

**EMILY DICKINSON AND
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI:
THE RHETORIC OF AMBIVALENCE**



By

REBECCA LALRINTLUANGI

Department of English

submitted

**in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the
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Shillong**

Thesis

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This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Dated: July 31 , 1999

Rebecca Lalrintluangi
(**Rebecca Lalrintluangi**)
Candidate


(**Dr. E.N. Lall**)
Professor
Supervisor


(**Dr. T. Ao**)
Head of Department

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Department of English
North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong
Dated: July 31 , 1999

(Rebecca Lalrintluangi)

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Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

No two poets can be so alike and yet so different as Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. On the personal level, their lives run almost parallel to each other's at every turn, yet neither can be dismissed as a mere reflection of the other. Their individuality and unique personalities are asserted even by the colour of the clothes they chose to wear. The 'Nun of Amherst' chose to dress in white whereas Christina Rossetti wore the black dress of the Lay Sister of the Anglican Church. Till today, Dickinson not only remains one of America's greatest poets, but has also become almost a cult figure there. The Homestead where she lived all her life is open to visitors every summer. One may see the white dress and a lock of her dark hair reverentially displayed by the Amherst College on her birthday week.

Christina Rossetti's appeal, although cloistral, is in no way inferior to that of Dickinson's. She too, has not lost her appeal with her popular children's verses and devotional poems. In 1892, Walter Raleigh thought Christina Rossetti to be "the best poet alive"¹; and in 1904, Ford Madox Ford wrote that every lettered person carried about with him a little of

Rossetti's verses. Accounting for her popularity, Madox Ford said that Rossetti "became the poet of suffering" and "suffering is a thing of all ages."² She is much anthologised and the enduring popularity of her poems proves her greatness. Celebrated poets of her time Jean Ingelow, Felicia Hemans, Letitia London, Dora Greenwell and Augusta Webster are almost unknown today. But the "High-Priestess of Pre-Raphaelitism" continues to hold her own, taking her place beside the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson. To read the love poems of these four poets together has been likened to opening a bottle of rare wine.³ Barrett Browning was already a published poet and Emily Brontë engaged in the imaginary world of Gondal when Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti were born.

Even though Emily Dickinson is an American poet, scholars and critics have, in recent times, begun to place her among the Victorians. In The Language of Exclusion The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti (1987), Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott make no distinction between England and America as they write about the socio-economic background of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. Instead they present the poets as products of the Victorian world. They even describe Dickinson's mother as an "ideal Victorian woman". Dickinson's literary mentors were John Ruskin, Robert and Elizabeth Browning and Tennyson, all of them English and

Victorian. Judith Farr, therefore, writes in the introduction of Emily Dickinson A Collection of Critical Essays (1996) that in so far as Dickinson "took and translated so much - subjects, themes, topical diction, a Ruskinian aesthetic - from the art and culture of her day" that it is imperative, to recognise her as she was "a remarkable or ... an exceptional mid-Victorian". The term "Victorian" not only refers to a particular era in the history of Great Britain, but also the "flavour or ethos of the period" and in literature, a certain "style and attitude" that reflect the concern of the age.⁴ Citing the themes of 'transience, death, eternity and religious faith' in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Stephen Gurney endorses that she may be called a "Victorian" in the broadest sense of the term.⁵

To designate Emily Dickinson as a "Victorian" or to refer Nineteenth Century America as 'Victorian America' as Vivian Pollak⁶ and Alfred Kazin⁷ have done is parallel to Christina Rossetti being called a Pre-Raphaelitic poet. The Pre-Raphaelitic Brotherhood formed in 1848 consisted of Dante Gabriel, Holman Hunt and John Millais, and later expanded to include Thomas Woolner, Frederick Stephens, William Michael Rossetti and James Collinson, the man Christina Rossetti was later engaged to for some time. The members of the mysterious "P.R.B." were painters, sculptors and poets, since Dante Gabriel proposed that they "include all the nice chaps" "who

do anything in the literary line".⁸ However, his proposal to include his sister was demurred on the ground that she being a woman would spoil the brotherhood. Dante Gabriel, in a letter to Homan Hunt protested that he merely meant that she should allow him to read her poetry in their meetings. But Christina Rossetti herself vetoed this suggestion, for fear that such a reading would seem a "display" of herself. The Pre-Raphaelites created a synthesis of poetry and painting, aiming for the principle of "Truth to nature". Although Rossetti did not become a member of the "P.R.B.", her poetry was nevertheless influenced by the ideals of the movement. She also posed for a number of their paintings. In 1848, Dante Gabriel painted her in "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin". She was, in the words of Frances Thomas, her biographer, "a black-clad figure flitting dimly through the brilliant peacock world of the Pre-Raphaelites."⁹ As the sister of two of its members and the one-time fiancée of another, she was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. With her poem "A Birthday", Rossetti is regarded to have reached the height of Pre-Raphaelitism. She weaves a wonderful tapestry of brilliant colour and texture with vivid iconography:

Raise me a dais of silk and down:
Hang it with vain and purple dyes:
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes
In leaves and silver fleur-de-lys.
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.¹⁰

C.M. Bowra in The Romantic Imagination (1961) observes that Christina Rossetti's poetry reveals her "dual personality": One side of her was Pre-Raphaelite, delighting in pictorial images; while another side of her was grave and serious, bound to her inner or spiritual life. The above poem as well as "Doblin Market" are representative of the Pre-Raphaelitic side of her nature.

Traditionally, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti have been viewed as reclusively eccentric poets whose works reflected the abnormality of their lives. Born within a few days of each other, these two poets lived in an age when the dominant culture for women was "romance, marriage and motherhood". Victorian England and America relegated single women as "redundant" and useless and by defying the social norm of marriage, both Dickinson and Rossetti risked being stigmatised. On the other hand, unlike the married woman, they were free to pursue their poetic vision and leave a wealth of literary treasure of posterity. Dale Spender, in The Writing or the Self (1989) says that "because marriage has so often been a full time occupation for women, with little or no opportunity for writing, one of the first questions a woman has had to ask is whether she could marry - and write? ... but literary women have ordinarily been required to choose, and no matter what the decision, it has often been accompanied by a sense of loss." Spender mentions Elizabeth

Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë among the few lucky ones who had literary career and marriage while Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti are listed among those who chose their writing over marriage.

In The Language of Exclusion, Leder and Abbott have offered a new approach to the study of the two poets by "releasing" them "from the prison of their private selves and by demonstrating their poetic responses to the public events of their age." They draw attention to the "shared historical experiences" in order to "reveal their public significances" at the same time exposing the inadequacy of the spinster/recluse model for studying their works. However, in order to assess their true genius and poetic worth, it is necessary not only to read Dickinson and Rossetti in their historical perspective, but also to make an in-depth study of their poetry. This will enable us to see the diversive and ambivalent attitudes which their poetic voices proclaim and express with conviction. If their poetry was a mere record of their private selves, it would have failed to attract or sustain universal interest. On the contrary, they have chosen such themes as love, faith and post-mortals existence which are of universal interest, not only during the Victorian age, but at all times. Sometimes the poets project contradictory attitudes in their poems. Leder and Abbott mention that Dickinson's "poems point in a million directions" while Farr

refers to her "multiplicity of attitudes". What the poets so convincingly convey cannot always be taken to be their personal convictions, for that would mean contradicting themselves often. It is rather, their rhetoric, the art of persuasion that gives ambivalence its credibility. It is imperative at this point, to define the terms "rhetoric" and "ambivalence".

In the Aristotelian sense, "rhetoric" is the art of "discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case". A modern day definition of the term as given by Anthony C. Winkler and Jo Ray McCuen in Rhetoric Made Plain (1974) is that it is "the art of putting one's case in the strongest and best possible way." The authors allow that "all those strategies of communicating in speech and writing that we all use everyday in an attempt to sway each other" fall within its scope. They also point out that rhetoric begins where grammar ends. Here one may quote from Dickinson: "This was a Poet/It is that" and Rossetti's lines "Gone were but the Winter/Come were but the Spring" as pertinent examples.

Ambivalence is part of human nature in so far as there is inevitable opposition between thoughts and actions or words and feelings. Twentieth Century Chambers Dictionary defines Ambivalence as the "co-existence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it also, as "acting on or

arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites". Ambivalence in human nature has been best portrayed by the unforgettable fictional character Holden Caulfield, the hero in Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951). Holden, whose one side of the head is significantly colored with "millions" of gray hair bands all grown-ups as "phonies" all the while he is painfully, anxious to act like one. He declares, matter-of-factly, that he is the "most terrific liar you ever saw." He conspiratorially admits that he often tells people he is glad to meet them even when in actual fact he is not. And with a wisdom that goes beyond his sixteen years, he asserts, "If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff though".

In The Landscape of Absence (1974), Inder Nath Kher observes that ambivalence is "integral to poetic creation". Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti's poetry do not always have actual bearings on their thoughts or lives or even with reality. But unlike Holden, they do not confess to be "terrific liars". On the contrary, the aim of their rhetoric is to lend credibility to the thoughts expressed in the poems, to convince readers that whatever is said in the poem is the truth, at least within its own local parameter. The rhetoric of ambivalence therefore, is the art of creating opposing truths and realities that not only exist side by side, but remain harmonious and cohesive. It is a literary

technique or strategy by which the poets offer multiple, often contradictory ideas about a certain theme or concept with the same degree of sincerity and conviction. It cannot be denied that the ambivalence of the poets' minds are largely expressed and reflected in their poetry, especially with regard to Emily Dickinson's faith and Rossetti's renunciation of earthly love. However, a good part of their poetic expressions are deliberate compositions without being necessarily connected to their personal convictions. Examples of this kind of composition are the poems portraying 'ghosts' which we find in Rossetti's poetry. The poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti is not random production. Instead, each poem is well thought out and well revised. The ambivalence in their poetry does not grate or jar, but reflects the essence of poetic creation and the complexity of the poets themselves. Matters of the heart, man's eternal quest for God and curiosity about existence beyond this life elicits ambivalent feelings which Dickinson and Rossetti have endeavoured to express and convey.

A very important point to be kept in mind while studying the poetry of Dickinson and Rossetti is that the speaking 'I' does not necessarily refer to themselves. Dickinson has taken pains to clarify this point when she wrote to Higginson that her poems are spoken by a "supposed person",¹¹ an alter ego or merely the poetic voice. Rossetti

too, while replying to her brother's criticism of "Under the Rose" draws attention to what she terms the "poet mind",¹² which allows her to compose about situations and emotions beyond and outside her own experience. When the creative mind is at work, both poets take recourse to this device of using the "supposed person". In other words, the poet-persona is created. Failure to acknowledge or remember this often leads the unsuspecting or over-enthusiastic scholar to lose himself or herself in a maze of fascination, coming up with such claims as the marriage of Emily Dickinson with an already married clergyman or her lesbian relationship.¹³

Since mid-nineteenth century England and America relegated single unmarried women as "redundant" and exclusive from society, Leder and Abbott have justified Dickinson's withdrawal from society as "a reasonable response" to that society and not due to her eccentricity. Hers was a radical position in defiance of the Victorian society's expectations of women. As for Christina Rossetti, she became obsessively religious and developed a world-weariness which her poetry inevitably reflects time and again. Dickinson and Rossetti, did not, however, let their reclusiveness stand in the way of keeping themselves abreast of the socio-economic and political conditions of their time. They were also interested in the growing feminism of the age since they chose not only

to remain as daughters, but also to pursue the unlady-like career of a poet.

The term 'feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas in 1872 in a pamphlet "L' Homme-femme" to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. It was, essentially, a movement for extending the franchise to women in England, but over the years, it has evolved to a universally accepted cultural movement for the equality of the sexes in almost every aspect of life. In "Men Against Patriarchy", Toril Moi describes the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' as "political labels indicating support for the aims of the women's movement. 'Feminism' then is a specific kind of political discourse; a theoretical and political practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism."¹⁴

Emily Dickinson was introduced to feminist literature by her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson. Together they read Aurora Leigh, a feminist verse novel by Elizabeth Browning and The Princess by Tennyson, both of which portrays the new intellectual woman and which no doubt encouraged Dickinson to be a full-fledged poet. She admired Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale, the latter being an epitome of "the heroic single woman" and who also happened to be a role model for Christina Rossetti. Emily Dickinson had been introduced to feminism during her year at Mt. Holyoke, a seminary for

women, that taught women to become better housewives and mothers as well as to "shed a civilizing influence over an increasingly corrupt patriarchal influence".¹⁵ But Dickinson, like Rossetti, was ambivalent towards feminism. The Seminary also stressed the importance of accepting Christ, and the young Emily found herself the only one who could not "accept Christ", and was torn between envy and mockery of those who did accept Him. She was also not interested to become a missionary or a teacher; nor was she interested to be a wife and a mother. She was, however, in the words of her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, "an instinctive feminist." But with Emily Dickinson, nothing can ever be cut and dried. Her career as a poet and her refusal to be caught up in a marriage, to the extent that even the lover in her poems is kept at a distance from her persona may be construed as her feminism and a bid for independence. But she was also contented not to lend any contribution to the emerging new women, by taking up the career of either a missionary or a teacher or a nurse. On the contrary, she secluded herself in the little upstairs room of her father's house, where she "oftenest stayed with myself", writing ambivalently:

Alone, I cannot be -
For Hosts - do visit me -
Recordless Company -
who baffle key -

They have no Robes, nor Names -
No Almanacs - nor Climes -
But General Homes
Like Gnomes -

Their coming, may be known
By couriers within -
Their going - is not -
For they're never gone - (#298)

Even as early as her stay at Mt. Holyoke, Dickinson had written that she had "enjoyed the solitude finely". In a way, her life typifies what Tricia Bicketon has said, that

it is often a very positive experience for a woman to be alone. It may be the first time in her life she discover what she wants, her own needs, without taking someone else into consideration ... She may discover new possibilities, talents and horizons ... Indeed, perhaps she becomes stronger and attempts to do things that once seemed easier to avoid. She is free, as it were, to create herself.¹⁶

Dickinson's seclusion upstairs elicits an enthusiastic comment from Karl Keller: "If going up there makes one a madwoman there's a hell of a good universe up there, let's go". For it is up there that Dickinson has created her ambivalent and enigmatic self through the 1775 poems. Living in a pre-dominantly patriarchal culture as a single unemployed woman, she was excluded from the dominant culture in more ways than one. But Emily Dickinson was able to turn her exclusion into an advantage, whereby she has created a 'self' that may best be described as the 'Myth of Amherst'. She challenged, in her own way the 'patriarchy and sexism' of

the dominant culture, gaining for herself freedom to explore the 'undiscovered continent' and following the Emersonian advice "who so would be a man, must be a nonconformist. ... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind".¹⁷ She was also at the same time, quite naturally drawn to other feminists. One of Dickinson's childhood friend was Helen Hunt Jackson, who became famous as a poet and a writer. Jackson was also an activist who championed the cause of Native Americans and who also championed Emily Dickinson as a poet.

In the spring of 1862, after reading an article "Letter to Young Contributors" in The Atlantic Monthly, Emily Dickinson wrote to the author T.W. Higginson, asking him for his opinion on four of her poems, including "Safe in their alabaster Chambers". Higginson, once a Unitarian Clergyman was not only an influential critic, but also a liberal thinker, interested in and sympathetic to the status of women. His opinion on the poems Dickinson sent him was not favourable. He thought that they were "remarkable though odd, ... too delicate - not strong enough to publish".¹⁸

Both Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti's exposure to the growing feminism of the age and their ambivalent reaction to it has been noted here as it contributed to a better understanding of their art. However, it is not the aim of this dissertation to fit in the poems written by them in

the feministic mould or to interpret them wholly from the feminist perspective. Rather, it concentrates on noting how ambivalence, real, as well as contrived, is a dominant characteristic of Dickinson and Rossetti's poetry. The poets had an ambivalent attitude not only towards feminism but life in general. This ambivalence is largely reflected in their poetic utterances and composition through the language and rhetoric used by them.

