

A Study of Modal Auxiliary Verbs “Shall”/“Should” and “May”/“Might” in the Lyrics of Christina Rossetti

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Introduction

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), one of the well-known poets in the Victorian Era, composed various poems during her lifetime. Her poems consist of various genres such as songs, sonnets and religious verse, but it is especially her lyrics that are well-read down to the present day, and one of the characteristics of her lyrics is that there are various uses of modal auxiliary verbs with which the speaker of each lyric expresses her/his state of mind. The frequent use of modal auxiliary verbs gives her lyrics a sense of realism as to evoke the sympathy of the reader and the listener.

In studying the use of modal auxiliary verbs in the lyrics of Christina Rossetti, what is noteworthy is the frequent use of “shall,” and next follows another auxiliary verb “may” although the use is less frequent. While “shall” in her lyrics indicates certainties about something that is going to happen, “may” functions as expressing the judgement of the speaker. Adding both of these modal auxiliary verbs, subjunctive “should” or “might” are also noticeable indicating that her lyrics are sometimes more focused on the speakers’ speculations about things surrounding her/him.

The purpose of this paper is first to analyze modal auxiliary verbs “shall” and “may” as indicatives which depict the speaker’s state of mind, and then “should” and “might” will also be examined as subjunctives that reflect the ambiguous attitude of the speaker. In examining the lyrics of Christina Rossetti, the voice of the speaker “I” with which each lyric is sung is focused on. Therefore, the lyrics examined in this paper

should be the ones with the voice of the first person, so that each modal auxiliary verb will be analyzed as the voice of the speaker.

I. Modal Auxiliary Verbs and Lyrics

i. Modal Auxiliary Verbs “Shall” and “Should”

The modal auxiliary verbs in the lyrics of Christina Rossetti reflect the modality of the speaker. “Shall” is one of the modal auxiliary verbs frequently used in her lyrics. According to *the OED*, the modal auxiliary verb “shall” is “a command, promise or determination of the speaker”⁽¹⁾ and defined as follows:

“‘Shall’ has always been auxiliary used, . . .for prophetic or oracular announcement of the future, and for solemn assertions of the certainty of a future event.”⁽²⁾

What is mainly defined in *the OED* is that “shall” is used in expressing something that is determined and certain. This characteristic of “shall” is referred to in other dictionaries as well, and *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines “shall” as a modal auxiliary verb with which “[i]n the past, the future tense in English was formed, . . . in the first person[.]”⁽³⁾ as well as “with ‘I’ or ‘we’ to make a suggestion.”⁽⁴⁾ *Collins Cobuild: Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* (hereinafter referred to as *CCAD*) also states that “[y]ou use shall, usually with ‘I’ and ‘we’ when you are referring that you intend to do, or when you are referring to something that you are sure to happen in the future.”⁽⁵⁾ With subjunctive “should,” the speaker refers to “what would be the right thing to do or the right state for something to be in.”⁽⁶⁾ The characteristics of “shall” and “should” defined in these dictionaries are applied to the use of modal auxiliary verbs in the lyrics of Christina Rossetti as well, and while “shall” in her lyrics implies what is destined to be or indicates the powerful will of the speaker, “should” depicts the speaker’s judgement based on the belief of her/him.

ii. Modal Auxiliary Verbs “May” and “Might”

