she never reunite with her love?

There are several instances of metaphor and simile that help build out the world of this work. Rossetti employs metaphor and simile to bring Heaven closer to the reader by comparing elements of Heaven and the damozel to things that the reader has actually seen. For example, the damozel sees the moon from her high up place and the speaker describes it in terms that we can visualize: "the curl'd moon / Was like a little feather" (55-6). In a similar vein, the damozel's hair is described in terms of a vegetable we have all seen: "Her hair that lay along her back / Was yellow like ripe corn." To see a more detailed list of all the metaphors and similes in "The Blessed Damozel," refer to the "Literary Elements" section of this guide. Finally, the speaker masterfully uses simile and personification near the middle of the poem to show the damozel's internal state at this moment: "And the lilies lay as if asleep / Along her bended arm" (47-8).

Like figures of speech that help to aid comprehension and build a bigger picture, Rossetti uses punctuation in several significant ways in "The Blessed Damozel." The most interesting use of punctuation is to separate the lover's words from the rest of the poem. The lover's words are sporadically placed throughout the poem and are separated by parentheses so that the reader knows someone else is talking. Separating specific stanzas with parentheses to indicate a different speaker is a revolutionary use of punctuation. It allows Rossetti to introduce a complex network of points of view and voices that traverse immense distances in space and time. D.M.R. Bentley focuses on the parentheses in "'The Blessed Damozel': A Young Man's Fantasy." According to Bentley, the parentheses do two things: isolate the earth-bound lover in a topographical stage, and present the thoughts of the lover as separate from, yet accessible to, the speaker. Bentley also brings up the use of punctuation in the final stanza to separate the lover's voice from the speaker's: "The barriers of this final stanza achieve special force when compared with the 'golden bar' across which the damozel leans out at the beginning and middle of the poem." Along with the parentheses, the punctuation in "The Blessed Damozel" plays a huge role in narrative understanding, rhythm, and sound. Rossetti's punctuation emphasizes the iambic meter and aids in reading comprehension when the line breaks do not match up to traditional sentence breaks.

Rossetti kept a careful eye on form when composing "The Blessed Damozel." The fact that Rossetti made the choice to write a sonnet marries the main themes of the poem to its form. There is a very specific rhyme scheme at work in these lines: the 2nd, 4th, and 6th lines of each stanza rhyme (ABCBDB) according to vowel sound, spelling similarity, "eye rhyme," or consonant sound. These rhymes are the sonic engine of the poem, as the poem beats along through these moments. Most of the lines in "The Blessed Damozel" contain 7-9 syllables. For example, line 55 has eight syllables: "The sun was gone now; the curl'd moon." The meter generally conforms to iambic tetrameter, which means that there are usually 8 beats and that every other syllable is stressed (the first syllable is un-stressed). "Iambic" meter is called so

because it supposedly sounds like footsteps: bum-bum-bum-bum-bum-bum, and so on. For example, line 3 could be metrically scanned like this: “Her eyes were deeper than the depth.”

“The Blessed Damozel” is full of important symbolism that the reader might not catch onto right away. Scholars throughout the years have traced countless archetypal resonances and threads throughout “The Blessed Damozel,” which emphasizes the Christian and spiritual foreground of the poem. For example, the three lilies in the damozel’s hand symbolize the Holy Trinity, purity, and the nearness of the triune God. The florals on the damozel’s cloak are emblematic of the damozel’s innocence. The seven stars in the damozel’s hair potentially come from Revelation 1:16, “in his right hand he held seven stars,” and Amos 5:8, “Seek him that taketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is his name.” Other scholars have wondered if the seven stars in the damozel’s hair are a reference to the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione in Greek Mythology. According to mythology, after they died, they became stars in heavens. The word “blessed” evokes saintliness and affinity with the Virgin. The blue from the damozel’s eyes is a color associated with the Virgin. The damozel’s unadorned robe is indicative of her purity. Her yellow hair accords with traditional representations of the Virgin. Finally, the white rose is a reference to Dante’s Empyrean (Rossetti was a huge Dante fan throughout his literary career).