Unlike Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti was educated at home by her mother Frances Lavinia, a professional governess. Ill health, a common enough trait of Victorian womanhood prevented Rossetti from becoming a governess herself. Though she was born with the volatile temperament of her Italian ancestors and given to terrible tantrums in childhood, she suddenly became grave and melancholy by the time she reached adolescence. Leder and Abbott suggest that Rossetti's bouts of melancholia were perhaps her way of justifying her concentration on her writing as well as her lack of regular employment. They point out that one of Rossetti's aunt, Margaret, "would erratically break out into fits of hysteria" so as to "conveniently" escape the pressure for a regular job. Rossetti was engaged, first as her mother's assistant in the two day schools, which eventually failed; and as her father's nurse till his death in 1854. After her father's death, having no vocation for nursing,



Rossetti nevertheless applied as volunteer to go to Scutari with Florence Nightingale. But at twenty-four, she was too young for the post and was rejected. This gesture however reveals her desire to identify with other single women knowing full well it was considered unnatural.

Around this time, the notion that single women should be "either self-supporting or engaged in some worthwhile occupation" was floated by some women writers known to Rossetti. There were Sisters of Charity (1855) by Anna Jameson, Women and Work (1856) by Barbara Leigh Smith and the newly launched English Women's Journal (1858) edited by Bessie Rayner Parkes. Sometime in 1859, Christina Rossetti joined the St. Mary Magdalene Home, a London diocesan penitentiary for 'fallen women' as a volunteer. The House of Charity, as it was also called, was established in 1855 and staffed by nuns from the Anglican sisterhood. Although Rossetti did not formally join the sisterhood, she dressed herself in the habit of an Associate of the Order in "black with hanging sleeves, a muslin cap with lace edging, quite becoming to her with the veil". Some of her poems of this period, "Cousin Kate", "Margery" and "Maude Clare" reveal her deep preoccupation with the 'fallen woman' or unmarried mothers. The poem "Under the Rose" written in 1869 and later retitled "The iniquity of the fathers upon the children" is

about the shame and pain of illegitimacy from the point of view of the child.

Christina Rossetti also came to be associated with a new feminist group formed in the late 1850s called the Langham Place Group. The members consisted of Barbara Leigh Smith, a cousin of Florence Nightingale, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Adelaide Procter. Smith brought the Married Women's Property Bill before Parliament in 1857 and in the next year, Parkes found the English Woman's Journal Smith, who also helped to found Girton College for women was largely interested in Parliamentary reform and helped to organise the Women's Suffrage Petition Bill, presented to Parliament in 1866. Although Rossetti felt that she was only at the "merest outskirts" of this radical feminist group, she, none-the-less was much influenced by it. She became an 'outer sister' in the Anglican Sisterhood and corresponded with the Suffragist Augusta Webster. However, her stand on the Woman Question is rather ambivalent. She opined that since the Bible reserves certain duties and privileges "exclusively," for men, it is clear "that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes". At the same time, she writes,

On the other hand if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female MPs are only right and reasonable...¹⁹

Then again:

Nor do I think it quite inadmissible that men should continue the exclusive national legislators, so long as they do continue the exclusive soldier-representatives of the nation, and engross the whole payment in life and limb for notional quarrels. I do not know whether any lady is prepared to adopt the Platonic theory of female regiments; if so she sets aside this objection, but I am not, so to me it stands.²⁰

"The Lowest Room" is an attempt "to satisfy the conflicting claims of womanhood, parenthood and sainthood."²¹

In spite of her acquaintance with "strong-minded women" and their ideas on the equality of the sexes and liberalism, Christina Rossetti never actually became one of them. Similarly, Emily Dickinson never attempted to join nursing or other community work despite her admiration and reverence of Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale. After a normal adolescence and early youth, Dickinson, for whatever reasons, neurotic or eccentric, began to withdraw more and more ~~from~~ society. After living in Amherst for two months, Mabel Loomis Todd wrote to her parents about Emily Dickinson:

I must tell you about the character of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people called the Myth. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson and seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She ~~has not been~~ outside of her own house in fifteen years, ~~except once to see a new Church,~~ when she crept out at night, and viewed it by moonlight ... She dresses wholly in white, and her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one ever sees her ...²²

It has sometimes been conjectured that Emily Dickinson turned away from society into the safety of her father's house as a result of her unhappy love affairs, especially her affair with Rev. Charles Wadsworth, the already married clergyman. But this is too trivial a reason for an intelligent, sane young woman to go into seclusion for the rest of her life. A reason which Dickinson herself would have scorned as preposterous.

Judith Farr points out that Dickinson was certainly not alone in her avoidance of company. Recalling other new England writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau, Farr advises that one should "recall that mid-Victorian America often associated the achievement of high art with the seclusion of the artist". She also points out that The Atlantic Monthly, where, incidentally T.W. Higginson published his "Letter to a Young Contributor" which encouraged Dickinson to send him her poems, recommended in January, 1860, that to be an 'artist', one "must be lifted away and isolated from worldly surroundings" and must live alone. The Atlantic also often featured artists such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford Gifford, who would disappear for months or even years while engaged in a project. Farr is of the opinion that by her seclusion and reclusiveness Dickinson "might have seen herself belonging spiritually to their company."²³ Here, one may also note that

Emily Dickinson's seclusion and her temperament conforms to Emerson's description of the Transcendentalist or the Idealist:

They are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society; they incline to shut themselves in their chamber in the house, to live in the country rather than in the town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude.²⁴

An interesting point to be note for consideration is the fact that among Dickinson's list of reading is Thomas à Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ. R.B. Sewall²⁵ informs us of the two editions of the book, one of 1857 which bore the poet's name in Sue's handwriting, and another of 1876, a present to Dickinson from Sue both of which are heavily marked. Quoting some of the marked passages, Sewall constructs the degree of influence which the Imitation has had on the poet. According to him, exhortations such as "Despise the World"; "Fly the tumultuousness of the world as much as thou canst"; "Take refuge within the closet of thine heart", which abounds in the Imitation, "must have had an attraction quite apart from its doctrinal basis" for Dickinson, with her "religious and social problems" and her burgeoning talent still unfocussed." Sewall further states that the religious side of the book must have been treated the same way as the Amherst sermons, "with contrived indifference". But the general injunctions of the Imitation

calls for renunciation of the world and all earthly love. Exhortations such as "Retire into your Chamber and shut out the tumult of the world"; "The cell continually dwelt in, grows sweet, but if you keep not to it, it becomes tedious and distasteful" and "It is praiseworthy for a religious to go seldom abroad, to shun being seen, and not to desire to see men" are likely to have led Emily Dickinson to withdraw more and more from society to the extent that she stopped seeing anybody. Even her letters were addressed for her to shield her handwriting from public eyes; her sister Lavinia and to be fitted for her dresses. Does it not appear, then, that the young Emily Dickinson who could not accept Christ like the others while at Mt. Holyoke Seminary decides to undertake seclusion as an alternative to conversion? Her letters to her friends Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey reveal that she was desperate in her failure to be converted and her subsequent feeling of being different from those who had, including "darling Vinnie". It must have occurred to her that conforming to the regimen and locale prescribed in the Imitation would do just as well. Apart from following the exhortation to renounce the world and to live in seclusion, Sewall also quotes this passage which was marked in the 1876 copy "Never be entirely idle, but either be reading, or writing, or praying, or meditating or endeavouring something for the public good". He says that Dickinson endeavoured to

work for the common good "with the living word in hundreds of letters and poems".

The Imitation was also read by Christina Rossetti, but there has been, as yet, no study about its impact on either her life or her poetry. But there is no doubt that the Imitation, which had a great influence on Dickinson's life but not on her work had the same strong influence on Rossetti and her works. Writing in the Memoir, William Michael Rossetti claims that his sister was never a "great devourer of books" although the number of books read by her during her entire life was "necessarily considerable". Her knowledge of the Bible was "minute and ready". This was "supplemented" by her readings of the Confessions of Augustine and the Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. But even prominent critics like Jerome McGann have not delved into why the Imitatio Christie was so popular during the Victorian Age or to what extent it has influenced Christina Rossetti. However, it may safely be claimed that both her life and her devotional poetry bears a deep imprint of the Imitation. On the personal level, Rossetti, not unlike Dickinson has responded to the call to renounce the world and earthly love. She rejected two offers of marriage, one from James Collinson and the other from Charles Bagot Cayley on the ground that neither men satisfied her spiritual expectations. She chose, instead, to remain single and spent her time visiting and

counselling fallen women in the House of Charity. The Imitation contains instructions such as: "Therefore renounce all earthly things, render yourself pleasing and faithful to your Creator, so that you may attain true bliss"; "Therefore learn also to part with a dear friend for the love of God. And do not be sorrowful if a friend abandons you, but reflect that one day we must leave each other."²⁶

Many of Rossetti's poems are about the parting of close friends and true lovers. Perhaps the most profound is "Parted" where the speaker philosophically accepts her separation from her beloved as an act of God. Nursing the memory of her love, the poet-persona can only hope and wait for a reunion in Paradise, where there will be no more parting. The pain of loss is mingled with a note of resignation. Giving up her earthly lovers, the poet strives to love Christ above all others. In "Ash Wednesday", she pleads,

Good Lord, I ask much of Thee
But most I ask to love Thee
Kind Lord be mindful of me
Love me and make me love Thee.

If Rossetti's life was influenced by the Imitation, her poetry has also been greatly influenced by this noble book. Colleen Hobbs mentions in "A View from The Lowest Place": Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose that Thomas à Kempis has been cited by Antony Harrison²⁷ as one of the literary models to have influenced Christina Rossetti. Not only are phrases lifted from the Imitation, but the theme from it echo

and reecho in a number of her poems. The poem "Passing away" reflect the passages "It is vanity to love what is passing away with all speed, and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy is" and "Oh how quickly does the glory of the world pass away" "Men pass away". Moreover, the idea of the lowest place is derived from the Imitation, which, quoting Luke 14:10 teaches that those who put themselves at the lowest place are highest in the sight of God and more glorious in as much as they were more humble. a number of Rossetti's devotional poems reflect her desire for a better existence in heaven, for which pursuit she has renounced all earthly things. Her renunciation is in response to the injunctions laid down in the Imitation and not due to "bitterness" as alleged by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Mad Woman in the Attic (1979). These authors have claimed that Rossetti, "banqueting on bitterness, must bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation..." Their opinion is not unlike the criticism made by Christabel Coleridge about Rossetti's prose. Writing in the Tractarian publication, The Monthly Packet three months after the poet's death, Coleridge comments that the prose works are "more calculated to help people to lay down their lives in the battle than to get up and live to fight another day". Antony Harrison argues that Rossetti's renunciation is a 'pose' deliberately adopted to enable her "to examine sensual and worldly impressions". The

truth, however, is that Rossetti, a Tractarian since her early youth, was largely influenced by the Imitation and this is inevitably reflected in her writing.

Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti undoubtedly have been greatly indebted to Thomas à Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ. It explains the reason for their reclusiveness and withdrawal from society. It is a manual of daily living that both poets strove to follow. One because she loved her Lord above all else and the other to compensate her inability to accept Christ. But their lives were far from being simple. Ambivalence coloured and compounded what would otherwise have been gray and dreary. For in spite of their seclusion and reclusiveness, neither poet was cut off from social reality. They kept themselves abreast of all national and international events. Dickinson wrote about the American Civil War in such poems as "It feels ashamed to be Alive" and "When I was small a woman died". The poem "I like to see it lap the miles" is a commemorative poem on the railroad which her father brought to Amherst.

Christina Rossetti at twenty-four applied and was rejected as volunteer to work in Scutari with Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War. She was also interested in the Woman Question and even expressed the idea that mothers should be MPs. At the same time, she staunchly held that women are Biblically ordained as the inferior sex.

Ambivalence is as much a part of Rossetti as it is a part of Dickinson's. They were involved with the world without letting the world be involved with them. They were detached from the world they deeply cared for. It is necessary to mention that ambivalence in the poets' lives as well as the influence of feminism and the poet's personal reading, especially the Imitation in order to have a better understanding of their poetry. Their poetry, by and large is a reflection of their ambivalence regarding such themes as love, faith and the after-life. Their rhetorics bring out this ambivalence in an effective and masterly manner.

When all these have been said, it is doubtful whether the two poets themselves would take kindly to each being likened to the other. It is even more unlikely that they would appreciate each other's works. Emily Dickinson would, no doubt dismiss Rossetti's poems with impatience. Like her namesake in England, the other Emily (Brontë), Dickinson might well claim that "no coward soul" is hers. A bold spirit like hers would be well and truly bored with Rossetti's meek and humble spirit. On her part, Rossetti would find most of Dickinson's poems blasphemous and altogether incomprehensible. She exclaimed that the American poet had "a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means".²⁸ when she finally read Dickinson after the latter's death. Yet there is an uncanny similarity in the thought processes and in the

composition of some of their poems. The most obvious ones are "Safe in their alabaster Chambers" and "They lie at rest our blessed dead" to describe the dead; "Uphill" and "What Inn is this" describing the grave as an 'inn' where souls may rest; and "Of course - I prayed" and "Its a weary life, it is she said" to express a wish for self-abnegation. The last two poems are quoted below.

Of course - I prayed -
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird - had stamped her foot -
And cried "Give me" -
My Reason - Life -
I had not had - but for Yourself -
'Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb -
Merry, and nought and gay, and numb -
Than this smart misery (376)

and

Its a weary life, it is she said
Doubly blank in a woman's lot,
I wish and I wish I were a man
Or, better than any, being wore not,
Were nothing at all in all the world,
Not a body and not a soul
Not so much as a grain of dust
Or drop of water from pole to pole.³⁰ (312)

Non existence is preferable to life without consolation or life as a woman. The speakers in both the poems echo the voice of Victorian womanhood. More poems are read and discussed in the next three chapters with special attention on the rhetoric that helps bring out the poets' ambivalence on their subjects.

END NOTES

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2. Georgina Rattiscombe, Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life (Constable London 1981) p.13.
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4. Stephen Gurney, Professor of English at the Bemidji State University Minn. in a private correspondence with this scholar.
5. Ibid.
6. Vivian Pollak in "Thirst and Starvation in Emily Dickinson's Poetry".
7. Alfred Kazin, An American Procession (Secker and Warburg London 1985) p.165.
8. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti (Virago London 1994), p.76.
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10. Christina Rossetti, "A Birthday" The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1904) p.335. All references are to this edition unless otherwise stated.
11. #268, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, M.A. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958) 2:412.
12. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti (Virago London 1994) p.170.
13. William Shurr in The Marriage of Emily Dickinson: A Study of the Fascicles (Lexington UP of Kentucky 1983) suggests that the poet had an anomalous marriage with the already married clergyman Rev. Charles Wadsworth. Rebecca Patterson was the first critic to suggest that the poet's lover is a woman. In The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1951) she identifies Kate Scott Anthon, friend of Emily and Sue Dickinson as the object of the poet's affection.

14. "Men Against Patriarchy" by Toril Moi from Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism, edited by Linda Kauffman (1989), p.182.
15. Leder and Abbott, The Language of Exclusion, p.23.
16. Tricia Bicketon, "Woman Alone", Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions ed. Sue Cartledge and Joanna Rejaw (Women's Press 1983) p.164.
17. Emily Dickinson read R.W. Emerson's Essays and this one is quoted from "Self-Reliance".
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19. Mackenzie Bell, Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study (Boston Roberts Brothers 1898) p.124.
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21. Sharon Smulders. "Woman's Enfranchisement in Christina Rossetti's Poetry" from Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Winter 1992, Vol.34, p.569.
22. Reproduced from Sandra M. Gilbert's essay "The Wayward Nun beneath the Hill."
23. Judith Farr, "Introduction to A Collection of Critical Essays", p.9.
24. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "The Transcendentalist" from Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson An Organic Anthology and by Stephen E. Whicher, 1957, Boston.
25. See "Emily Dickinson's Books and Readings" from Emily Dickinson A Collection of Critical Essays.
26. These and subsequent quotations are from a later edition.
27. In her essay "A View from the Lowest Place: Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose", Colleen Hobbs refers largely to Antony Harrison whose Christina Rossetti in Context, 1988, is a "full length critical study of the poet in recent years".
28. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti, p.235.

29. Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Little and Brown Boston, 1955). All references are to this edition.
30. Christina Rossetti's poems are quoted from The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1904). The figures at the bottom refer to the page number and not the poem as it is in the case of Emily Dickinson.