Whereas “shall” functions as a modal auxiliary verb which indicates

something determined, and “should” is used to express some judgement based on the belief of the speaker, another modal auxiliary verb “may” stands for anything related with the judgement of the speaker. *CCAD* explains that “[y]ou use may to indicate that something will possibly to happen or be true to the future, but you cannot be certain.”⁽⁷⁾ This definition is based on the judgmental characteristic of the modal “may,” and according to *the OED*, “the original meaning of this modal “may” is “[t]o be strong; to have power or influence,”⁽⁸⁾ and defined as “a verb of complete predication [.]”⁽⁹⁾ What is also emphasized in *the OED* is that “[m]ay’ shares with various other auxiliary vbs (sic) . . . the characteristic that the inflected past subjunctive retains its original functions,”⁽¹⁰⁾ and is followed by the explanation of the past form of “may” that “‘might’ is frequently used in a sense which differs from that of the present form not temporally but modally.”⁽¹¹⁾ As to the modal function of “might,” *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* explains that the modal auxiliary verb “might” is used “to express the possibility that something will happen or be done, or is true, although not very likely[.]”⁽¹²⁾ and also used “to make a suggestion or suggest a possibility in a polite way.”⁽¹³⁾

It is actually these modal auxiliary verbs used both as indicatives and subjunctives that characterize the lyrics of Christina Rossetti, so the following analysis of the use of modal auxiliary verbs in her lyrics is to be achieved in relation with the modality of the speaker.

iii. Lyrics and the Voice of the Speaker

Lyrics are one of the noteworthy genres of poetry in which Christina Rossetti was eager to engage during her lifetime. It is in her lyrics that her lyricism and poetic depiction are thoroughly shown. According to Phil Roberts, lyrics are explained as follows:

“The word derives from Greek, and means literally, ‘of the lyre’. The medieval lyric is a short rhyming poem, often about secular or sacred love. . . . Later ages, particularly the nineteenth century, extended the meaning of lyric to include

personal statements, or revelations of the poet's innermost feeling [.]”⁽¹⁴⁾

Jonathan Culler also states that the lyrics are a genre “where the narrator speaks in the first person”⁽¹⁵⁾ and “[t]he key question has been the relation between the act of the author who writes the poem and that of the speaker or ‘voice’ that speaks there.”⁽¹⁶⁾ What is emphasized is that “[t]he author does not speak the poem; to write it, the author imagines him or herself or another voice speaking it.”⁽¹⁷⁾ In the lyrics of Christina Rossetti, the voice of each lyric is not the voice of the poet herself, but a speaker whose voice reflects that of the poet or represents another person whose voice evokes the sympathetic feelings of the reader and the listener.

II. A Function of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in “From the Antique” and in “Song”

The lyrics of Christina Rossetti are often characterized with the depiction of the relation between the speaker and the natural world surrounding her/him. As to the poetic depiction of Christina Rossetti, Dinah Roe compares some common features of her poems to those of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood whose “natural world often reflected a speaker’s state of mind.”⁽¹⁸⁾ It is actually this reflective mood of the speaker expressed both with indicatives and subjunctives that is characteristic of the poems of Christina Rossetti, and what is also noticeable about her lyrics is that the imperative mood is sometimes used as the modality of the speaker as well. Therefore, the following study of the modal auxiliary verbs in her lyrics should be based on the modality of the speaker.

One of the well-known lyrics of Christina Rossetti, “From the Antique” (1852)⁽¹⁹⁾ is a lyric in which only “shall” is used as a modal auxiliary verb. The theme of this lyric is the afterlife the speaker thinks over or contemplates. The speaker continually addresses the listener referring to the world of death where there is no more love nor hate:

The wind *shall* lull us yet,
The flowers *shall* spring above us;
And those who hate forget,
And those forget who love us. (my italics, 1-4) ⁽²⁰⁾

While the speaker thinks that everything is destined to pass away, she/he also refers to the continuity of nature, which pervades and infiltrates the whole lyric. The continuity of the natural world is depicted with the modal auxiliary verb "shall" which implies the eternity of nature. The speaker is finally to be integrated with the natural surroundings such as the wind and the flowers:

The pulse of hope *shall* cease,
Of joy and of regretting:
We twain *shall* sleep in peace,
Forgotten and forgetting.

