

the course), but we want to show you the *process* we think you should go through. You should then be able to apply this process to the poems you will be studying in class.

Starting the commentary: what should you do first?

We would advise you to follow the six-stage process outlined on page 39. Here it is again:

- 1 Read the text and the guiding questions.
- 2 Identify your two or three big themes.
- 3 Mark up the points that you will use to develop and analyse your themes.
- 4 Sequence your points so that you are clear about the order in which you will talk about them.
- 5 Make sure that you have clear notes.
- 6 Practise.

So the first thing you need to do is read the poem, carefully, a couple of times.

Text 2.1 *I wish I could remember that first day*, Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti (1830–94) was an English poet and the sister of the famous artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She was born in London and began writing as a very young girl. Many readers have identified feminist themes in her poetry.

I wish I could remember that first day,
First hour, first moment of your meeting me,
If bright or dim the season, it might be
Summer or Winter for aught I can say;

- 5 So unrecorded did it slip away,
So blind was I to see and to foresee,
So dull to mark the budding of my tree
That would not blossom yet for many a May.
If only I could recollect it, such

- 10 A day of days! I let it come and go
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;
It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;
If only now I could recall that touch,
First touch of hand in hand – Did one but know!

Guiding questions

- 1 What are Rossetti's main thematic concerns in this poem?
- 2 How does Rossetti use language and structure in interesting ways?

The first question asks about 'thematic concerns'; it's basically saying: what are the big themes? You might start thinking about starting points and memory and history. When you look at a poem in the real commentary, you should remember having discussed things like this when you studied the poem in class.

The second question asks about language and structure. It is likely that if you had looked at the poem previously in class you would have noticed that it was a **sonnet** (it has 14 lines and a particular **rhyme scheme**); in terms of language, you might have looked particularly at metaphorical language and at repetition.

So, in very broad terms, your themes might be:

- The relationship between memory and history and the way the poem explores starting points.
- The use of the sonnet form, metaphor and repetition.

Having reminded yourself of these thoughts, you should now go back to the poem and mark up some of the aspects you will want to discuss in your commentary. Here is an example of how you could mark up the poem:

I wish I¹ could remember² that first day,
First hour, first³ moment of your⁴ meeting me,
If bright or dim the season, it might be
Summer or Winter for aught I can say;⁵
So unrecorded⁶ did it slip away,
So blind was I to see and to foresee,
So⁷ dull to mark the budding of my tree⁸
That would not blossom⁹ yet for many a May.
If¹⁰ only I could recollect it, such
A day of days!¹¹ I let it come and go
As traceless as¹² a thaw of bygone snow;
It seemed to mean so little,¹³ meant so much;
If only now I could recall that touch,
First touch of hand in hand¹⁴ – Did one but know!¹⁵

- 1 Repetition of the **first person pronoun** in the first three words – makes the reader think about the **narrator**.
- 2 Introduces theme of memory and history.
- 3 Another interesting repetition.
- 4 Introduces a second character.

- 5 Note the rhyme scheme in the first **quatrain** (4 lines).
- 6 Interesting word?
- 7 Repeated three times.
- 8 Is this a metaphor?
- 9 Continuation of the metaphor? Why?
- 10 Repetition of 'If' throughout the poem. Why?

- 11 Further repetition for effect?
- 12 An interesting simile?
- 13 Is this an important **caesura** (break in the line)?
- 14 Double repetition.
- 15 Interesting conclusion to the poem.

The next thing you need to do is sequence your ideas. This might take the form of brief notes. Look, for instance, at how you might sequence the second big thematic point (structure and language):

- Sonnet form
 - Normal expectations of sonnet form
 - Division of this poem into two quatrains and six lines with the rhyme scheme cddcd
 - What happens in each of these sections and how that is important
- Metaphor
 - Use of the metaphor of a tree on line 7
 - The metaphor extended into line 7
 - The effect of the simile in line 11

Key terms



First person pronoun The pronoun 'I' or 'we'.

Narrator The person (character) telling the story.

Quatrain Four lines of poetry.

Caesura A break or pause in a line of poetry.



Figure 2.5 Christina Rossetti (1830–94).



Key terms

Sonnet A structured, poetic form of usually 14 lines; there are many different forms of sonnet, with the Petrarchan and Shakespearean being the most common.

Rhyme scheme The pattern of rhyme in a poem, for example ABBA.

Repetition

- o Repetition of the first person pronoun at the start
- o Repetition of 'so' in the second quatrain
- o Double repetition in the last two lines

This gives you a clear plan and a structure for your commentary in the form of brief notes which you might write by the side of the text in your planning time. In the last few minutes of your preparation time, you will need to make sure that you can use your notes effectively. You will need to work through each point and think about how you are going to be analytical and talk about *how* and *why* the poet makes the decisions she does.

If you have any time left, you should use it to run through some of the points you are going to make. For instance, you might be keen to make sure you are particularly analytical when talking about metaphor under your second big theme. Think about how you might do this; here is an extract from a student sample commentary. This is the section on the use of metaphor in this poem.

One of the techniques Rossetti uses in this poem is metaphorical language. In lines 7 and 8 she uses a metaphor to describe her experience as being like a tree beginning to grow. She tells us that she failed to notice its original 'budding' (the very beginning of the relationship) because it 'would not blossom yet for many a May'. This metaphor from nature suggests that she sees her relationship as something natural and beautiful; however, it also reinforces her point about small beginnings. She contrasts the bud (small and almost unnoticeable) with the 'blossom' (which is visible to everyone). She underlines this point by using a simile in line 11 when she describes the day of the first meeting as if it were 'As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow'. The simile is drawing attention to how the meeting is 'traceless' in her memory. It does this effectively by asking us to think of a landscape where snow has melted and to try to find the snow there. Like her memory, it is lost.

You might also want to think carefully about exactly how you will start your commentary. It might be helpful to write a few notes so that you are confident about the first words you will say. Here is an example of how one student started her commentary on this poem:

This poem by Christina Rossetti is a sonnet. In it she explores how difficult it is to remember exactly when something – in this case a relationship – actually starts. In my commentary, I want to answer the guiding questions and in doing so want to look at two themes. In the first instance I will talk about the way Rossetti presents the relationship between memory and history and look at how the poem explores starting points. My second point will look at structure and language. I will explore Rossetti's use of the sonnet form and how she uses metaphor and repetition effectively in this poem.