Chapter—II

LOVE

There was nothing nun-like about Emily Dickinson, the 'Nun of Amherst' and Christina Rossetti, Associate Sister of the Anglican Church. They not only fell in love, but Christina Rossetti even got engaged to be married on two occasions. But, eventually, neither woman got married, writing instead, extensively on the subject of love. The identity of the lover in Dickinson's poetry remain conjectural till the present day, while it is no secret that Rossetti's life-long love was Charles Cayley. The poets, while refraining from marriage were not against it as we can see in a number of their poems. This chapter is a study of the poems on love by Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti in order to establish that the poets did not only document personal experiences on love, but that they also composed imaginatively on the theme. The ambivalent and contradictory attitude found in the poems justify the claims of this dissertation that Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti were serious and gifted poets whose rhetoric successfully bring out their ambivalence.

Love is a major theme in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Her poems on the subject of love are not only numerous but

varied. In this chapter we read and examine some of the poems which the 'soul' of the poet-artist has created 'at the white heat; and are henceforth, largely responsible for the beginning of the quest, who was Emily Dickinson's lover? The poet's tools of creation are words which she uses with deliberate skill and craftsmanship.

Studies and speculations have led to the popular belief that Emily Dickinson had passionately and intensely loved ~~three men at different periods of her life~~. These were Samuel Bowles, Rev. Charles Wadsworth and Judge Otis P. Lord. Of them, both Bowles and Wadsworth have been thought to be the object of the famous "master" letters, the draft of three of which, are extant. These are love-letters of painful intensity, from which can be deduced that 'master' did not wholly, if at all reciprocate the love felt for him by the writer. Ruth Miller believes that these letters were meant for Samuel Bowles but that they were never actually sent.¹ But whether the letters were meant for Bowles or Wadsworth or some other person whose identity may never be revealed, they do prove the point that Dickinson did fall in love, rather passionately, and that the man on whom she focussed her attention was either unaware of, or indifferent to her feelings. In his biography, This Was a Poet (1938) George Whicher attributes Dickinson's reclusiveness as a result of a failed love affair, possibly with Wadsworth. The poet's

niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi has also hinted at an unhappy love affair with a married man. Most of Dickinson's love poems are therefore assumed to be addressed to Wadsworth. The Rev. Charles Wadsworth was an already married clergyman whom Dickinson met in Philadelphia in 1855, when she went to meet her father, then a Congressman, in Washington.

In the poem #640, "I cannot live with you", the speaker rhetorically rejects all possibilities of her union with her lover, whose identity is hinted to be a clergyman, therefore possibly Wadsworth:

They'd judge Us - How -
For You - served Heaven - You know
Or sought to -
I could not -

In a series of arguments, she proposes and rejects options for living or dying together. She 'cannot live' with him nor 'die' with him since one must be there to 'shut the other's gaze down'. Neither can she be resurrected with him, as she feels that his face would outshine even Jesus in her sight. The "new Grace" would "grow plain - and foreign" to her. If she were 'saved' and he were 'lost', then even paradise would be 'sordid excellence', may be Hell. The only link that is between the lovers is the distance and the impossibility of their union. Agnieszka Salska explains in "Emily Dickinson's Lover" that "Despair of even being united is this union's immaculate sustenance". The only possibility for the lovers is to "meet apart", "with just the Door Ajar".

The rhetorics proclaim the ambivalence here - the lovers unite in separation. The speaker's despair is described by Frederick Morey as "the anguish of an atheist or an agnostic",² because she cannot conform like her lover, to Heaven's commands - "I could not -" Her relationship with him is ambivalent - loving him, yet sacrificing their union than agreeing to serving Heaven with him. Her strong rhetoric is meant to persuade herself as much as the beloved as to why they cannot be together.

The distance of the lovers from each other is the theme of more than one poem. In poem #498 "I envy seas whereon he rides", the speaker declares that the sight of the beloved is "forbidden utterly" to her. She is envious of the 'seas' and 'chariots' on which he rides and travels. She is envious of the sparrows that build their nests on his 'distant eaves'; even the fly on his window pane is more privileged than her:

How easy All can see
What is forbidden utterly
As Heaven - unto me!

Here too is ambivalence. If 'All' can easily see the lover, why doesn't the speaker too try to see him? Instead she cries, "Yet interdict - my Blossom -/And abrogate - my Bee -" for fear that here 'Noon' might be changed to 'Everlasting Night'. Morey points out that perhaps the speaker delights in her sumptuous destitution and fantasy than in actually trying to contact her lover.³

Ambivalently, the speaker in poem #648 "Promise This - When you be dying" instructs the lover to 'summon' her in his last moments, to enable her to minister his needs. She claims the right to perform the most intimate duties for him:

Mine belong your latest sighing -
Mine to Belt your Eye -
Not with coins - though they be minted
From an Emperor's Hand -
Be my lips - the only Buckle
Your low Eyes - demand -

Because she is "Christ-omitted -", the only 'Heaven' she aspires to is to 'follow' the 'dear feature' of the beloved. For the sake of the beloved, she offers to 'supplicate Madonna' to let her be "ne'er so far behind" the beloved after death, for she had been denied him in life. The speaker accepts the separation of the lovers and the impossibility of reunion in this life.

In The Marriage of Emily Dickinson (1983) William H. Shurr has put forward the theory that the poet had a secret anomalous marriage with Charles Wadsworth. This was based on the author's study of the poems and the fascicles. According to Shurr, the union was consummated and the poet even lost a child of the couple's. The poems "While it is alive" (#491), "My first well day" (#574) and "Savior! I've no one else to tell" (#217) are what may be called pregnancy poems. Whether there is truth in Shurr's deduction or not will remain as indeterminate as the identity of the lover. What is apparent in all three of these poems is the rhetoric of ambivalence.

In "While it is Alive", the poet likens love to three different things in as many lines.

Love is like Life - merely longer
Love is like Death, during the Grave
Love is the Fellow of the Resurrection

On closer inspection, the ambivalence is only superficial, for in truth, what we have here is a dialectical explanation of love. The Fellow of Resurrection is Christ, through whose love others may "Live".

In "My first well day", the speaker is one who has recovered from a long illness. Summer has come and almost gone while she 'took' her 'Chance with Pain', unsure which of them 'Should prove the strongest One". After her recovery, the speaker is ambivalent about her illness:

My loss, by sickness - Was it Loss?
Or that Ethereal Gain
One earns by measuring the Grave -
Then - measuring the Sun -

There is not only ambivalence but ambiguity and vagueness as well. Is she talking about the loss of a baby as Shurr thinks she is or is she referring to the loss of summer's blooms, - the 'Redder Cheeked Ones' while she had been confined indoors. She questions herself then - 'Was it Loss?' The alternative is 'Ethereal Gain' when she realises she ought to be grateful to be alive and well. That after 'measuring the Grave', she has recovered to be 'measuring the Sun-".

There is ambivalence in the very first line of the poem 'Savior! I've no one else to tell". The speaker approaches

the 'Savior' only because there is 'no one else' to whom she might turn. Her tone is extremely polite as if talking to a stranger whose reception she is uncertain of

And so I trouble thee.
I am the one forgot thee so -
Dost thou remember me?

The 'imperial Heart' which she 'had not strength to hold' may be the anomalous husband or newborn child she may have lost. The rhetoric is deliberately vague. The speaker brings her woe to the 'Savior' because he is a choice out of no choice. She would have told anyone else if she could, rather than 'trouble' him. The poet has conspicuously refrained from capitalising the pronouns 'thee' and 'thou' throughout the poem while the poem directly is an address to the 'Savior'.

A poem commonly read as a marriage poem is #322, "There came a day at summer's full". Shurr has read it as a celebration of the day when Dickinson and Wadsworth exchanged marriage vows and crucifixes. The speaker of the poem declares that the exchange of the crucifixes was 'sufficient troth' which will reach fulfilment "To that new marriage/Justified - through Calvaries of Love." The occurrence of 'Calvary' here and in others is what leads to the connection with Wadsworth, who left Philadelphia to be minister at Calvary Church in the west. This poem is ambivalent as it is a celebration of a union as well as a valediction at the same time. The participants of silent

communion are "Bound to opposing lands -". They exchange crucifixes without 'external sound' but gives each other 'no other Bond'. In poem #1072 "Title Divine - is Mine", the persona refers to herself as a "Wife without a Sign". The marriage that Dickinson describes in her poems is, in the words of Vivian Pollak, "a marriage that is and is not, that has been and is not now, that will be and is not yet, a marriage thwarted by nature, God, and social convention, validated by faith alone."⁴

Another marriage poem is #246 "Forever at His side to Walk" where the poet-persona envisions a close union with the beloved. The poem describes an ideal Christian marriage that has elements of love, sharing and sacrifice. The speaker wishes to bear

If grief - the largest part -
If joy - to put my piece away
For that beloved Heart -

She also looks forward to further joy in Heaven for a perfection of what has been started below: "And by and by - a change/Called Heaven -". But this is just a wishful thinking on the part of the speaker. She is not at "his side" at all. It is, to quote Pollak again, "an interior marriage, a marriage of the spirit divorced from social circumstances ..."⁵ The distance between them is made obvious with the use of the adjective "that" while referring to the beloved heart. The poem's ending is not only abrupt but also

anti-climactic. The "change called Heaven" becomes simply a place where earthly puzzles are solved. This poem and "I cannot live with you" proves, in the words of Jackson Wilson, the poet's "capacity to write poems from disparate and even contradictory points of view". This is possible because the poet does not write about a particular man or actual experiences.

One curious fact about Dickinson's love poetry which Karl Keller has pointed out is the absence of man. In an essay called "Notes on Sleeping with Emily Dickinson", Keller points out that there may have been men on her mind, but "most of her poetry is poetry in which she wishes there were, or she fantasizes there being, or she documents the absence of" men. This is what makes it so hard to prove the identity of 'master' or lover(s). She takes recourse to what William Empson calls "the strength of vagueness" in his book The Seven Types of Ambiguity (1970) that allows for "secret ambiguity". It remains impossible to pinpoint a single character as Dickinson's lover. The very vagueness of the lover's identity has had critics suggesting that it was a woman whom the poet had loved. In Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (1963) Northrop Frye equates Dickinson's 'preceptor' or 'master' with the 'mistress' in Shakespeare's day, one, 'to whom he vowed eternal devotion, though this 'mistress' might have little if any part to play in his

actual life and very seldom had anything to do with his marriage'. This is a sound and acceptable view, since it recognizes the importance of the 'preceptor'/'master' without compromising the integrity of the character of the men she had so chosen for the role. Benjamin Newton, Rev. Charles Wadsworth and T.W. Higginson were, by turns, the chosen 'preceptors'. With such understanding, the lover, then, should be regarded as a paradigm, an inevitable figure in the poetical set-up, inhabiting the same region of the poetic mind as the Dark Lady of the Sonnets.

As baffling as the identity of the lover is the gender of the lover. While the lover is obviously a man in most of the marriage poems, in some poems, it is a female while in yet others, it is indeterminate. In Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender (1984), the author Vivian Pollak speaks of Dickinson's "innate feminism" and her "suppression of a complex homosexual identity". Rebecca Patterson in The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (1951) was a forerunner in introducing the poet's possible homosexual inclinations. She has identified the object of Dickinson's affection as Kate Scott Anthon, a widow known to both the poet and Sue Dickinson. Recent critics like Judith Farr favours Sue herself as Dickinson's lover. Martha Nell Smith⁶ goes so far as to identify 'Master' as Sue. Such a speculation has been necessitated by some of

the poems in which the speaker declares her love and affection for a female person.

Dickinson's poems celebrating sororal relationship as well as those that memorialize a particular woman with whom the poet-persona had had an intimate relationship form an important part of the Dickinson canon. These poems apart, Karl Keller points out that it was women who rescued Emily Dickinson. He writes that

... it was *women* who saved Emily Dickinson: Sue Dickinson, Lavinia Dickinson, Helen Jackson, Mabel Loomis Todd, Martha Bianchi. Women needing women, loving women, giving us women. It is an anomalous rescue, a touching one.⁷

Here one is struck by the particular use of the word "anomalous" which Keller has chosen to describe the role played by the women involved in presenting Emily Dickinson to the world. Coincidentally, William Shurr too talks about the poet's secret and 'anomalous' marriage to the Rev. Charles Wadsworth. But the crux of the matter is not whether the poet had any 'anomalous' relationship with anyone. It is rather her rhetoric of ambivalence which invites speculations and make room for all kinds of formulations and finds about her life.

In poem #84 "Her breast is fit for pearls" and #518 "Her sweet weight on my Heart a night", the rhetorics indicate that the beloved is indeed a woman. The poems are a description of relationship, may be even intimacy between

women. Unless of course, the speaker is a man. The 'supposed person', in this case, could be a man as the poet has licence to assume any identity or gender she pleases. William Shurr interprets "Her sweet weight on my Heart a night" as the poet's imagination of Wadsworth's feelings after their anomalous marriage. The truth of this line of understanding depends on whether the anomalous marriage took place or not. The poem, however, is dream material, as the speaker himself/herself is not sure whether his/her Bride has really been with him/her for a night before slipping away:

"If 'twas a Dream -"
"Or if myself were dreamed of Her -"
"A Fiction superceding Faith -"
By so much as 'twas real-"

The above quoted lines reveal the speaker's ambivalence about the reality of the Bride's existence. They lend doubt to what is stated at the beginning 'Her sweet weight on my Heart a Night'. Instead of searching for Dickinson's female lover, it would be wiser to read the poem as a literary "fiction superceding faith" and assume the speaker to be a man, though not necessarily Wadsworth.

Another poem which without doubt relates to women's relationship is #631 "Ourselves were wed one Summer - dear". The speaker refers to herself and the other woman as 'Queens'. Vivian Pollak explicates this poem as Dickinson's relationship with Sue and her reaction to Sue's marriage with Austin.⁸ The speaker may be 'Queen' with the other woman, but

she shows herself to be inferior to her in every way. While the other's 'cottage' faced the sun, the speaker's is surrounded by 'Oceans and the North', thus implying that one has warmth while the other must bear the cold and the chill. One's 'Garden' has 'blooms', while the other's was sown in 'frost'. There is no similarity or equality between them save the fact that both were 'wed' and were 'Queens'. Words like 'dear', 'thee' and 'sweet' are commonly favoured by the poet as a form of address to the beloved. As a result, it becomes impossible to determine the gender of the lover. Patterson has read the poems "Promise this when you be dying"; "Long Years Apart" and "Proud of my broken heart" as being addressed to Kate Scott Anthon.⁹ But in these poems, there is no proof that the speaker is Emily Dickinson as lover or that the beloved is a woman.

The embers of a Thousand Years
Uncovered by the Hand
That fondled them when they were Fire
Will stir and understand - (#1283)

These lines simply affirm the recognition and familiarity of lovers. The words 'fondled' 'Fire' 'stir' imply passion no doubt, but 'Hand' is impersonal. The witch whose absence does not "invalidate the spell" is a metaphor and does not indicate that the poet is referring to a particular woman. Nor does the lines "Proud of my broken heart, since thou didst break it,/Proud of the pain I did not feel till thee" (#1736) make any reference to a woman. In this particular

poem, the adjective 'Proud' is repeated in the first three lines as if the speaker needs to convey the sense of honour it gives her to be suffering. This idea is reinforced in the last four lines where the speaker, with a hint of competitiveness chides the beloved not to think of herself/himself as the sole sufferer:

Thou can't not boast, like Jesus,
drunken without companion/was the strong
cup of anguish brewed for the Nazarene

The rhetoric lays more stress on the sense of pride than on actual pain or suffering. If here and in the poems mentioned above, the beloved is indeed a woman, they merely demonstrate the poet's ambivalence towards love. They prove the point that Dickinson did not limit her vision only to heterosexual love.