For us no sun *shall* rise,
Nor wind rejoice, nor river,
Where we with fast closed eyes
Shall sleep and sleep for ever. (my italics, 5-12)

While the end of life is referred to in the first and the second stanza, the third stanza indicates the eternity of afterlife as is depicted on the lines, "[w]here we with fast closed eyes / Shall sleep and sleep *for ever*." (my italics, 11-12) The phrase "for ever" strengthens the speaker's belief of the permanency of existence after she/he has passed away. Therefore, the themes of continuity of nature and the unavoidable death of everything coexist in this lyric, and the use of modal auxiliary verb "shall" functions as indicating both of these ideas about life and death.

Another lyric, "Song" (1848) is a lyric in which the speaker addresses "thou" when she/he is separated from the earth. In the first stanza, the speaker refers to the afterlife of her/him:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,

Nor shady cypress tree:
 Be the green grass above me
 With showers and dewdrops wet;
 And if thou *wilt*, remember,
 And if thou *wilt*, forget. (my italics, 1-8)

In this lyric, a modal auxiliary verb “wilt,” the old form of “will” is used to address “thou” who is considered to be the beloved or the very important person of the speaker. What is emphasized here is the will of the second person, so “wilt” rather indicates the speaker’s showing some respect for “thou” even after death separated them. By allowing “thou” to be free of remembering or forgetting her/him after death, the speaker insists that “thou” should be free from any restraint of keeping memory of her/him. By addressing “thou” with “wilt,” and referring to herself/himself with “shall” in the following stanzas, the speaker makes the contrast of “thou” who keeps on living and her/him who passes away. It is considered that the lyric is contrasted between the depiction of “thou” with her/his own will and the speaker whose afterlife is already determined.

In the second stanza, the speaker describes her/his afterlife with “shall” in detail. The place where she/he lies is the place which enables her/him of “dreaming through the twilight.” (13) Bound with the place where she/he does “not see the shadows” (9) nor “feel the rain[.]” (10) the speaker refers to the things waiting her/him after death. Whereas “shall” functions as an announcement of the destined circumstances that surround the speaker, the expectation awaiting her/him is related in the following stanzas. After relating the destined circumstances with “shall,” the speaker finishes the lines with the modal auxiliary verb “may”:

I *shall* not see the shadows,
 I *shall* not feel the rain;
 I *shall* not hear the nightingale
 Sing on as if in pain:
 And dreaming through the twilight
 That does not rise, nor set,

Haply I *may* remember,
And haply *may* forget. (my italics, 9-16)

Using "may" in the last two lines, the speaker reveals that she/he is speculating her/his own state of mind. The modal auxiliary verb "may" implies the speaker's withstanding of the future that is already determined. Referring to her/his own state of mind with speculative "may," the speaker makes statements that she/he still has a will to make judgement about herself/himself even after death. It is considered that she/he tries to struggle with anything by casting her/his judgement with a modal auxiliary verb "may." While suggesting her/his withstanding will against the determined future, both "wilt" and "may" are construed to correlate as to the future of each person, "thou" and the speaker; living and dying. Addressing "thou" with "wilt," and referring to her/his state of mind with the auxiliary verb "may," the speaker insists that they stand equal even after they are divided. The modal auxiliary verbs in "Song" function as the contrast as well as the correlation between the speaker and "thou" based on the reflective mood of the speaker.

III. A Function of Modal Auxiliary Verbs in "Echo" and in "A Summer Wish"

"Echo" (1854) is a lyric in which the speaker asks for the beloved to return in her/his dream. The theme of unrequited love pervades and echoes in this lyric as the speaker repeatedly calls for the beloved to come back. The first stanza of this lyric begins with the imperative mood:

Come to me in the silence of the night;
Come in the speaking silence of a dream;
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream;
Come back in tears,
O memory, hope, love of finished years. (my italics, 1-6)

The imperative mood with which the speaker seeks for the beloved

signifies the powerful sense of the active voice. However, the speaker recognizes that the beloved will not be back anymore and repetitively resorts to the dream in which she/he thinks about meeting the beloved again:

