

Christina Rossetti's use of characters in Babylon the Great and Maude Clare

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Explore the way in which Christina Rossetti creates character in *Babylon the Great* and one other poem.

Within Rossetti's poetry she uses character adeptly in order to represent ideas or symbols. *Babylon the Great* is a poem based on a passage of *Revelations 18: 8* where a queen of sin appears in her dreadful awe and Rossetti makes her character a temptress to communicate the ideas that the *Babylon* communicates in the bible. Another poem in which Rossetti creates a character is also *Maude Clare* where a jilted lover interrupts a wedding and through her defiance that her character is formed.

Firstly, the way in which character is used in *Babylon the Great* is created through the way she is described with powerful adjectives such as "foul" and "ill favoured" to show the reader that she is a character filled with evil intent but is deceiving people with a mask to "dream her fair" but in reality is a foul beast. Rossetti is creating a character that is powerful and can alter what is real or an illusion in order to manipulate her prey. *Babylon* appears to be a beautiful, lustful woman who will "mesh thee in her wanton hair" as man gives into the temptation of the flesh. This character is promiscuous but also predatory creating layers of character. On the surface there is the beautiful woman who "lusts not for love" in which seems appealing to any man and this is accentuated by the anaphora of "love, but thro and thro" which reels the reader in as the words roll off the tongue nicely a *Babylon* draws you in. In addition to this, Rossetti repeats the word "gaze" in order to make more tempting to look upon *Babylon* as if she is testing the resolve of the readers themselves. However beneath that façade is the "spotted panther" who has no "blood in her cup but filth is there" which could indicate an absence of

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Christ who is represented by red wine in the Holy Communion. This creates a character that is not with God but were riddled with “ plagues out of view” which could be a reference to the ongoing sexual transmitted disease crisis in the Victorian period but show the degradation of that society in a new light. Deep bible study has always been a concurrent activity in all of Rossetti’s life and towards the end of her life, she published *The Face of the Deep* which was an analytical study of the book of revelations. Through this study, she sprinkles the commentary with poetry such as *Babylon the Great* and *Our mothers*, lovey pitiful to represent different ideas communicated within Revelations. Through *Babylon* she exploring the sin of temptation and lust thus replacing love from Jesus and she characterises this further through clothing too. The “ scarlet vest, gold, and gem” show opulence and greed compared to the humble Christ figure, which appeared in the previous passage creating a juxtaposition of ideas.

Character is also used in *Maude Clare* to display the fallen woman. Both poems depict female characters in Victorian society would deem as outcasts or negative. *Maude Clare* has a very strong character that dominates the story to highlight the injustice of her fall. She is described with the simile “ like a Queen” which ascends her to the top of the social strata in the poem but also creates an image to the reader of a queen which connotes beauty and confidence. This is also suggested in her gait, which a “ lofty step with mien” was showing that image of confidence that befits the label of royalty. This is contrasted with Lord “ pale with strife” who was meant to be figure of the patriarchy but instead has his voice removed and has his mother and wife to stand up for him only emphasising Clare’s dominance. Rossetti also

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utilises speech to give her a voice and her grievances, which completes her building of character, and tell her side of the story. Her defiance is also bravery as it is a last resort for Maude as she is doomed to live a life a fallen woman because what she had perceived as love. A sense of betrayal is given to the reader when she describes the " day we waded ankle-deep for lilies in the beck" the flower imagery connoting purity and innocence suggesting she was a respectable woman who was simply in love. Contextually, romance in a Victorian woman's life was idealised as innocent and pure as sex was ideally left until after marriage a romance taken away from Maude Clare as the semantic field used of blooming nature such as " we plucked from budding bough" or the fact the " lilies are budding now" suggest at virginity being taken. Her tone of voice is clearly gives that sense of betrayal that it gives that sense of pathos to her character. Nell, in a sense, has taken her place and by the end of the poem finishes it is Nell who is victorious as despite Maude Clare being " taller by the head, more wise and much more fair" she is now married and in the eyes of a Victorian society successful. Perhaps Rossetti is exposing the hypocrisy of the society and this frustration is manifest in Maude Clare with her passing on a " paltry love" which essentially meant paying the high price of being a social outcast for a romance that in the end meant little.

In terms of structure, Babylon the Great is in Petrarchan sonnet form which creates character because originally these sonnet forms were used to describe graceful and respectful women which the women in this poem is not. The juxtaposition used will accentuate both the beautiful and horrific features of Babylon therefore creating a more vivid image to the reader of

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what this awesome creature was like. The form follows strictly to the ABBA rhyme structure in the octave with a volta to switch rhyme scheme in the sestet shows on the outside something can look appealing and normal but within could reveal a complete contrast. This is also reflected in the character of Babylon who may appear to those who gaze upon her, as a beautiful woman similarly a standard sonnet may seem enticing to the reader; it draws you in.

Maude Clare is a ballad with multiple voices so the form allows character to be created. Maude Clare makes an instant impact by changing the rhyme scheme from ABCB to ABAB. This creates character because it gives Maude Clare more flow and grace due to the increased rhyming pattern to accentuate the iambic pentameter that reflects class relative to her looks. This change in rhyme also exposes sudden disruption in the poem, which is what essentially Maude Clare is when she confronts her scorned lover. It reflects the abrasive side of Maude Clare's character and this is accentuated by the use of trochees on words such as "you" and "take" to reflect how emotionally hurt she is actually is. Furthermore in her last speech Rossetti uses a half rhyme of "love" and "thereof" to show this was a half love that was half formed adding that sense of futility to her downfall.

In conclusion, both poems create strong characters from two powerful female roles. Rossetti gives voice to women in a society where they little or virtually none. Rossetti dove deep into the bible throughout her life and novel *Face of the Deep* shows in which Babylon the great resides. Such knowledge was able to ferment a stronger character for Babylon, which was reflective in

both form and content. However, through Maude Clare we see a more social approach and the popular presentation of the fallen woman is questioned by Rossetti.