Even if the poems were written for Kate Scott, it is preferable that one should keep in mind the fact that they were written a century ago. It would not be fair if the poems were read and interpreted with the "twentieth century sexual awareness."¹⁰ This has caused even Rossetti's "Goblin Market" to be regarded as a lesbian manifesto, when the poet herself meant it to be only a fairy-tale. British and American societies in the nineteenth century not only permitted, but saw nothing wrong in close and intense friendship between girls or young women. Unmarried women or those with unsatisfactory marriages often turned to other women for

consolation. Barbara Bodichon, nee Leigh Smith and Georgiana Burne-Jones both had a "crush" on George Eliot.¹¹ Others like Rossetti turned to religion. Therefore, Dickinson's relationship with either Sue or Kate Scott, should not be construed as something which it might not have been. But this is not to deny that the poet felt betrayed by at least one of her female friends. This is the subject of the poem "That she forgot me was the least". Here, as in "Proud of my broken heart", the speaker takes pride in herself, that she is "worthy" of being forgotten. The poem mentions how "She" is ashamed of the speaker's affection for her. The second stanza read,

Faithful was all that I could boast
But constancy became
To her, by her innominate
A something like a shame. (#1683)

The words 'faithful' and 'constancy' do suggest perhaps, more than friendship especially since 'She' has found it shameful and has preferred to 'forget' the speaker.

When T.W. Higginson was preparing the second edition of Dickinson's poems in 1891, he was apprehensive about including "Wild Nights! Wild Nights", on the ground that the 'malignant' might "read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamt of putting there". It appears now that his fears were justified - not only with this particular poem, but with all the love poems. Christina Rossetti's poems "Two thoughts of Death" and "In the Lane" also have speakers who talks

about their female loves. Yet no one has ever charged Christina Rossetti with homo-sexuality, nor has her closet been ever rummaged for the identity of the female lover. Even those who have read "Goblin Market" as lesbian relationship have not seen Rossetti as the protagonist.

Diametrically opposed to the marriage poems and other love poems, Dickinson has written poems that portray the narrator's fear of direct confrontation with male sexuality. The two poems that clearly reveal the persona's ambivalent attitude towards overt sexual approach are "In Winter in my Room" and "I Started Early—took my Dog"—. In both these poems, the speaking 'I' is both fascinated with and afraid of male potency, embodied by the snake and the sea. "In Winter in My Room" is a symbolically erotic poem with its graphic imagery and Freudian undertones. The speaker finds a harmless worm, "Pink, Lank and Warm", in her room which she ties up with a string. When she returns, it is to find it changed to a powerful snake:

A trifle afterword
A thing occurred
I'd not believe it if I heard
But state with creeping blood -
A snake with mottles rare
Surveyed my chamber floor
In feature as the worm before
But ringed with power. (#1670)

The speaker has an ambivalent relationship with the worm-turned-snake, just as the persona in D.H. Lawrence's poem "Snake", who was both afraid and honoured to find a snake

visiting his water trough. Dickinson's persona is both afraid and fascinated, viewing the snake as a traditional symbol of evil as well as a symbol of male potency and power. Both Lawrence and Dickinson's snakes are nonchalant and sure of themselves, as if they understood and enjoyed the fear they inspired. They exude an air of superiority over their human audience. The ambivalent feelings which the snake arouses in Lawrence's persona is graphically described:

And voices in me said, if you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now,
and finish him off.
But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest ...¹²

Unlike him, Dickinson's persona feels no liking for the snake. She "shrank" from this "mean and new" creature. Unable to face or cope with his advances - "He fathomed me", she retreats and flees to a distant town.

That time I flew
Both eyes his way
Lest he pursue
Nor ever cease to run
Till in a distant Town
Towns on from mine
I set me down
This was a dream.

The poem closes rather abruptly as the speaker declares 'This was a dream'. The rhetoric of the last line is ambiguous. Perhaps the speaker bids to erase, from her memory the whole unpleasant experience. Or she may be trying to forget her fear of blatant male power and aggression. Her fear overpowers the fascination she felt for the powerful snake,

filling her with an urge to get as far from it as possible. Or perhaps the poet has added this line to discredit the whole narrative for what it really is - a dream. The rhetoric itself suggest the improbability of the situation: I'd not believe it if I heard/But state with creeping blood - Not only is the persona ambivalent about the worm - snake, but also about the mysterious transformation of the insignificant worm into the terrifying mottled snake. The persona, by admitting that she herself would not have believed such a thing had she not seen it herself appeals for the 'willing suspension of disbelief' only to mock at our credulity by admitting at the end that it is, after all, a dream.

In a similar manner, the female persona in "I Started Early - Took my Dog" runs away from the pursuing male 'tide' all the way up to the "Solid Town".

I started Early - Took my Dog -
And visited the Sea -
The mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me -
And Frigates - in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands -
Presuming me to be a mouse -
Aground - upon the sands.

After the first two lines, there is a shift in reality as "mermaids" and "frigates" are introduced and the speaker is presumed to be an insignificant "mouse". It is only in the third stanza when the speaker mentions her "Apron" and her "Bodice" that we learn she is a girl. She encounters no

trouble till she meets the "Tide" which 'went past' her shoes
and apron, up her belt and all the way up her bodice.

And made as He would eat me up
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's sleeve -
And then - I started - too -
And He - He followed - close behind -
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle - (#520)

The "Tide" personifying the passionate male, pursues "the not
entirely unwilling damsel till they came up to the Solid
Town", where he is forced to make his retreat as gracefully
as a gentleman. The threatening aggressive Tide restrains
itself, and "bowing", withdraws, but not before he favours
the girls with "a mighty look". Though this poem is not
designated as a 'dream' like the poem "In Winter in my Room",
it also has the characteristic quality of dreams. In the
beginning, the persona is safe because she is presumed to be
a "mouse". She makes the rather imperious statement "But no
man moved me". As the 'Tide' begins to chase her, she
recovers her identity as a girl. The "distant Town" of the
previous poem becomes the "Solid Town" that intimidates the
pursuing snake - sea into withdrawing. As in the other poem,
the speaking 'I' is attracted to and fascinated by the male
factor. It is she who makes the first approach to the 'worm'
and the 'sea'. But terror eventually overrules her attraction
when it is reciprocated, and she finds retreat easier than
facing the situation. The persona has the same ambivalent

attitude of fear and fascination towards the 'Sea' or the 'Tide'. It is she who, with her visit to the 'Sea' provokes him to chase her just as the persona in the other poem gives her attention to the lank and helpless worm by securing "him" with a string. But when the "Snake" and "Tide" turned aggressive, the persona flees to where there other people. A town is inhabited by people and the use of 'distant' and 'solid' to describe the towns emphasize the safety they provide for the fleeing girl. In one, the town is too far for the snake while in the other, social etiquette stops the Tide and forces it to withdraw. This poem, in the words of Vivian Pollak, "dramatizes the ambivalence of a self-divided between the desire for sexual experience and the determination to resist its ego-annihilating potential."¹³ These two poems, "In Winter in My Room" and "I Started Early - Took My Dog" are perhaps nearer the truth to what Dickinson really feels about male attention and why she prefers to fantasize about an ideal, unattainable lover, from the safety of her father's house. The picture of a frightened girl running away from male pursuit rather goes well with the image of a reclusive spinster poet.

At the same time that Dickinson's persona shies away and flees from male attention, there are poems that boldly explore the physical aspects of love and desire. These poems are mainly allegorical, the poet using symbols like the bee

and the flower. They are part of the poet's rhetoric of ambivalence. They prove not only the poet's awareness but interest in the relationship between the male and the female. The lover-bee takes his pleasure from the rose in "A Bee in his Burnished Carriage" only to "flee" himself, leaving her the "humility".

A Bee his burnished Carriage
Drove boldly to a Rose -
Combinedly alighting -
Himself - his carriage was -
The Rose received his visit
With frank tranquility
Witholding not a crescent
To his cupidity -
Their moment consummated -
Remained for him - to flee -
Remained for her - of rapture
But the humility (#1339)

This poem is obviously about "sexual passion" as Gross and Rashid point out in "Dickinson and the Erotic".¹⁴ The words "Cupidity"; 'consummated' and 'rapture' are words associated with mating, the central action in the poem. Like the snake and the Tide, the Bee is the aggressor. The difference here is that the rose is "stationary" unlike the girl who runs away from the snake and the tide. The Bee is free to 'flee' while the rose is left with the 'humility'. William Shurr argues that Dickinson's use of the word 'humility' against 'humiliation' denies "exploitation of the female by the male". But the poet is concerned about the status of the female after being seduced by the male. In "Did the Harebell lose her girdle", she asks a series of questions of age old

concern, of which there can be no simple, universally accepted answers.

Would the Bee the Harebell hallow
Much as formerly?
Did the "Paradise" - persuaded -
Yield her moat of pearl -
Would the Eden be an Eden
Or the Earl - an Earl? (#213)

These rhetorical questions only serve to highlight the vulnerability of the female against the male offensive. But the poet does not mean her poem as a lesson to be learnt or even as a fair warning. The persona in another poem blatantly invites the lover - Eden to come to her.

Written around the same time as the poem just discussed, "Come slowly - Eden" is an obvious invitation to love:

Come slowly - Eden!
Lips unused to Thee -
Bashful - sip thy Jessamines -
As the fainting Bee -
Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums -
Counts his nectars -
Enters - and is lost in Balms.

The persona's invitation to be ravished is expressed through the metaphor of the bee and the jessamine. She is 'unused' to passion and therefore 'bashful'; but she promises the lover-bee that it will be worth his while. Such fear of the male's power exhibited by the persona in "In Winter in My Room" and "I Started Early - Took My Dog" is totally absent in this poem. It is an evidence of the poet-persona's ambivalent

attitude towards passion and desires. It is as demonstration, in fact, just how sensuously the self-confessed 'Nun' is capable of describing the passion of the lover-bee.

Most of Dickinson's love poems depict unrequited love or "relationship that has never been actualized or that has already disintegrated."¹⁵ Whether the lover is a man or a woman is of lesser importance to the fact that he or she is always inaccessible to the poet-persona.

In some poems, the poet creates situations in which the speaker has been betrayed by her lover and she tries to cope with the knowledge. The poem "Heart! we will forget him" is one such poem. Addressing her heart, the speaker seeks its co-operation to help her forget the loved one. In a rhetoric that is as abrupt as it is direct, the speaker launches her purpose, that is to forget the beloved.

Heart! we will forget him!
You and I - tonight!
You may forget the warmth he gave -
I will forget the light.
When you have done, pray tell me
That I may straight begin!
Haste! lest while you're lagging
I remember him! (#47)

The urgency at the beginning of the poem, however, must give way to the slow functioning heart. And till the heart has done remembering 'him', 'I' cannot begin to forget 'him'. But the 'You' and 'I' are both part of the same person - representing passion and intellect. 'Him' is the beloved associated with the inseparable 'warmth' and 'light'. In a

much later poem, the poet-persona makes a confession of her self-deception. Addressing the absentee lover, she reveals her pathetic secret of make-believing:

The most pathetic thing I do
Is play I hear from you -
I make-believe until my Heart
Almost believes it too
But when I break it with the news
You knew it was not true
I wish I had not broken it -
Goliah - so would you - (#1290)

This poem fits in with the theory of unrequited love. It is also one of those poems where the persona addresses a lover of an indeterminate sex. Addressing a beloved simply as 'You' is a common practice of Christina Rossetti too. It helps to shift the focus from the particular to the universal, thus broadening the purview of the poem. In the case of Emily Dickinson, 'You' 'Thee' and 'Sweet' heightens the mystery of the identity and gender of the lover. In the poem quoted above, the persona reveals that she has been deluding herself knowingly. She 'play'(s) or pretends to herself and 'make-believe' that she hears from her lover. The moment of truth, when she accepts for herself that the beloved is actually keeping away and not even corresponding with her, causes her heart to break within her. William Shurr attributes this poem to the poet's relationship with Wadsworth. But there is no certainty that the voice is Dickinson's or the 'supposed person's'. Thematically, this poem is in the same category as "That She Forgot Me was the Least" and "Proud of My Broken

Heart". The only difference is that the speaker admits her hurt whereas in the other two poems, the persona takes negative delight in her assumed state of being forgotten or betrayed. In "Proud of My Broken Heart", the persona even compares the agony of her broken heart to the agony of Christ's suffering, thereby suggesting that her agony is sacrificial and worthy. By contrast, there is self-derision in the persona's tone when admitting what she has done is 'pathetic' self-deception.

Adelaide Morris in "The Love of Thee a Prism Be"¹⁶ says that for Emily Dickinson, "love is an opportunity for observation, for hypothesis, for experimentation, for revelation ... All varieties of love fill Dickinson's work". So while there are poems on betrayal and separation, there are others on passion and even on marriage. In some poems, the persona describes herself as a wife. In "I'm 'Wife' - I've finished that -", the persona declares herself a 'wife' and she equates the word with 'Czar' and 'woman'. From her new position as 'wife' which she describes as a 'soft eclipse', she finds her former position of girlhood 'odd'. The difference between girlhood and wifeness is compared by her as the difference between life on earth and heaven, between pain and comfort.

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse -
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven - now -

This being comfort - then
That other kind - was pain -
But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there!

(#199)

Many critics who read this poem feel that the poet is equating 'wife' with death. But the persona merely delights in her new status. After comparing being 'wife' with being in 'Heaven' and calling the new state 'comfort', she abruptly decides against comparison. It is enough that she is 'wife'. But strangely, the corresponding word 'Husband' is conspicuously absent in the poem. As if to stop any question that might arise, the poem calls to a halt with "Stop there!" and comes to an end. One wonders if the persona is really married since 'wife' occurs within quotation marks. Perhaps she is a make-belief wife, another self-deception on the part of the persona.

In another poem, the persona waits for the bridegroom who will change her from a 'child' to a 'wife'. "A wife at Daybreak I shall be" is an anticipatory poem in which the persona awaits the coming of her groom. He will transport her from maidenhood to wifhood in the course of the night. But the rhetoric makes it impossible to say who her 'Future' is, for he is at once husband, Christ and Death:

Midnight-Good Night! I hear them call,
The Angels bustle in the Hall -
Softly, my Future climbs the Stair,
I fumble at my Childhood's prayer
So soon to be a child no more -
Eternity, I'm coming - Sir,
Savior - I've seen the face-before!

(#461)

The poem exist in a different plane of reality since it fails to make a logical sense in everyday life. For one thing, 'Angels' do not 'bustle' in the 'Hall', and for another, why must it take exactly "midnight" for the speaker to make the passage from 'Maid' to 'Wife'?

At midnight, I am but a Maid
How short it takes to make a Bride -
Then - midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East and Victory -

It appears as if the ticking of the clock at midnight suffices as ceremony marking the transition from 'Bride' to 'Wife'. It is no ordinary marriage between man and woman. "Eternity" "Sir" "Savior" in the second stanza, not to mention the approaching "Future" infuses the poem with a sense of dreadful anticipation and eeriness.

Influenced, perhaps, by her reading of the The Imitation of Christ, Dickinson's persona also describes herself as the bride of Christ. The ideal absentee lover sometimes appears as a celestial lover with whom she looks forward to a union in Heaven:

Given in marriage unto Thee
Oh thou Celestial Host -
Bride of the Father and the Son
Bride of the Holy Ghost. (#817)

This poem is another revelation of the ambivalence in Dickinson's poetry. It is not only religious, but orthodox as well. Not only does it describe a celestial marriage with the Holy Trinity, it lacks Dickinson's usual irreverence. The

theme is contradictory to other Dickinson poems that reveal the poet's ambivalent feelings towards the Godhead. The poem also implies immortality which 'marriage' with the 'Celestial Host' will ensure:

Other betrothal shall dissolve -
Wedlock of Will decay -
Only the keeper of this Ring
Conquer mortality.

The second stanza is contradictory to what the poet has written in other poems. It describes the impermanence and transiency of earthly marriages as contrary to the times she looks forward to the union with the beloved to be perfected in Heaven. The first two lines of the second stanza quoted above nullifies what the poet has expressed in poems like "There Came a Day at summer's Full" and "Forever at his side to Walk", that marriage entered into on earth will reach its fullness in Heaven.

Albert Gelpi in The Tenth Muse (1975) writes that

it is impossible to determine whether the lover is a man or God or Jesus the Godman because in no mere figuration or casual sense the lover is any or all of them."

His own conclusion is that the lover is an integral part of the poet's own psyche. The rhetoric of ambivalence ascertains that the truth will never be known. Perhaps in no other poem is the rhetoric more ambivalent and vague than in poem #704, "No Matter-Now-Sweet":

No matter now-now-Sweet-
But when I'm Earl -
Wont you wish you'd spoken
To that Dull Girl?

Not only is the gender of 'Sweet' indeterminate, the speaker's too is problematic. She no doubt identifies herself as a "Dull Girl" but states the imminence of her becoming an 'Earl'. 'Earl' is not only masculine but in no perceivable way can a "Dull Girl" become one.