Oh dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet,
Whose wakening *should have been* in Paradise,
Where souls brimful of love abide and meet;
Where thirsting longing eyes
Watch the slow door

That opening, letting in, lets out no more. (my italics, 7-12)

Looking back of the past years, the speaker refers to the dream “[w]hose wakening should have been in Paradise.” (8) Using “should” with subjunctive past perfect, the speaker deplores having lost the dreams after waking up from them. The powerful active voice of the former stanza is no more used in the second stanza, and “should” indicates her/his dismay about wakening from the dream rather than keeping on dreaming. The modal auxiliary verb “should” is often seen in other poems of Christina Rossetti, and in one of her well-known sonnets “Remember” (1849), the speaker asks for the beloved to remember happily after death and ends the sestet as follows, “Better by far you *should* forget and smile / Than that you *should* remember and be sad.” (my italics, 13-14) “Should” implies the speaker’s suggestion or possibility of what the beloved would think of her/him after death. And “should” in “Echo” as subjunctives also emphasizes the suggestive mood of the speaker. Switching the mood from imperatives to subjunctives in this lyric allows the speaker to refer to her/his state of mind both with diversity and changeability.

The third stanza of “Echo” begins with the imperative mood again after which follows that-clause with the modal auxiliary verb “may.” The imperative mood in this stanza signifies the active voice of the speaker, and she/he seeks for the meaning to live for by expressing her/his thinking of the beloved again:

Yet come to me in dreams, that I *may* live

My very life again tho' cold in death:
Come back to me in dreams, that I *may* give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:
Speak low, lean low,

As long ago, my love, how long ago. (my italics, 13-18)

The auxiliary verb "may" is used twice, and each "may" indicates the speaker's idea and judgement about the relationship with the beloved. The first "may" (line 13) depicts the speaker's wish of gaining strength to live once more, and the second "may" (line 15) suggests the possibility or happenings after regaining the love of the beloved. This stanza shows the speaker's belief of accomplishing the love as long as she/he is relying on the dream. The speaker puts her/his belief in the modal auxiliary verb "may" which is related with the judgement of the speaker. The speaker knows that she/he has already lost the beloved, but by expressing her/his judgement with the auxiliary verb, she/he shows her/his belief of regaining the beloved. Thus the judgement of the speaker which is depicted with "may" pervades in the lyric "Echo."

Another lyric, "A Summer Wish" (1851) is a lyric which depicts the speaker's sympathy towards the natural surroundings around her/him. In this lyric, modal auxiliary verbs are seen on the third and the forth stanzas. In the first and the second stanza, the speaker shows her/his sympathy towards the rose or the bird by expressing her/his wish to live like them. The lyric begins with the imperative mood:

Live all thy sweet life thro',
Sweet Rose, dew-sprent,
Drop down thine evening dew
To gather it anew
When day is bright:
I fancy thou wast meant
Chiefly to give delight. (1-7)

The speaker first addresses the rose and expresses her/his sympathy towards them for "[l]iv[ing] all [the] life thro'," (1) and refers to the meaning of its existence with saying that "I fancy thou wast meant /

Chiefly to give delight.” (6-7) The speaker adores not so much the beauty of the rose itself but its meaning of living as the one giving delight to others. Following the depiction of the rose, the attention of the speaker shifts to the song of the bird in the next stanza:

Sing in the silent sky,
 Glad soaring bird;
 Sing out thy notes on high
 To sunbeam straying by
 Or passing cloud;
 Heedless if thou art heard
 Sing thy full song aloud. (8-14)

What the speaker emphasizes in this stanza is the strength of the bird singing with “full song aloud.” (14) Unlike the rose which lives for others, the bird sings for its own sake, and the speaker associates the song of the bird with the singing of the poets. The speaker wishes to sing with her/his own words freely and independently. So this lyric is interpreted as the declaration of living as a poet. And the following stanzas are also related with the sympathetic feelings of the speaker. Each stanza ends with the lines with subjunctive “might”:

Oh that it were with me
 As with the flower;
 Blooming on its own tree
 For butterfly and bee
 Its summer morns:
 That I *might* bloom mine hour
 A rose in spite of thorns.

