

RELIGION AND ART

Dante Rossetti Poems Inspired by Paintings



Planet Art

National Gallery, London

John the Baptist seeks the blessing of his cousin Jesus. In a nearly identical version of this painting in the Louvre, Paris, the angel next to the infant Jesus points to the Baptist child, who is not pictured with the cross.

For

OUR LADY OF THE ROCKS

BY LEONARDO DA VINCI

*Mother, is this the darkness of the end,
The Shadow of Death? and is that outer
sea*

*Infinite imminent Eternity?
And does the death-pang by man's seed
sustained*

*In Time's each instant cause thy face to
bend*

*Its silent prayer upon the Son, while He
Blesses the dead with His hand silently
To His long day which hours no more
offend?*

*Mother of Grace, the pass is difficult,
Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered
souls*

*Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering
through.*

*Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice
extols,*

*Whose peace abides in the dark avenue
Amid the bitterness of things occult.*

—Dante Gabriel Rossetti



The Trustees, Tate Museum, London

MARY'S GIRLHOOD
(For a Picture[†])

I

II

This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
 God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
 Dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee.
 Unto God's will she brought devout respect,
 Profound simplicity of intellect,
 And supreme patience. From her mother's knee
 Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
 Strong in grave peace; in pity circumspect.

So held she through her girlhood; as it were
 An angel-watered lily, that near God
 Grows and is quiet. Till, one dawn at home
 She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
 At all—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed
 Because the fullness of the time was come.‡

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
 I' the center is the Tripoint: perfect each,
 Except the second of its points, to teach
 That Christ is not yet born. The books—whose head
 Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said—
 Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
 Therefore on them the lily standeth, which
 Is Innocence, being interpreted.

The seven-thorn'd briar and the palm seven-leaved
 Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
 Until the end be full, the Holy One
 Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
 Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
 Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.

† Rosetti's first Pre-Raphaelite painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49), shows an adolescent Mary working at a piece of embroidery and surrounded by devices that prefigure her fate. The angel clasps a lily, a symbol of purity, which is to be presented at the Annunciation. The dove on the trellis represents the Holy Ghost through whom she shall conceive. The lamp stands for piety, the vine bears the grape whose wine symbolizes the Redeemer's blood and the sacrament of the Eucharist.
 ‡ The last four lines of this sonnet are the subject of Rosetti's second painting, *The Annunciation*, in London's National Gallery.



Oil on panel, Hans Memling (1435-1493), National Gallery, London

The Virgin and Child with Saints (The Donne Triptych)†

FOR
A VIRGIN AND CHILD
BY HANS MEMMELINCK
(In the Academy of Bruges)

FOR
A MARRIAGE OF ST. CATHERINE
BY THE SAME
(In the Hospital of St. John at Bruges)

Mystery: God, man's life, born into man
Of woman. There abideth on her brow
The ended pang of knowledge, the which now
Is calm assured. Since first her task began
She hath known all. What more of anguish than
Endurance oft hath lived through, the whole space
Through night till day, passed weak upon her face
While the heard lapse of darkness slowly ran?

Mystery: Catherine the bride of Christ.
She kneels, and on her hand the holy Child
Now sets the ring. Her life is hushed and mild,
Laid in God's knowledge ever unenticed
From God, and in the end thus fitly priced.
Awe, and the music that is near her, wrought
Of angels, have possessed her eyes in thought:
Her utter joy is hers, and hath sufficed.

All hath been told her touching her dear Son,
And all shall be accomplished. Where He sits,
Even now, a babe, He holds the symbol fruit
Perfect and chosen. Until God permits,
His soul's elect still have the absolute
Harsh nether darkness, and make painful moan.

There is a pause while Mary Virgin turns
The leaf, and reads. With eyes on the spread book,
That damsel at her knees reads after her.
John whom He loved, and John His harbinger,
Listen and watch. Whereon soe'er thou look,
The light is: starred in gems and the gold burns. ◻

† The painting shown above is neither of the two for which Dante Rossetti composed his two sonnets. Memling painted several versions of the Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine, including those in Bruges and one in the Louvre. With respect to symbolism, this National Gallery painting is a composite of the two poems. Saint Catherine is standing on the viewer's left proffering the hand that other pictures on this subject show being ringed to signify the mystic marriage of the soul to the Christ within. On the right, Saint Barbara's normal pose of reading scripture is assumed by the wife of the triptych's donor. Two angels bear musical instruments and one is holding "the symbol fruit." John the Beloved is on the right panel holding the cup of regeneration and John the Baptist ("harbinger") is on the left, he who first identified Jesus with the words, "Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Memling painted himself partially visible behind the pillar in this left wing.