aren’t there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘nay’ ‘nay’; ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘yea’ ‘nay’; and ‘say’ ‘nay’ appear. In the second stanza, ‘gay’ occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have ‘yea’ in line 3. **What is the effect of this?**

Do you think the effect might be to help *over*-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south’s devotion: he ‘never dared’ to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he ‘saddens’ when she does, is ‘gay’ when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: ‘It’s quite too late to think of nay’. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the ‘links of love’ imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has ‘neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish’ to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the ‘book and bell’ with which she’s made to stay? Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words ‘Till now’ particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free? ■

**How important is it to resolve such questions?** It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight *quatrains* (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren’t feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward? ■

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don’t go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word ‘nay’ chiming throughout ‘Love From the North’ is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, ‘nay’ is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’ (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn’t a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti’s *quatrains*. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, though there is space to quote only the first two here:

> St. Agnes’ Eve – Ah bitter chill it was!
> The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
> The hare limp’d trembling through the frozen grass,
> And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
> Numb were the Beadsman’s fingers, while he told
> His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
> Like pious incense from a censer old,
> Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death,
> Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith.

> His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
> Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
> And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,
> Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
> The sculptur’d dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
> Emprison’d in black purgatorial rails:
> Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat’ries,
> He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails

To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

*(Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.380)*