Oh that my work were done
 As birds' that soar
 Rejoicing in the sun:
 That when my time is run
 And daylight too,
 I so *might* rest once more

Cool with refreshing dew. (my italics, 15-28)

The lines that go "I might bloom mine hour / A rose in spite of thorns" (20-21) imply the speaker's wish for living for others as is represented in the rose. The wish for living for others is emphasized with the use of subjunctive mood which pervades in the latter stanzas. What is indicated with "might" is this wish of the speaker. Whereas "might" in the third stanza indicates the speaker's wish for living for others, the modal auxiliary verb in the fourth stanza implies an ideal life and death the speaker thinks about. The ideal life as a poet is expressed with the singing of the bird and only after achieving of living as a poet, she/he "might rest once more" (27) when the last time comes. Subjunctive "might" in "A Summer Wish" functions as the speaker's expressing her/his wish for living as a poet and her/his sympathy towards the nature as well. Unlike indicative "may," "might" as the subjunctives rather emphasizes the suggestive attitude and wish of the speaker.

IV. An Analysis of Subjunctive "Might" in "Another Spring"

"Another Spring" (1857) is a lyric sung with the subjunctive mood. The speaker repetitively uses the modal auxiliary verb "might" in order to express her/his own thinking of the coming of spring though she/he is actually getting skeptical of seeing another spring. The whole lyric consists of the speaker's skepticism about the coming of spring:

If I *might* see another Spring
 I'd *not* plant summer flowers and wait:
 I'd have my crocuses at once,
 My leafless pink mezerions,
 My chill-veined snowdrops, choicer yet
 My white or azure violet,
 Leaf-nested primrose; anything
 To blow at once, not late. (my italics, 1-8)

In the first stanza, the speaker refers to the flowers of early spring that tend "[t]o blow at once," (8) but they are expected to decay so soon. What is depicted here is the speaker's belief of the shortness of life and

she/he shows her/his skepticism about living long with the decaying of spring flowers. This skepticism becomes clearer as the speaker makes statements about not keeping on waiting for anything until summer. While preferring the flowers of the early spring whose life are short and fragile, the speaker also chooses keeping the flowers by her/his side. The reason of her/him preferring the flowers of early spring is that they are still valuable because she/he can associate the short-lived flowers with her/his frailty. Having so short a life is not directly related with the meaning or the reason of living itself, and the speaker's wish that goes "If I *might* see another Spring / I'd *not* plant summer flowers and wait" (my italics, 1-2) shows her/his skepticism about just living long for its sake. So the negation in apodosis implies both the speaker's denial of living long and accepting the shortness of her/his life. As to the use of the subjunctives in the lyrics of Christina Rossetti, Isobel Armstrong states that "[her poems are] the logical consequences of *seeing* the world in terms of lack or negation."⁽²¹⁾ The speaker repeatedly uses subjunctive "might" which is construed to indicate both the speaker's skepticism about life and the acceptance of the shortness of life. The theme of the shortness of life in "Another Spring" is considered to be based on this logic of negation which pervades with the subjunctive mood.

In the second stanza, the speaker shows some sympathy towards the birds as is seen in the former lyric, "A Summer Wish":

If I *might* see another Spring
 I'd listen to the daylight birds
 That build their nests and pair and sing,
 Nor wait for mateless nightingale;
 I'd listen to the lusty herds,
 The ewes with lambs as white as snow,
 I'd find out music in the hail
 And all the winds that blow. (my italics, 9-16)

After showing some sympathy towards "the daylight birds" (10) that are associated with their singing, the attention of the speaker shifts to "the lusty herds" (13) or "[t]he ewes of lamb" (14) as well as "music

in the hail" (15) and "all the winds that blow." (16) These natural surroundings are things often regarded as something ordinary, and placing much emphasis on ordinary things may lose the lyricism of the poet. But as is seen in the former stanza, subjunctive "might" functions as indicating the affinity of anything whose life is short and transitory. Life being short and transitory is reflected with the depiction of the natural surroundings in this lyric, and the nature that surrounds the speaker implies her/his ambiguous attitude about life. And the speaker's thinking of this ambiguity is expressed with subjunctive "might."