Dickinson's ideal lover, regardless of him being human or divine is one whom she deems a safe haven, one who will keep her safe even when storms rage on the high seas.

Wild Nights - Wild Nights!
Were I with Thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury.

Futile - the Winds -
To a Heart in Port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -
Ah; the Sea!
Might I but moor - Tonight -
In Thee!

(#249)

This poem is deceptively simple with its images of storm at sea and port. But these images are what constitutes the contrasts and complexities in the poem. A closer examination reveals that the rhetoric is ambiguous as well as ambivalent. For instance, 'Thee' in line two is the beloved, whereas in line twelve, 'Thee' could mean either the beloved or the Sea. Then "Rowing in Eden" could either mean that the speaker

feels safe in paradise and delights at the sight of the storm at Sea or she longs to leave 'Eden' and navigate towards the Sea where there is scope for 'luxury' amidst the storm. Commonly interpreted as an erotic poem, this poem may be read as the poet-persona's wish to be moored at the port - lover - Thee. Wild nights or storm at sea would be a luxury then, because her marriage will keep her safe and render the winds 'futile'.

In poem #368 "How sick to wait in any place but thine" the poet continues with the same imagery.

One port - suffices - for a Brig - like mine -
Ours be the tossing-wild though the sea -
Rather than a mooring - unshared by thee
Ours be the Cargo - unladen - here -
Rather than the "spicy isles -"
And Thou - not there -

The persona prefers to be storm-tossed with her lover than be moored safely without him. The lover is compared to a port where her ship may be safely moored. then both the lover and the speaker are compared to merchant ships. This poem and "Wild Nights! Wild Nights" complements and completes each other. The lover addressed as 'Thee' in both the poems is the same. The persona has faith in him to keep her safe and only he has the right to console her loneliness or ease her pain.

From all the poems discussed so far, it appears that Dickinson addresses herself to an ideal lover evolved from the man she had known and not to one specific man. The love poems of Emily Dickinson take on a new significance when read

in the light of some of her poems, namely, "Undue Significance a Starving man attaches", "Heaven is what I cannot reach" and "Success is counted Sweetest." In the first, the poet makes the observation that from a distance, food appears tasty and attractive to a hungry man; but once he tastes the food, it 'relieves' his hunger but loses its 'spice' or attractiveness.

Undue significance a starving man attaches
To food -
Far off - He sighs - and therefore - Hopeless.

And therefore - Good -
Partaken - it relieves - indeed -
But proves us
That spices fly
In the Receipt - It was the distance -
Was savoury -

This poem describes more than the attraction of food to the hungry. It provides an insight into Dickinson's attitude towards desire and fulfilment. In the words of Barbara Mossberg, "Her rather perverse aesthetics prefer the unattainable ..."¹⁷ Robert Wilbur in "Sumptuous Destitution" writes:

Emily Dickinson elected the economy of desire and called her privation good, rendering it positive by renunciation. And so she came to live in a huge world of delectable distances. Far-off words like Brazil or 'Circassian' appear continually in her poems as symbols of things distanced by loss or renunciation, yet infinitely prized and yearned for.¹⁸

In poem #239, '"Heaven" - is what I cannot reach', the poet describes Heaven as something beyond her reach - an apple in

the tree; and 'interdicted land'; the 'colour' on a 'cruising cloud' and a 'House' beyond the 'Hill'. It follows, then, from this premise, that, distance between the lovers heighten the desirability of the fruit to be enjoyed and the poet has deliberately maintained her state of privation in love. In his book Emily Dickinson (1976) Paul Ferlazzo states that neither Bowles nor Rev. Wadsworth had any romantic involvement with the poet. Therefore, it may be stated that the poet has projected an image of an out-of-reach lover to serve as the object of her undying passion. She may have initially had a crush on these men without their knowledge and she has created a paradigm out of them to be the focus of her powerful love poems characterised by separation and pain. It is her imagination and love of words that has produced the poems which are, in turn responsible for the conjecturals about her love life.

It is to her credit as an artist that Dickinson continuously convinces and perplexes readers and scholars. If her poetry had been a mere record of her personal experiences, critics would have already squeezed her dry and there would be no mystery left. On the contrary, no one can prove for sure, the identity of her lover, if indeed she had a lover. The numerous names brought forward rather seem to point out the absence of a lover. She has denied herself love and fulfilment in marriage, instead preferring her 'sumptuous

destitution, issuing sentences like 'We shun because we Prize'. Her persona desires love and passion, but at the same time make certain that she is denied. She takes pride in her deprivation of what she yearns for.

Dickinson's rhetorics on the theme of love are so ambivalent that they cannot be read as her personal confession as that would mean contradicting herself over and over. Just as William Shurr has established her secret anomalous marriage to the already married Rev. Charles Wadsworth. We also have her prayer to the 'Madonna' to 'regard a nun' (198), to 'Cherish' the 'Wayward Nun' (722). As we read about her impatience to be reunited with her beloved beyond the grave in "The Stimulus beyond the Grave", we also read her matter-of-fact comment on the transiency of love: "We outgrow love, like other things". These poems reveal the complexity of the mind behind their creation. The rhetoric of ambivalence reflect the brilliance of the mind that can use the simplest words to create the most complex poems. The masks that Dickinson puts on sit so well on her face and the voice of the 'supposed person' so real that they are often mistaken to be Emily's own. The voice is that of Dickinson, the poet, and not Emily, the person.

If fantasy be the hallmark of Emily Dickinson's love poetry, Christina Rossetti's on the other hand display a high degree of realism. They reflect, for the most part, the

poet's innermost thoughts and feelings. Two cultural streams run in Christina Rossetti without mingling. The Mediterranean sensuousness, a heritage from her Italian ancestors and the more sober and restrained Tractarian co-exist in her, conflicting with each other. Part of her longed for love while the other strove to subdue this longing in favour of the more exalted love of God. This "conflict in Christina between the woman and the saint" as C.M. Bowra has noted in The Romantic Imagination (1961) lasted almost during her entire life. As a young girl of eighteen Christina Rossetti fell in love with, and was engaged for a time, to James Collinson, a painter and member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although Dante Gabriel favoured the union, Rossetti, being dissatisfied with Collinson's vacillations between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism broke off the engagement. Later, she fell in love again, this time with Charles Cayley. But she refused his proposal on the ground that Cayley was an agnostic. She, however, remained on good terms with him and loved him for the rest of her life. During the Victorian age, it was common for women to reject proposals from even their loved ones on grounds of religion. Georgina Battiscombe in Christina Rossetti (1981) writes that "of all the tensions which tore her apart and shaped both her character and her poetry, by far the most acute, and the most fruitful, was the tension between the two loves, human and

divine". Christina Rossetti chose divine love over earthly love, but the choice did not bring her happiness or peace. What peace should have been hers eluded her, being "haunted by regrets for the joys she had forgone."¹⁹ C.M. Bowra points out the poignant fact that Rossetti "learned in imagination the joys of love" while "in life she felt its wounds".²⁰ And this is the ambivalence in her life that is reflected in the poems. Most of her love poems are for Cayley, while a few are for Collinson. Throughout her life, Rossetti never took the one step that would have altered her whole life. Instead, she kept her love 'buried yet not dead' in her heart and waited for the time when the lovers would be reunited in Heaven.

In the case of Christina Rossetti, there is no need of speculation on the identity of her lover(s) as it is with Emily Dickinson. Her love for James Collinson was short-lived, but as he was her first love, she did not forget him. Even though it was her own decision not to marry either Collinson or Cayley, in the poem 'Parted' the speaker attributes the parting of the lovers as divinely ordained:

Had fortune parted us,
Fortune is blind:
Had anger parted us
Anger is unkind -
But since God parts us
Let us part humbly
Bearing our burden
Bravely and dumbly. (p.397)

The rhetoric blames 'God' for the separation of the lovers, who are left with no choice but to accept their fate. The

last line may be read as an expression of the rest of Rossetti's life after her renunciation of Cayley. She remained single, even though she became 'redundant' in a society, where outwardly she lived a life of cloistral calmness. But her regret, fanned by her passionate nature, inspired her to write sensuous and tenderly pathetic love poems. According to her biographer Frances Thomas, loneliness was "a major event in her life, the event that enabled her, as it enabled Emily Dickinson, to create at the white heat."²¹

The poem "Memory" is a poignant expression of the choice the poet-persona made in giving up her love. Part-I of the poem describes the choice which the persona had made with "perfect balances" even though it 'broke' her 'heart'. Deliberately, she had broken her 'idol' and buried it in her heart:

I broke it at a blow, I laid it cold.
Crushed in my deep heart where it used to live.
My heart dies inch by inch

In part-II of the poem, the persona lays her heart bare before the reader, revealing that inmost chamber "wherein no one enters". The rhetoric of part-II tells a different story. Here, we learn that the love that is 'dead' and 'cold' in part-I is changed into 'a blessed memory', around which the persona's life centres'. Her heart which has died 'inch by inch' in part-I is changed into a 'throne' on which sits the

one that is 'buried but not dead'. Whatever be the reason why the persona has found the beloved 'wanting', and she silently made her choice, he remains in her heart, not, as an object of desire or passion but as a memory. The persona can look into her heart at this memory with 'clear' unclouded eyes, - "And think how it will be in Paradise/When we're together." In the poem 'Echo', the persona invokes her lost love to come to her in dreams in the silence of the night. The poem is hauntingly beautiful and poignant

Come in the speaking silence of a dream ...
O memory, hope, love of finished years
Oh dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet...
Yet come to me in dreams that I may live
My very life again though cold in death: (314)

The rhetoric consists of repetition, alliteration and juxtaposition of contrasting words such as 'speaking silence', 'bitter sweet' and 'life' and 'death'. The overall effect is exquisite beauty and depth of feeling. The persona invites her 'love' whom she has renounced to come back only in 'dreams', for, in the light of day, she will stand by her choice. The persona's wish here as in the poem 'Memory' is that she and the beloved should wake together in Paradise never to be separated again.

Rossetti's rhetoric makes no great distinction between religion and the secular. Her sensibility balances the religious and the secular themes in such a way as to prove that both are integral part of life. Her rhetoric on love

Even so, the days on which the lovers meet are "heavenly days" which she looks forward to. Life was sweet to her because her beloved called them sweet.

In sonnet #two, the speaker voices her uncertainty about the first day the two of them had met. The rhetoric of ambivalence is used to convey the hazy memory of the speaker. Words like 'bright' and 'dim', 'summer and winter are juxtaposed as she rakes her memory of 'that first day' which "seemed to mean so little, meant so much". The ambivalence continues in Sonnet #three which opens:

I dream of you to wake: would that
I might
Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;

The speaker states that it is only in dreams that she holds the beloved 'full in sight' and only in dreams that they 'are at one'. As such, she has developed ambivalent feelings about life:

If thus to sleep is sweeter than to
wake,
To die were surely sweeter
than to live,

The closeness of the lovers is apparent when the speaker in sonnet #five declares,

O my heart's heart, and you who
are to me
More than myself myself.

Yet by the next one, she is already strong in her resolution to love God more than the beloved:

I love, as you would have me,
God the most;
Would lose not Him, but you,
must one be lost.
Nor with Lot's wife cast back a
faithless look.
Unready to forego what I forsook.

In the speaker's understanding of love, her love for God and her love for the beloved are interdependent. She cannot love one without also loving the other. She is ready to give up the beloved without a backward glance, if she must. But in the last two lines, in what Empson calls "ambiguity by tautology,"²⁴ the speaker declares how necessary each love is to the other for it to be worth its name:

... love is such
I cannot love you if I love not Him,
I cannot love Him if I love not
you.

In order to love God the 'most', the speaker must necessarily love the beloved. And by the same token, she can love him only because she loves God. Although Rossetti's love is renunciatory, it is complementary with her love for God. In the "Monna Innominata", the poet-persona takes consolation in the hope that what she gave up in this life will be hers in the next. The anguish of her sacrifice becomes bearable with the belief that they will be together in Heaven. In sonnet #eleven, the speaker stakes her claim over the beloved in Heaven:

But by my heart of love laid bare to
you
My love that you can make not
void nor vain,
Love that foregoes you but to claim
anew
Beyond this passage of the gate of death

These sonnets on love, renunciation and hope of reunion in Heaven are thick with religious overtones in a way that Dickinson's poems on the same theme never are. Rossetti's love is not only renunciatory, it is also self-sacrificial. She will not 'grudge' her beloved if he finds "a sweeter face" or a "nobler grace" than her to take her place in his heart. Whether he remains in "honourable freedom" or "companioned", she commends him to God, whose will determines all things on earth (Sonnets #twelve and thirteen). For herself, she prefers to 'trust' her life on God's hands than the beloved's, even if that would leave her with "the longings of a pent up heart forlorn". (Sonnet #fourteen).

The rhetorics of the sonnets give us an insight into the poet's mind about her love and renunciation of that love. She has renounced her love to prove that she loved God more than him. But the pain of loss is her only reward. She also realises that renunciation simply does not kill the love since it is intimately bound up with her love for God. For this reason, her persona has the hope that the two will meet in Heaven with no fear of being parted from each other ever gain.

Notwithstanding her personal choice to remain single all her life, Rossetti is not against marriage. Even in her famous poem on sisterhood, "Goblin Market", she makes Laura and Lizzie turn into 'wives' and 'mothers'. Leder and Abbott have grouped certain poems together as 'anti-marriage' poems. These are "An Apple Gathering" (1857); "Maude Clare" (1858); "Cousin Kate" (1859) and "Goblin Market" (1859). The speakers or heroines in these are mostly 'fallen' women or the 'other' woman. But the poet conveys through the rhetorics that marriage gives social acceptance and security to women.

In "An Apple Gathering", the poet exposes the Victorian sexual double standard. The speaker is a 'fallen' woman deserted by her lover. Her story is told through the metaphor of the apple-blossom.

I plucked pink blossoms from
mine apple tree
And wore them all that evening
in my hair.

When in 'due season' she goes to see her tree, there are no apples for her and she is forced to go back 'empty-handed'. Other girls like Lilian, Liliias and 'plump Gertrude' with "their heaped-up baskets" walk past her on their way home, while she, empty basket dangling, 'loitered' alone. She is reproachful of Willie, who had been her love and now who lends his "stronger hand" to 'plump Gertrude'. The speaker is angry and disappointed with Willie, but she has no one to blame for the barren apple tree. She had 'plucked' the

blossoms herself, to wear in her hair. But for Willie, the "great lord" in "Cousin Kate" or Thomas in "Maude Clare", there is no social condemnation for their liaison with women outside marriage.

The speakers in "Cousin Kate" and "Maude Clare" are the "other woman" who have been loved for a time and then discarded for another. In the former, a 'cottage maiden' is 'lured' by 'a great lord' to his 'palace home' where she is made to live a "shameless shameful life" of mistress or lover till he 'changed her like a glove" preferring to marry her fairer cousin, Kate. The speaker insists that her 'love was true' while Kate's love was 'writ in sand'. There is ambivalence in her character because while on the one hand she is morally low as her "shameless shameful" life indicate, on the other hand, she is morally superior to her cousin Kate who has married the 'great lord' without a thought for her cousin. She tells Kate,

If he had fooled not me but you,
If you stood where I stand
He had not won me with his land
I would have spit into his face
And not have taken his hand. (p.347)

In other words, she would have seen that her cousin is not betrayed. She would not be 'bought' with 'land'. There is an implied criticism of Kate here. She has accepted the wedding ring of the lord knowing full well that he already has a child, the 'shame and pride' of the speaker's. The speaker

however is silent about the feelings of the lord himself. Would he realise that he has wronged her, or would he, like the man in another poem, "Light Love" callously ask,

But hast thou ne'er another love
Left from the days of old
To build thy nest of silk and gold
To warm thy paleness to a blush
When I am far away. (p.327-28)

In "Maude Clare", the sexual double standard is exposed, as the narrator tells the story of Maude Clare, the 'other' woman Maude has been abandoned by her lover Thomas to marry Nell, a village maiden. Maude boldly appears on their wedding day, looking like a queen, to inform Nell of Thomas's 'fickle heart'. Poor Thomas 'faltered' and hid his face while Nell bravely declares her love for him and tells Maude Clare that she will continue to love him till he has come to love her best of all. Maude feels no shame in announcing her past relationship with Thomas. Scornfully, she cries that she has a gift for Nell, "Though, were it fruit, the boom were gone,/or, were it flowers, the dew.

