How would you describe this rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don’t they? While ‘was’/‘grass’ in the first stanza and ‘man’/‘wan’ in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas!). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I’d really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

Now describe the rhyme in the stanza that follows from Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’ (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

   With blackest moss the flower-plots   
      Were thickly crusted, one and all:   
   The rusted nails fell from the knots   
      That held the pear to the gable-wall.   
   The broken sheds looked sad and strange:   
      Unlifted was the clinking latch;   
   Weeded and worn the ancient thatch   
   Upon the lonely moated grange.   
      She only said, ‘My life is dreary,   
         He cometh not,’ she said;   
   She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,   
         I would that I were dead!’

(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.396)

As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as ‘a b a b c d d c e f e f’. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasize lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line ‘I would that I were dead’ (this is known as a refrain) so – as in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Love From the North’ – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

What is the first stanza about? We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The ‘dreary’/‘aweary’ and ‘dead’/‘said’ rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’, there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana’s mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.