There is a lot of beautiful descriptive language in “The Blessed Damozel” that helps to build out Heaven and create a romantic atmosphere. For example, the damozel breathlessly imagines everywhere she will take her lover when he finally makes it to Heaven with her. She breathlessly imagines their time together: “We two will lie i’ the shadow of / That living mystic tree / Within whose secret growth the Dove / Is sometimes felt to be, / While every leaf that His plumes touch / Saith His Name audibly” (85-90). In this moment, the damozel is equally as concerned with lying down with her lover in Heaven and having a physical connection with him as she is in enjoying the spiritual experience. In this sense, the descriptive language underscores the tension between sensuality and spirituality—the damozel seems to hold the urges for both of these states equally in her mind. The descriptive language both builds out the beautiful setting of this poem and also acts as a sounding board for the psychological problems that the damozel is dealing with.

Several scholars have focused on the question of sensuality in “The Blessed Damozel”—is this poem about religion or is it about the body? Lise Rodgers in “The Book and the Flower: Rationality and Sensuality in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Jenny;’” notes that the sensuality in “The Blessed Damozel” is much tamer than other Rossettian sensualities: “Rossetti’s works generally deal with sensuality in one of two different ways: as a spiritual, sacred, and idealized experience, or as fleshly and evil—an inescapable horror of the human condition. The first kind of sensuality is probably best known in Rossetti’s early poem, ‘The Blessed Damozel.’” Similarly, Janna Knittel, in “Knocking at Paradise: Christina Rossetti Rewrites ‘The Blessed Damozel,’” notes that Rossetti’s poem explores the relationship between the sacred and the sensual. She makes the observation that the poem relies on the presence of physical bodies to describe otherworldly concerns—for example, the damozel wants to lie with her lover under the Tree of Life in order to enjoy it: “Though being together in Heaven suggests a purely spiritual reunion—and the speaker infuses this scene with spirituality by making the Holy Spirit (in the form of the omnipresent Dove) witness to this reunion—the speaker desires and imagines a bodily reunion as well.” The

tears at the end of the poem, Knittel writes, return the poem's emphasis to the body in its final moments.

Throughout the years, "The Blessed Damozel" has been lauded as an emblematic poem of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In general, the poems written by the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were interested in beautiful language and they employed many different poetic forms, including the sonnet, salad, and dramatic monologue. The Pre-Raphaelites were enthusiastic about enjoying literature and visual arts together, and many of its members wrote as well as created visual art. There are certain other characteristics of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that have been traced by scholars throughout the years. Dr. Gita Rajan has noted in "The Woman Question and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" that many of the women depicted in Pre-Raphaelite art "are either pausing on the threshold of life—but denied pleasure, or on the threshold of sexual awakening, or even denied justice by the classical gods." In this way, the damozel from "The Blessed Damozel" is a typical example of the other women found in Pre-Raphaelite poetry: trapped, melancholy, and unable to escape a seemingly perfect situation.

Finally, in terms of Rossetti's involvement with the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, it might be interesting to note Rossetti's intention in writing this poem. The Pre-Raphaelites believed that art can be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap between Heaven and Earth. "The Blessed Damozel," as well, attempts to bridge this gap through the relationship of the damozel and her lover. The speaker connects the damozel, Heaven, the lover, and Earth through his observations and is able to traverse huge distances to do so. Bentley notes that the figurative language of the poem itself helps to close the gap between Heaven and Earth: "As if to diminish the distance between Heaven and Earth, as well as to emphasize the physicality of the Damozel, the recipient includes two comparisons with things in nature in the poem: the Damozel's eyes ... and her hair." It is also worth noting that Rossetti used this poem as a kind of literary experiment early in his career. Bentley spells out all of the Gothic elements that Rossetti used in "The Blessed Damozel," including the title, the stanza form of the poem, the archaic diction of the poem, the archaic characters, and the archaic physical objects. Janna Knittel also notes in "Knocking at Paradise" that Rossetti also pulled from the Italian tradition when writing this poem: "Dante Rossetti bases his poem on a convention widely used in many of the poems he translated for *Early Italian Poets* (1861). In the Italian tradition, a woman who is absent from the male speaker, either by distance or by death, is praised with the same intensity and language as would be used to describe deities and saints."