And with whatever dignity she has, Nell replies,

"And what you leave, I'll take
And what you spurn, I'll wear;
For he's my lord for better and worse.

Rossetti's ambivalent attitude towards marriage finds expression in poems like "Cousin Kate", "Maude Clare" and "Light Love". While keeping herself away from marriage through deliberate choice, she does not praise the single

state or even try to influence others to follow her choice. Instead in poems like those mentioned above, she projects that marriage provides security, respectability and acceptance in society which the 'fallen' or 'other' woman cannot enjoy. The poems also prove that women who love do not regret, regardless of the worthiness of the object of their love. The men in all three poems have no scruples about picking one girl for their pleasure and then leaving her to marry another. The woman in "Light Love" even voices her concern for her replacement, who might one day suffer a similar fate.

'Alas for her, poor faded rose,
Alas for her like me,
Cast down and trampled in the
snows.' -

In so far as "feminism" may be regarded as "an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women" as K. Meera Bai has expressed in her essay "Feminism as an extension of existentialism. Woman in Indian English Fiction", Rossetti's poems "Cousin Kate", "An Apple Gathering", "Maude Clare", "Margery" and even "Goblin Market" may be regarded as feminist utterances. In all these poems, women are projected as unsuspecting victims at the hands of callous men. Feminism, writes Toril Moi, is "something more than the effort to express women's experience: It is at once a relatively comprehensive analysis of power relations between the sexes, and the effort to change or undo any power

system that authorizes and condones male power over women."²⁵
In the light of this observation, it becomes obvious that the writer of the above mentioned poems is a feminist. For Rossetti does not merely express the experience of the wronged woman, but there is also the implied criticism of the patriarchal culture that allows for men like the great lord, Willie or Thomas to use women for their pleasure and desert them again. These men are depicted as essentially lacking in conscience and humanity. Through the women, however, the poet may be said to be celebrating the 'feminist culture' of sisterhood and dramatising the ordeals of the wronged woman. The speakers in 'Cousin Kate' 'An Apple Gathering' and 'Maude Clare' express their expectations to be given emotional support and understanding by the women whom the men they love have chosen in their stead.

The sexual freedom of man is the theme of another poem called "Last Night". Written in a dramatic monologue, the speaker addresses her lover, who at this point may have been planning to woo another maid. Unlike the other speakers, the speaker here is neither bitter nor jealous. She charges the man to speak out:

If you love her best, speak up
like a man;
Its not I will stand in the light
of your plan.

She had enjoyed love while 'lasts' but she says 'it needn't last' and may be 'dropped away into the past'. This attitude

is reminiscence of one of Dickinson's poems "We Outgrow Love". The speaker projects love as a transient impermanent commodity, beautiful during the short time that it lasts. She compares love to "a goodly rainbow that fades away", to a "dew that steams upward from the grass" and to a "sunset flush that leaves heaven grey". These images are not just beautiful but short-lived as well. To use these images to describe love is contradictory to those poems that describes love as lasting for life-time and even beyond.

Not only does the speaker have a philosophical attitude towards love, she is also big hearted enough to accept her position and that of her 'very good friend' who has now turned his attention elsewhere. She has only good wishes for Kate, her possible replacement, whom she advises not to let time go by if she intended to marry. For by taking time to weigh and wait, a girl might 'miss the chance' at marriage. At this point, one wonders, if the poet had ever felt that she missed her chance at matrimony because she had weighed and waited. Had she rued her own fastidiousness? But these are mere speculations. The poem's speaker admits that love for her had been 'pleasant', but she says, "All things begin and all have an end/But let broken be broken." She does not grudge her lover a possibility of a new love and marriage. Thus, unlike the others, she maintains her dignity and self-respect till the very end. Nineteen years after this poem,

the poet echoes this magnanimity in Sonnet #twelve of the "Monna Innominata":

If there be any one can take my place
And make you happy whom I
 grieve to grieve,
Think not that I can grudge it,
 but believe
I do commend you to that nobler
 grace
That readier wit than mine, that
 sweeter face;

Another dramatic monologue marked by a dark intensity is "The Convent Threshold" written in 1858. The protagonist is one who had indulged in a 'pleasant sin' but has repented and urges her lover to repent too. As she climbs the stairs of a convent as a novice, she entreats her lover to climb the stairs with her, to repent with her, just as he had sinned with her: "Lo, stairs are meant to life us higher;/Mount with me, mount the kindled stair." Her gaze already goes beyond this life - to mansions inhabited by people whose faces outshines the sun. She is almost frantic as she begs her lover to repent and be saved with her, for without him, she asks,

How should I rest in Paradise
Or sit on steps of heaven alone? ...
Should I not turn with yearning eyes
Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang.
Oh save me from a pang in heaven.

There is no hope of reconciliation for the lovers unless both climb the stairs together in repentance. The speaker's eyes are already turned upwards while her lover's eyes look

'earthward'. After their 'pleasant sin', the speaker repents and look to the 'sea of glass and fire' to wash off the 'scarlet mud' that has 'soiled' her 'lily feet'. But she is not content to leave her lover behind. The urgency, impatience and desperation of the speaker is conveyed through the rhetorics:

Today while it is called to-day
Kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray
Today is short, to-morrow nigh:
Why will you die? Why will you die?

Sharon Smulders²⁶ says that apparently Christina Rossetti intended "The Convent Threshold" as a response to Dante Gabriel's "The Blessed Damozel". In Gabriel's poem, the speaker is a man gazing up towards heaven and imagining his beloved speaking to him. Rossetti's speaker is feminine, the novice who asks two questions "which in effect describe the predicament of the blessed damozel".

Unlike the blessed damozel who still feels desire even from heaven, Smulders says that the 'pitiful pang' the novice might feel "is contingent upon the certainty that the unrepentant lover is lost not to her, but to God". She is no longer filled with passion for him but with a serious concern for his salvation. "The Blessed Damozel" ends with the 'golden barriers' separating the lovers, but "The Convent Threshold" concludes with the possible reunion of the lovers, on condition that the lover follows the novice's heartfelt pleas to repent. The love enjoyed by the speaker novice and

her lover is sinful and repentance is called for. The reason why it is sinful is explained at the beginning lines of the poem:

There's blood between us, love, my love,
There's father's blood, there's brother's blood;
And blood's a bar I cannot pass: (p.340)

The rest of the poem however, do not explain what the lines exactly means, except that 'blood' is a 'bar' that separates the lovers and turns their interlude into a 'pleasant sin'. It may be about an Italian blood-feud as Mackenzie Bell²⁷ suggests. The novice removes herself to the convent, but nurtures the desire to meet her lover in heaven in the 'old familiar love'. This is one instance where the poet depicts eros as being opposed to agape and therefore sinful. The predicament of the novice has no bearings upon the poet's life. Nor does the anguished speaker resemble the fiery Maude Clare or even the speaker in "Cousin Kate". There is no repentance or even regret in these others for the way they have lived. There is, also, no condemnation from the poet, whose concern for the 'fallen' woman is so clearly testified in the poem "Margery".

A young girl Margery had loved a man and foolishly, she had let him know. The man then used her without loving her back and changed her into a 'woman' eaten up with shame and 'grief'. The poet persona asks what can best be done for Margery to rekindle her interest in life. She agrees that it

is her own fault but she stoutly argues that the question is how to restore the poor girl to her former self?

What now to do with Margery,
A weak poor creature on our hands?
Something we must do. I'll not
see
Her blossom fade, sweet Margery (p.360)

She suggests taking the girl away for a 'Change' till she learns to 'smile' 'at her own folly'. Margery's only fault lies at her 'foolish' admission of her love:

A foolish girl, to love a man
And let him know she love him
so!
She should have tried a different
plan:
Have loved but not have let him
know
Then he perhaps have loved her so.

This seems like a simple reasoning of simple folks or perhaps it is a Victorianesque approach and expectation. The speaker opines that the man Margery had loved should feel remorse for causing such heartache and misery to her. But the man in question has, no doubt, like the men in poems such as "Cousin Kate", "Light Love" and "An Apple Gathering"; no thought for the heart he had broken or for the love that pines for him. He is not unlike the dilatory Prince in "The Prince Progress" who lost his bride because of his tarriance on the way. Unthinking of his bride's possible feelings, the prince takes his time to dally with a milk-maid; then helped an alchemist brew on "Elixir of life" that actually killed the old man. Then when he finally 'resumed' his journey, he still

'loitered', wished for 'a second maiden' and lagged and swerved. A flood that almost drowned him delayed him more. When he finally arrived at his destination, it is to find that his bride had already died, after waiting for him in vain. At the end of the narrative is the lyric "Too late for love":

Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted done upon her branch
Died without a mate
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate
Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait. (p.34)

The tone is accusatory, and rightly so. 'Loitered', 'trifled' 'wait' 'late' are words that describe the procrastination of the prince. In "Pilgrimage and Postponement: Christina Rossetti's the Prince Progress", Mary Arsenau suggests the 'possibility' that the title poem of Rossetti's second volume was written with a 'specific audience in mind - her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti". Like the procrastinating prince, Gabriel kept his mistress Lizzie Siddal waiting for years before marrying her. Stephen Gurney finds this poem and the sonnet "In an artist's studio" "a tacit censure of the brother by a woman poet who shared a sense of sisterhood with those female models whose lives were entwined with the Pre-Raphaelites".²⁸

Perhaps the most ambivalent of all Rossetti's poems is the deceptively simple "Goblin Market", written in 1859. In spite of its fairy-tale like character, it is anything but one, especially for the modern reader. The strangely erotic imagery teases and baffles readers and critics alike. It has been variously interpreted: ranging from a Christian allegory, a feminist Christian allegory with a female Christ figure to an outright lesbian manifesto. One of the simplest way to read the poem, apart from it primarily being an exposition on the value of sisterly love, is to treat it as "a straight-forward warning to Victorian girls about the suspect motives of male wooers". In a conjectural and analytical essay, David Bentley states that "Goblin Market" was written to be read aloud to the young prostitutes in the House of Charity where Christina Rossetti worked to reclaim 'fallen' women.²⁹ At its superficial level, the poem is about two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, who live together in a cottage by the woods haunted by 'goblin men'. They encounter the goblin men who sell exotic and magical fruits which are addictive, but strangely, cannot be obtained a second time. The fruits are "All ripe together/In summer weather" and therefore unnatural. The more prudent Lizzie warns Laura against the danger, reminding her of Jeanie who had eaten the goblin fruits and then died craving for them, and no flowers would grow on her grave. But 'sweet-toothed' Laura, the

danger and the cautionary notwithstanding, buys the fruits with strands of her golden hair and gorge herself: "She sucked and sucked and sucked the more/Fruits which that unknown orchard bore." She takes the kernel home to plant and waits for the night when she can buy more wares from the goblin men. But Laura cannot see or hear them anymore. She declines in health as she keeps watch for the little goblin men in vain.

Day after day, night after night,
Laura kept watch in vain
In sullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never caught again the goblin cry:

She plants the kernel stone of the goblin fruit, but even that does not grow. Seeing her sister's deterioration, Lizzie, much against her inclination braves herself to meet the goblins and obtain their fruits for Laura. Carrying a silver penny in her purse, she sets out at twilight to look for the goblin men. The bestial creatures insist that she sit and eat with them and when she refuses, starts to attack her, squeezing and smearing the fruits all over her face and neck. The earlier laughing goblin men turn nasty on Lizzie.

Their looks were evil.
Lashing their tails
They trod and hustled her,
Clawed with their nails,
Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking.

Laura tastes the juices again from her sister's face and this time, it is repellent and curative. She is restored once more to her old innocent self. She hugs Lizzie, 'but not twice or

thrice' unlike when Lizzie cam back with the juices smeared on her face. Then Laura had "kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth". The poem ends with Laura telling her and Lizzie's children, years later, how Lizzie had saved her life and expounded to them the importance and value of a sister's love. The poem's apparent theme is spoken by Laura at the end of the long narrative:

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To clear one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray;
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

In manuscript, "Goblin Market" was dedicated to "MFR", the poet's sister Maria Francesca Rossetti, but not in the printed text. It is not clear as to why Rossetti should have made the dedication, apart from Maria being her only sister. William Michael wrote to Mackenzie Bell about this matter conjecturally "... apparently [Christina] considered herself to be chargeable with some sort of backsliding, against which, Maria's influence had been exercised beneficially."³⁰ It may simply be a dedication to an only sister since the poem is a celebration of sisterly love. But the poet did not always write about sisterly love. In poems like "Noble Sisters", "Sister Maude" and "The Lowest Room", the poet depicts jealousy and betrayal between sisters. When the poet and Maria were children, Maria was often jealous of her younger and prettier sister. She was, however, able to outgrow that

feeling to become the loving elder sister, which makes assumption easy that Lizzie's sacrifice for Laura was prompted by the sisters' real life experience.

Admitting that it is "difficult to read 'Goblin Market' without a twentieth Century sexual awareness", Frances Thomas however cautions against interpreting the poem in an overly crude and sexual terms and thereby 'push' it "into a territory which it does not inhabit".³¹ It is impossible to ignore the sexual overtones in the poem. The sinister goblins with their uncouth bestial character and their luscious fruits pose a sexual temptation for innocent young girls. Ironically, it is Laura who warns her sister, crying,

We must not look at goblin men
We must not buy their fruit:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?

But the temptation proves to be too much for Laura, and like Jeanie before her eats the goblin fruits. She has no money so she trades with a lock of her golden hair. Maureen Duffy has pointed out rather boldly in the Erotic World of Faerie that Laura's payment with a lock of hair is associated with the loss of virginity.³² So also are the goblin fruits, which although addictive, may not be eaten twice. Jeanie too, had "pined and pined away" for more of the goblin fruits till she "dwindled" and finally died. Her offense is without doubt sexual; since she

... should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime.

But if one is to read "Goblin Market" as a poem on temptation, and sin, how does one account for the absence of men in it? Laura and Lizzie live in their cottage with no father or brothers. There are only the goblin merchant men who come to sell their wares. They are 'queer' 'little men' who are more animals than real men:

One had a cat's face
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat's pace,
One crawled like a snail
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

They call out in 'voice of doves', 'full of loves' for the girls to buy their exotic fruits. But after having eaten her fill once, Laura turns deaf to their cries and blind to their sights. This does not mean that Laura has transcended temptation. Instead she craves the goblin fruits till she subsequently declines in health, growing thin and grey. The goblin men and their fruits exist in a different plane from the real world. In the essay "Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement and Goblin Market", Mary Arseneau says that there is "something inherently unnatural" "illusory and deceptive" about the goblin fruits. Pointing out the fact that the various fruits cannot be 'harvested' in one season, she says that neither the goblins nor their fruits are 'governed by natural laws'. The fruits

may be eaten only once. A number of questions may be asked for which there are no logical answers: why is it only the 'maids' who hear the goblin men selling their wares? Why do the maids turn 'deaf and blind' to the goblin men after tasting their fruits once; why do the goblins refuse to sell their fruits to Lizzie when she offers them a silver penny but insist that she 'feasts' with them? and how is it that the fruit juices prove to be curative and restorative when Laura tasted them the second time?

After encountering the goblins who
... cuffed and caught her,
Coaxed and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,
Kicked and knocked her,
Mauled and mocked her.

Lizzie runs home with an inward laughter. She takes home to Laura the fruits and juices which the goblin men have squeezed on her face and neck. She calls out "Laura" up the garden,

Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me
Never mind my bruises
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Eat me, drink me, love me
Laura, make much of me.