In the last stanza, this ambiguity is extended. Anything expressed with "might" can be understood as an ambiguous meaning to live for:

If I *might* see another spring—
 Oh stinging comment on my past
 That all my past results in "if"—
 If I *might* see another Spring
 I'd laugh today, today is brief;
 I would *not* wait for anything;
 I'd use today that *cannot* last,
 Be glad today and sing. (my italics, 17-24)

In "Another Spring," subjunctive "might" has always been used with if-clause and the speaker shows her/his skepticism about life. But the speaker's resolution in the last lines that goes, "I'd use today that *cannot* last, / Be glad today and sing" (my italics, 23-24) shows the fact that she/he still has some wishes to live for. The final decision of the speaker is to sing, which means that the meaning of her/his life is in living as a poet. Looking back on her/his past, the speaker finally chooses to live for today as best as she/he can. While "might" is referred to in if-clause, contractions of the modal in apodosis emphasize the assertiveness of the speaker so that she/he maintains her/his voice with the action verbs. The modal auxiliary verb "might" in "Another Spring" is ambiguously used and as the stanza progresses, the speaker begins to gain the might for living even though she/he is actually not certain about living long.

Conclusion

The modal auxiliary verbs in the lyrics of Christina Rossetti function as the indication of the speaker's state of mind which can be transitory or ambiguous, and the various uses of modal auxiliary verbs in each lyric are related with the modality of the speaker. Expressing various ideas and state of mind of the speaker with the modal auxiliary verbs both as indicatives and subjunctives, Christina Rossetti achieved poetic depiction affluent of lyricism as well as sense of realism which evokes sympathy and attracts so many readers and listeners even in the present day.

Notes

- (1) "shall," Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933, rp., 1970.
- (2) "shall," Def. 8a.
- (3) "shall," Def. Future Tense. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge UP, 1995.
- (4) "shall," Def. Suggest.
- (5) "shall," Def. 1. *Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006 ed.
- (6) "should," Def. 1.
- (7) "may," Def. 1.
- (8) "may," Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933, rp., 1970.
- (9) "may," Def. Signification and Uses. I .
- (10) "may," Def. II .
- (11) "may," Def. II .
- (12) "might," Def. Possibility. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge UP, 1995.
- (13) "might," Def. Suggestion.
- (14) Phil Roberts, *How Poetry Works*, 1991, (London: Penguin, 2000) 286.
- (15) Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 1997 (Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 72.

- (16) Jonathan Culler, 74.
- (17) Jonathan Culler, 74.
- (18) Dinah Roe, "Introduction," *The Pre-Raphaelites: From Rossetti to Ruskin*, (London: Penguin, 2010) xxii.
- (19) The year of publication of each lyric is indicated in the bracket after the title.
- (20) R.W. Crump and Betty S. Flowers, eds. *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 739. (Every citation of the following lyrics of Christina Rossetti is based on this text. The numbers at the end of each citation indicates the lines of each lyric.)
- (21) Isobel Armstrong, "Christina Rossetti —Diary of a Feminist Reading," Tess Cosslett, Ed, *Victorian Women Poets*, (London/New York : Longman, 1996) 170. (I apologize for my miscounting of the pages of citation on my former thesis, "A Study of Auxiliary Verb 'Shall' in the Poems of Christina Rossetti" which was published in *Contexture* №35 of Saitama Institute of Technology in the academic year of 2017.)

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