The juice she brings home on her person proves to be a 'fiery antidote' which brings Laura back to her old innocence. She makes a miraculous recovery, of the kind which happens in fairy tales. But how does one react to Lizzie's words to

Laura? In 1973, Playboy magazine brought out an illustrated version which highlighted the erotic dimension of the sisters' love and 'portrayed' the sisters' 'physical intimacy' as "an unconscious sexual fantasy to act out a forbidden, titillating desire for lesbian incest."³³ Maureen Duffy sees the poem as an erotic fantasy although she does not connect it with any actual love of Christina's, the way Lona Mosk Packer does with the poet's love for William Bell Scott.³⁴ Cora Kaplan in Sea Changes Culture and Feminism (1986) observes that the world of 'Goblin Market' is a strategic device "used to suspend social rules", whereby the poet can express feelings and enact dramas otherwise 'taboo in genteel households'. The imagery invites speculations of all kinds. Leder and Abbott offers their interpretation of the poem as "partly about women's exploring and taking control over their own sensual natures, identifying pleasure and experiencing joy ... Lizzie and Laura find emotional/erotic release within their own relationship".³⁵ Laura "clung about her sister/kissed and kissed and kissed her." Lizzie's words and Laura's action reduces the juice to a lesser degree of importance as the sisters concentrate on each other. To interpret Lizzie's action at this point as providing Eucharistic feast for her sister and to equate her with Christ and His sacrifice is blasphemous, especially after taking into consideration the poet's orthodoxical

piety. Lizzie's sacrifice does recall that greater sacrifice in its selflessness, but the point which the poem presses home is the ideal of sisterly love. Frances Thomas defends the innocence of both poet and poem when she says that many Victorian women were kept ignorant of the 'sexual process' and 'lived their erotic lives at a just pre-adolescence level', where desires and emotions are "unfocussed, unfulfilled and turbulent".³⁶ And it is at 'this level' that the sexual imagery in "Goblin Market" operates. Perhaps a more acceptable view is that which C.M. Bowra has given in The Romantic Imagination (1961): "Her [Rossetti's] genius took command of her and made her write poems which her conscious self would have repudiated ..."³⁷ Thus, she may not have had erotic or incestuous relationship of sisters in her conscious mind when writing the poem. But "Goblin Market" can be so read as such, especially by modern readers. For instance, even the goblin men who try to attract Lizzie to their merchandise "Hugged her and kissed her:/Squeezed and caressed her:"

But the very presence of the goblin men puts the whole poem in an entirely different plane of reality from our ordinary world. In spite of the obvious absence of men, the world of "Goblin Market" is complete in itself. It is a strange world where bestial little men with their stranger fruits of all chimes entice innocent young girls. It is a world created

with words by what Rossetti once described as the 'Poet-mind'. It cannot be dismissed as a mere fairy-tale, but one should also be careful not to read too much in it as Maureen Duffy has done. What T.W. Higginson feared for Dickinson's poem "Wild Night! Wild Night! that the 'malignant' might read in it what 'that virgin recluse' never intended is also applicable to Rossetti's "Goblin Market". But in conclusion, it may be said that the rhetoric of the poem do invite ambivalent interpretations, some of which do not sit well with Rossetti's image as a saintly poet.

In "Goblin Market", the only male representative[^] are the evil goblin men whose only function in the poem is to tempt and corrupt. In poems like "Cousin Kate", "Maude Clare", "Light Love" and "Margery", the men are fickle, callous and base. But it should not be inferred that Christina Rossetti is anti-men. She had never been betrayed by a man. The more autobiographical poems are heavy with regret and longing. In some poems like "Two Thoughts of Death"; "In the Lane" and "Annie", the speakers are masculine, describing their female lovers like Dickinson's 'supposed-person', Rossetti is also capable of donning a mask to suit her poetic purpose. Both Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti rely on words and their skilful arrangements to convey ambivalent meanings and interpretations in their poetry.

END NOTES

1. Paul J. Ferlazzo writes this in his book Emily Dickinson (1976), p.62.
2. Dickinson-Kant II, Dickinson Studies No.64 (second half 1987), 3-30.
3. *Ibid.* p.23-24.
4. Vivian R. Pollak, The Anxiety of Gender (1984), p.165.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Martha Nell Smith in Rowing in Eden: Re-reading Emily Dickinson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).
7. "Notes on Sleeping with Emily Dickinson", Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson, ed. Suzanne Juharz, (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1983).
8. Vivian R. Pollak, The Anxiety of Gender (1984).
9. *Ibid.*
10. Frances Thomas in her Biography of Christina Rossetti mentions it is difficult to read "Goblin Market" without the twentieth century sexual awareness and find meanings not obvious to the Victorian readers.
11. *Ibid.*
12. D.H. Lawrence "Snake" from An Anthology of English Verse, Gauhati University Publication.
13. Vivian R. Pollak, The Anxiety of Gender (1984).
14. "Emily Dickinson and the Erotic" Dickinson Studies, No.37 (first half 1908): 25-28.
15. Vivian R. Pollak, The Anxiety of Gender (1984), p.135.
16. "The Love of Thee - a Prism Be : Men and Women in the Love Poetry of Emily Dickinson". Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson, ed. Suzanne Juharz, (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1983), pp.98-113.

17. Barbara Mossberg, Emily Dickinson: When the Writer is a Daughter (1982), pp.140-141.
18. Richard Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution", Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Judith Farr (1966), p.59.
19. Herbert J.C. Grierson and J.C. Smith, A Critical History of English Poetry, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp.451-452.
20. C.M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination (1961), p.258.
21. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti.
22. *Ibid*, pp.254-255.
23. Stephen Gurney, British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century (1993).
24. William Empson, The Seven Types of Ambiguity, 1970, p.182.
25. "Men Against Patriarchy" by Toril Moi from Gender and Theory Dialogues on Feminist Criticism, ed. Linda Kauffman (Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), p.183.
26. Sharon Smulders, "A Form that Differences": Vocational Metaphors in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Victorian Poetry, Summer 1991, Vol.29, No.2, p.165.
27. Mackenzie Bell in his Biographical and Critical Study of Christina Rossetti, p.236.
28. Stephen Gurney, British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century.
29. This is mentioned in "Christina Rossetti's Vocation: The Importance of Goblin Market" by Jan Marsh. Victorian Poetry, Autumn-Winter, 1994, Vol.32, Nos.3 and 4, p.239.
30. Mackenzie Bell, Biographical and Critical Study of Christina Rossetti (Boston, 1898), p.231.
31. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti, pp.170-2.
32. *Ibid.*, p.170.

33. Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott, The Language of Exclusion (1987), p.66.
34. Georgina Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti (1981), p.105.
35. Leder and Abbott, The Language of Exclusion (1987), p.131.
36. Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti, p.172.
37. C.M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, p.255.

Chapter—III

FAITH

Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson cannot be more different from each other than they are in matters concerning religion and faith. It has been said of Dickinson, that while she "never really doubted" the 'existence' of God, she 'could almost never accept' his 'identity as the formal Christian godhead.'¹ By contrast, it was as if Rossetti's whole life was focussed on God alone, for whose sake she forsook all earthly love. Her brother William Michael said that the poet "clung to and loved the Christian creed because she loved Jesus Christ". For her, "faith was faith pure and absolute: an entire acceptance of a thing revealed - not a quest for any confirmation or demonstrative proof."² She found in her religion an inspiration for genuine poetry although her views are orthodox and therefore lacking in excitement or novelty. Biblical verses, both from the Old as well as the New Testaments echo and re-echo in her poems. Here, it is relevant to note Dame Helen Gardner's observation made in the introduction of John Donne, The Divine Poems (1952). Describing the difference between Donne's love poetry and divine poetry, she says that the divine poet "cannot escape

using the language of the Bible, and of hymns and prayers, or remembering the words of Christian writers".³ She also states categorically that the Christian poet "cannot venture alone", since Christianity as a "revealed religion" is "contained in the Scriptures and the experience of Christian Souls".⁴ In this respect Christina Rossetti has often been compared to the Seventeenth Century Divine poet George Herbert. One may also discern traces of Thomas á Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ in the thematic structure of Rossetti's devotional poetry. On the other hand, it is not only difficult but almost impossible to determine Emily Dickinson's religious stand, apart from the glaring fact that, she had no use for the Congregational Church, of which her parents and sister had become members. Her ambivalent attitude towards God finds expression in a number of poems, some of which, borders on the blasphemous. In this chapter, we take a look at some of the poems by Dickinson and Rossetti which bear witness to the ease with which the two poets have handled painful scepticism and pure child-like faith.

Rossetti's devotional poetry have often been found monotonous and the poet has been accused of writing perfunctorily at times. The truth is that the poet writes exhaustively on the same themes, drawing upon the Psalms till the net result is monotony. The poems fall in two broad units. On the one hand are the poems dealing with general

devotions and auspicious themes such as Easter, Lent, Good Friday and the Apostles, grouped together in Some Feasts and Fasts (1853-93) and on the other hand are the poems dealing with individualised faith, mostly the poet's and are therefore more personal in nature. Most of these are cries from the heart to God and written in her later years. Reprinted from her prose works, they are grouped together in Verses (1893). There is no clear cut division thematically or otherwise between the poems by which the classification may be made. It is in the subtle difference in the rhetoric and general choice of words one can discern the difference. For example, a look at two of her poems describing Nativity will help to illustrate the point:

Thank God, thank God, we do believe
Thank God that this is Christmas Eve
Even as we kneel upon this day
Even so, the ancient legends say,
Nearly two thousand years ago.
The stalled ox knelt and even so
The ass knelt full of praise, which they
Could not express, while we can pray
Thank God, thank God, for Christ was born...

(p.117)

and

Angels and Archangels
May have gathered there.
Cherubim and Seraphim
Thronged the air;
But only His mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give Him
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb
If I were a wise man
I would do my part, --
Yet what I can I give Him
Give my heart. (pp.246-47)

The first was written in 1847 and the latter before 1872. In the first, despite the repetitive "thank God" the overall effect is more artificial, more put-on than the second carol. The difference between these two poems is subtle and may have more to do with the poet's ~~maturity than anything else~~. The first poem is a mere narrative, while in the latter, the speaker connects Heaven-Manger-her heart in a simple but profound rhetoric. On the whole, there is a sincerity and involvement in the general tone of the later poems that is not always there in the earlier poems. The later poems are often surcharged with the poet's personal emotion of self-doubt and surrender. This is so, because, towards the end of her life, Christina Rossetti was beset with doubts about her own worthiness in God's eyes. Conventional religious poems gave way for the more heart-felt pleas and prayers made to God. Complacent faith and painful doubt therefore are responsible for the rhetoric of ambivalence. Rossetti is much more a private poet than Emily Dickinson because the speaker is, more often than not, Rossetti herself and not an assumed character.

In a poem written in 1847, the poet-persona declares her trust in "one who is strong" when she is weak; whose "rod and staff shall comfort" her. She seeks and chooses Him over her earthly father, from whom she inherits "sickness and death". Her faith in 'Him' is absolute:

He from the heaven-gates built above
Hath looked on me in perfect love.
From the heaven-walls to me He calls
To come and dwell within those walls.
With Cherubim and Seraphim
And Angels: yea beholding Him.

The speaker chooses God, described as "a sheltering rock" and "a hiding place" over her earthly father. She is confident of His love and unchanging 'promise' even in the face of trouble and misfortune. It is with supreme confidence that she speaks of God looking down on her in "perfect love", inviting her to 'dwell' with Him and the Angels. Then at the very end of the spectrum, so to say, of her devotional poems, are those poems in which the poet-persona suffers from an acute sense of unworthiness. In the poem "They shall be as white as snow" written before 1893, the speaker is anxious to be 'clean' not only in God's sight, but here as well. She is ready to "reach thro' any flood or fire of pain" the "whiteness most white". She pleads,

Lord, not today: yet some day
bliss for bane
Give me, for mortal frailty give
me might,
Give innocence for guilt, and for
my stain
Whiteness most white.

This poem is a sinner's plea for cleansing and is one of the many that Christina Rossetti wrote in her later years. She acknowledges that Man is an ambivalent creature - 'great' and 'little' at the same time. In one poem, she exclaims on this ambivalence - "How great is little man!" She exhorts both the 'rich man' and the 'poor man' both 'heir of all things' to 'pursue' after the saints at the 'heavenward track', for this, in the opinion of the poet is the most important.

Little and great is man
Great if he will, or if he will
A pigmy still;
For what he will he can. (p.121)

Such is Rossetti's opinion of 'man' and to be great is obviously to live in accordance to the will of his Maker, to love God above all else.

Talking about Rossetti's faith, Stephen Gurney says that "there was nothing spurious or decorative in Christina's utter surrender to the Gospel of Christianity."⁵ He also comments on her 'sincerity' as well as the "artlessness and transparency of her faith" which found expression in the sonnets "which read as if her dialogue with God fell naturally and unself-consciously into the exact measures of this demanding form." Gurney also rescues the poet from the clutches of feminist critics such as Dolores Rosenblum who calls Rossetti's writings, especially "The Lowest Place", 'notorious' from a feminist perspective. He finds the feminist approach to be misrepresentative and disfiguring.

This is a fair and commendable view, for Rossetti's whole heart is focussed on God in the devotional poems. Her greatest wish is to see her 'king' in his city of gold:

Marvel of Marvels, if I myself shall
 behold
With mine own eyes my King in
 His city of gold;
Where the least of lambs is spotless
 white in the fold,
Where the least and last of saints in
 spotless white is stoled,
Where the dimmest head beyond a
 moon is aureoled. (p.122)

But that she is uncertain of herself being allowed entry there, is attested by the qualifying 'if'. The uncertainty becomes more pronounced when she questions the 'saints', "shall I see you lift your heads,... See with these very eyes?" Unlike Emily Dickinson's persona, Christina Rossetti never takes her going to heaven for granted. Her faith, deep and staunch as it is, never allows for her to be complacent.

With the aid of her imagination and the Pre-Raphaelitic love for colour and details, Rossetti paints beautiful word pictures of Paradise in the poems "Paradise" and "Mother Country".

Once in a dream I saw the flowers
That bud and bloom in Paradise;
More fair they are than waking eyes
Have seen in all this world of ours
And faint the perfume-bearing rose,
And faint the lily on its stem



And faint the perfect violet
 Compared with them

I saw the Gate called Beautiful;
 And looked, but scarce could look
 within;
 I saw the golden streets begin
 And outskirts of the glassy pool.
 Oh harps, oh crowns of plenteous stars
 Oh green palm branches many leaved-
 Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard,
 Nor heart conceived. (pp.180-81)

and

If I one day may see
 Its spices and cedars
 Its gold and ivory

As I lie dreaming
 It rises, that land;
 There rises before me
 Its green golden strand
 With the bowing cedars
 And the shining sand;
 It sparkles and flashes
 Like a shaken brand. (p.245)

This vivid picturesque image of Paradise is dream-induced, the poet garnering images from the book of Revelation till we too can see the golden streets and green leafy palms swaying in the breeze before our eyes as if it were real. But the poet does not claim her vision as real as Dickinson's persona insists in the poem, "I went to heaven..." Rossetti's Paradise is a dream as both "Once in a dream" and "As I lie dreaming" clarifies. It is her "hope" to see them "not as once in dreams by night" but with her "very sight" and be with God there. "If I one day may see..." is filled with hope and longing. The speaker has no doubt as to the existence of

such a place as she has dreamt. Emily Dickinson's Paradise is never half as beautiful as Rossetti's. The golden grandeur of Rossetti's Paradise makes Dickinson's seem cold and barren when she asks

What is - 'Paradise' -
Who live there -
Are they 'Farmers' -
Do they 'hoe' -

Rossetti's persona, already enamoured of her Lord, re-creates the picture of Paradise in her mind's eye and longs to reach that land. Since 'death' separates her from the golden city, the persona not only accepts death, but appears to long for it. She says in one poem,

And youth and beauty die
So be it, O my God, Thou God of Truth:
Better than Beauty and than Youth
Are Saints and Angels, a glad company;
And Thou, O Lord, our Rest and Ease,
Art better far than these
Why should we shrink from our full harvest? Why
Prefer to glean with Ruth?

and in the sonnet "If only", she cries,

If I might only love my God and die!
But now He bids me love Him and live on,
Now when the bloom of all my
life is gone.

It is because of poems like the above two that, Rossetti is sometimes accused of possessing a certain world-weariness. They justify Christabel Coleridge's warning that the poems are "more calculated to help people to lay down their lives in the battle than to get up and live to fight another day."⁶ In the lines quotes above, the speaker expresses her

Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?
Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
And all my pleasures are like yesterday ...
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.

In a similar vein, Rossetti in "Sarsum Corda" writes,

.....
I cannot, Lord, lift up my heart to
Thee:
Stoop, lift it up, that where Thou art
I too may be.

.....
Stoop, Lord, as once before, now
once anew;
Stoop, Lord, and hearken, hearken,
Lord, and do,
And take my will, and take my heart,
and take me too. (p.130)

Here, the poet requires Christ, lifted on the Cross for sinners to 'Stoop' and take her 'up' to be where He is. Here, the rhetoric implies that no one can lift up their hearts to God unless He 'stoops' to lift it up Himself.

Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit priest, who in 1881 confided to Richard Dixon, of his fears of divine judgement against him for writing poetry, which he himself deemed were 'backward glances',⁸ Rossetti too, had fears about her career as a poet. If writing verses were tantamount to backsliding, then no doubt, Rossetti too felt guilt and a sense of unworthiness. In one poem, she describes her heart as "still hankering after Egypt full in view/where cucumbers and melons grow." Her prayers reveal not only her own but humanity's frailty and weakness and the difficulty of holding on and keeping the faith:

Lord Jesus, who would think that
I am thine?
Ah who would think
Who sees me ready to turn back or sink
That Thou art mine?
I cannot hold Thee fast tho' Thou art mine
Hold Thou me fast. (p.219)

The speaker claims that Jesus is hers just as she is His. But she finds it difficult to 'hold' Him 'fast', because she is "ready to turn back or sink" away from Him. Her heartfelt cry moves us because we recognise our plight in hers; her prayer becomes our prayer as we see our frailties mirrored in hers.

Rossetti's brother William Michael, himself an agnostic, had to comfort the poet in her later years, when she was assailed with doubts, and assure her of her own worthiness just like her mother and sister Maria Francesca.⁹ William attributes the spiritual gloominess of her last days to the influence of the opiates which were administered to her. The following lines reveal the inner trauma of the poet:

We are of those who tremble at Thy
word;
Who faltering walk in darkness
toward our close
Of mortal life, by terrors curbed and
spurred:
We are of those
.....
Not ours the hearts Thy loftiest
love hath stirred.
Not such as we Thy lily and Thy
rose: (p.196)

The poet also realises the ambivalent nature of the human heart. In "Worship God", she expresses her idea that if God

had ordered not to worship Him because of His loneliness,
then 'We' would have 'besieged' Him with "prayer and tear".
Instead because He said,

Worship Me, and give
Thy heart to Me, my child; now
therefore we
Think twice before we stoop to
worship Thee:
We proffer half a heart ... (p.123)

It is sheer contradictoriness on our part that we do not
worship God as we ought to. Christina Rossetti had another
reason to fear for punishment, another cause that led to her
ambivalent relationship of love and fear with God. She could
not fully free herself from the Biblical precepts which
ordained "unalterable distinction between men and women,
their position, duties, privileges."¹⁰ As such, her own
single state, political activities and even her career as
poet appeared to her as going against Scripture. Her doubts
and fears find expression in a number of poems. In sonnet
#twenty seven of "Later Life", she voices her fear:

I have dreamt of Death: - what
will it be to die
Not in a dream, but in the literal truth
With all Death's adjuncts ghastly and
uncouth
The pang that is the last and the last sigh?
.....
While I supine with ears that cease
to hear
With eyes that glaze, with heart-pulse
running down
(Alas! no saint rejoicing on her bed)
May miss the goal at last, may miss
a crown. (p.81)

Virginia Woolf's diary reveals what the novelist thought of the poet. She has written that Rossetti, for the sake of religion "starved" herself of love, and stunted her poetic talent. Then as a "reward for all her sacrifices", "died in terror, uncertain of salvation."¹¹

Apart from her later fears, Rossetti had already formed her conception of a wilful God who delighted in capriciously tormenting even those who love Him: In "Weary in Well-Doing", the persona depicts God as arbitrary and capricious:

I would have gone; God bade me stay:
I would have worked: God bade
 me rest.
He broke my will from day to day;
 He read my yearnings unexpressed,
 And said them nay.
Now I would stay; God bids me go:
Now I would rest; God bids me
 work.
He breaks my heart to and fro;
My soul is wrung with doubts that
 lurk
And vex it so. (p.242)

Here it seems as if the persona and God are working at cross-purpose. The image of God that is projected here is totally opposed to the one of Him as a loving Father who cared enough for humanity to have sent His Son for their deliverance. God not only denies her wishes but breaks her will and her heart for no apparent reason. The speaker sounds pathetically helpless as she laments "My soul is wrung with doubts that lurk". This is very different from when the poet persona says,

"How Heaven to Thee without us
had been lost,
How Heaven with us is Thy one
only Heaven
Heaven shared with us thro' all
eternity,
With us long sought, long loved
and much forgiven. (p.268)

In a sonnet that is reminiscent of the Shakespearean lines from King Lear, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/They kill us for their sport",¹² the poet depicts God as unreasonably arbitrary, who can 'scourge' and 'slay' even those who 'flaunt His praise'. In sonnet #one of 'Later Life', the rhetoric of ambivalence is obvious and apparent:

Before the mountains were brought
forth, before
Earth and the world were made, then
God was God:
And God will still be God when flames
shall roar
Round earth and heaven dissolving
at His nod:
And this God is our God, even while
His rod
Of righteous wrath falls on us
Smiting sore.
And this God is our God for evermore.
Through life, through death, while clod
returns to clod.
For though He slay us, we will trust
in Him
We will flock home to Him by divers ways:
Yea, though He slay us we will vaunt
His praise,
Serving and loving with the Cherubim,
Wathing and loving with the Seraphim,
Our very selves His praise through
endless days. (p.73)

The phrase "And this God is our God" is a recurring phrase which betrays the speaker's love-hate relationship with God.

It occurs at strategic places after the speaker describes the arbitrary and despotic character of God. There is an implied criticism in the tone as when she mentions His "righteous wrath". Man is depicted as having no choice other than to praise God, even when His 'rod' might 'smite' and 'slay' him, because "He is God". And when with "His nod" the world is dissolved, then "we will flock home" to Him to "vaunt His praise" for evermore.

In the same "Later Life" series, the poet, alluding to the Psalms, prays for grace and understanding, reminding God that man was made out of "dust and nothingness". She cries:

Thou who didst make and knowest
 whereoff we are made,
Oh bear in mind our dust and nothingness
 Our wordless tearless numbness
 of distress:
Bear Thou in mind the burden Thou
 has laid
Upon us, and our feebleness unstayed
 Except Thou stay us: for the
 long long race
Which stretches far and far before
 our face
Thou knowest, - remember Thou
 whereoff we are made (p.74)

and

Allow my plea! for if Thou disallow
No second fountain can I find
 but Thee;
No second hope or help is left to me
No second anything, but only Thou. (p.74)

There is no other God to whom she might pray even when she feels she has not been heard. He may be a "scourge" but like Dickinson's persona who calls on the "Savior" because she has

no one else to tell her plight, so also Rossetti's persona has "no second anything" save this God. She attempts to soften His hard and unyielding stand against her and the rest of humanity by reminding Him that 'we' are made of 'dust and nothingness' and therefore no match for His Superior strength.

Her uncertainty and doubt about God's love finds expression in a poem written in 1863.

Have I not striven, my God and
watched and prayed?
Have I not wrestled in mine agony?
Wherefore still turn Thy face of
Grace from me?
Is Thine Arm shortened that Thou
Canst not aid?
Thy silence breaks my heart: speak
tho' to ubraid,
For Thy rebuke yet bids us follow
Thee.

(p.228)

The God of this poem is neither loving nor wrathful. Instead, He is indifferent and distant. He remains silent to all the persona's prayers and she feels deprived of His Grace and His helping Hand.

This poem is uncannily like one Emily Dickinson had written a year before Rossetti wrote hers. In "At least to pray - is left", Dickinson's persona questions, "Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth/Has Thou no arm for me?" Elsewhere, Dickinson also writes that God's 'arm' is 'amputated' now and can no longer save. Although different from each other in tone, both Rossetti's poem as well as Dickinson's are

expressions of the frustration and hopelessness of a lonely soul in search of a connection with its Maker. What is amazing is that such a quest should have been made by the poets almost around the same time. The allusion to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is very strong in both the poems as the speakers call out to Jesus to 'aid' them with His arm. In the Old Testament too, there are references to God's 'arm' that aids His people. The prayers that the personae makes are met with 'silence', but this does not deter them. They keep their faith and belief in God. Rossetti in another poem "Thy fainting Spouse" and Dickinson in "Given in Marriage Unto Thee" both describe themselves as the bride of Christ.

Rossetti's rhetoric of ambivalence includes such poems as "Twice", "When I was in trouble I called the Lord" and "Afterward he repented and went" where the speaker gives her heart to God, only after it had been "broken". In real life, Christina Rossetti had neither been rejected nor callously treated by either of her two suitors. What she wishes to project, in these poems is the forgiveness of God and His Constancy. There is utter trust in the speaker's words below:

Lord, when my heart was whole,
I kept it back
And grudged to give it Thee
Now then that it is broken, must I
lack
Thy kind word "Give it me".
Silence would be just, and
Thou art just
Yet since I lie here shattered in
the dust,

With still an eye to life to Thee
A broken heart to give
I think that Thou wilt bid me live
And answer "Give it me". (p.123)

God will not reject or turn away from anyone who comes to Him, no matter how badly bruised or marred the heart they bring. Unlike men, God never rejects or betrays those who seek His face.

Uncertainties and doubts notwithstanding, Rossetti's faith and confidence in a benevolent God is restored in "Heaven Overarches" the last poem in the devotional section. In this simple unsophisticated poem, she invites the reader to 'look up' with her and watch for 'the day break and the shadows flee':

Heaven overarches earth and sea,
Earth sadness and sea-bitterness
Heaven overarches you and me:
A little while and we shall be -
Please God - where there is no more sea
Nor barren wilderness. (p.286)

Here there is no trace of the uncertainty, fear or frustration that has filled some of the poems discussed. The confidence in the speaker's voice is heartening while the optimism it carries recalls to the mind the voice of Robert Browning, another great Victorian who writes, "God's in his Heaven/And all's right with the world."¹³ Rossetti's poem is full of encouragement as she stoutly declares,

Look up with me, until we see
The day break and the shadows flee.
What though tonight wrecks you and me
If so tomorrow saves?

Earthly tribulations are worth suffering for the joys of heaven. This poem is testimony of faith and unadulterated hope.

Rossetti's rhetoric of ambivalence on faith would be incomplete without mentioning a word of "Goblin Market". This superficially simple poem has elements of the subversive, not essentially associated with Christina Rossetti. It appropriates the theme of temptation, sin and redemption that one associates with the Bible. Alicia Ostriker in Feminist Revision and the Bible (1993) point out this fact by saying that "Goblin Market" bites off the whole plot of the Bible: it is a feminist version of temptation, fall and redemption."¹⁴ The protagonists, in place of Adam and Eve are two sisters, Laura and Lizzie. Temptation comes to them, not in the form of a snake, but a troop of little goblin men selling their wares of the choicest fruits. Laura succumbs to the temptation, eating the fruits which she bought with a lock of golden hair. The mysterious fruits may not be acquired twice even though they are addictive. Laura falls into decline with longing. Lizzie then braves the goblin men in an attempt to acquire the fruits for Laura. She is "subjected to a kind of attempted gang-rape" by the goblins who, "after shedding their friendly attitude ~~being~~ to attack her bodily and tried to push the fruits into her mouth. She runs home to Laura with the smears of goblin fruit juice on

her face and neck, offering herself to Laura "in a communion feast which gives us a full-scale female and even quasi-lesbian Christ":

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you.
Goblin pulp and goblin due.
Eat me, drink me, love me,
Laura, make much of me,
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.

Stephen gurney says that Lizzie's action of offering herself "as a kind of Eucharistic meal" recalls the sacrifice of Christ ..."¹⁵ But he does not equate Lizzie with Christ much less as a feministic version of Christ. Instead, he describes Lizzie's action as an expression of a "poetics in which the Gospel values of sacrifice, service, and praise are pre-eminent over the worldly values of pride, lust or avarice."¹⁶ The theme of temptation, sacrifice and redemption is too obvious to be ignored and the language, however innocently the poet may have used the words allow room for more than one interpretation including feminist Christian allegory.

If Christina Rossetti's devotional poems are worthy of being called the National hymns of Heaven, Emily Dickinson's can lay no such claims. The poet herself had an ambivalent attitude towards God which is reflected in the poems. Dickinson showed a distinctive impatience with conventional religion and mode of worship. In a letter to Higginson, she remarked that all her family were religious except her "and

address and Eclipse, every morning - whom they call their Father". Of course, Alicia Ostiker is of the opinion that here, Dickinson is merely "testing the waters of Higginson's tolerance for verbal mischief."¹⁷ While studying at Mt. Holyoke, a female Seminary, she was the only one who did not make a formal commitment to Christ. She also remained the only member of her family not formally join the Church. As Northrop Frye puts it in Fables of Identity (1963), Dickinson "belonged in the congregation, but not in the Church". But still, she did not have an alternative God or an alternative form of salvation. Even her art, for all the importance she gives to it in life, could not deflect her mind totally from the issue of faith. She remained pre-occupied with the Bible and the Church she did not want to be a part of. This pre-occupation found manifestation in a large number of poems in her canon. Even so, Dickinson cannot be regarded as a religious poet the way Christina Rossetti is regarded. Whatever emotion she might feel towards the Christian Godhead, the poet preferred to hide behind the various masks that she so loved to wear. Ostiker points out that Dickinson was not concerned about contradicting herself in her poetry. But in whatever context she uses Biblical and religious terms, she makes sure that they ring true within each poem's own context.

The rhetoric of the poems emphasize and underscore the ambivalence of the poet. No one attitude can be pin-pointed as the truth about Emily Dickinson and that the rest be discarded. But taken as a whole, they serve to display the poet's talent and creativity. The poems dealing with God and faith, like the rest of her poems on love or immortality offer multiple attitudes, all of which are equally convincing. Scripture, which she was familiar with was, in the words of Ostiker, "a poem out of which one makes, of course, other poems".¹⁸ In a playful, mock serious poem meant for her nephew, the poet declares the Bible to be "an antique volume written by faded men."

The Bible is an antique volume -

Written by faded men
At the suggestion of Holy spectres -
Subjects Bethlehem -

This poem is a deliberate attempt to down-grade the sanctity of the Holy Book of the Christians. The poet's deliberate use of 'Holy Spectres' over 'Holy Spirit' which amounts to near blasphemy goes a long way to show her irreverence. Her jest about the Bible is inappropriate and unsuitable for a little boy. But in spite of the light hearted wittism with which the poem starts off, the poet brings in a more serious note at the end. She compares the Bible unfavourably with Orpheus, whose 'Sermon' is delivered through music: "Orpheus' sermon captivated/It did not condemn -". The unwritten feeling which

the boy might not decipher from between the lines is that the poet felt condemned by the Bible. In order to hide her uneasiness and frustration, she takes recourse to joking. In "I will be Socrates", Tselentis Apostolidis¹⁹ says that the poet 'prefers' the "fundamentally amoral, poetic and magical quality of Orpheus" to the 'Puritan preachings' she has been exposed to. It is not so much the content of the Bible as the way the 'sermon' is delivered that the poet finds objectionable. Her disapproval and discontent with the Biblical content is obvious from two other poems. In poem #597, "It always felt to me - a wrong", the persona declares what she regards as God's injustice in not having allowed Moses to enter the Promised Land:

It always felt to me - a wrong
To that Old Moses - done -
To let him see - the Canaan -
Without entering.

But ambivalence towards the truth of the Biblical narrative intrudes -

And tho' in soberer moments -
No Moses there can be
Im satisfied - the Romance
In point of injury.

At her 'soberer moments', she is convinced that Moses, the "Old Man on Nebo" is only a myth, yet she blames God for barring him from entering Canaan after letting him 'see' it. Her sense of justice 'bleeds' for Moses even as she half regards the Bible as mere 'Romance'.

In a similar vein, she portrays God as a willful God, "taunting humanity with its helplessness before His Power" in the poem "Abraham to kill him." The poet regards Abraham's obedience to God's command to kill his son Isaac and offer burnt offering as fear-induced.

Isaac - to his children
Lived to tell the tale
Moral - with a mastif
Manners may prevail.

Here God is equated to a 'mastif', who, makes sure with His superior strength that His commands are obeyed. Ostiker comments that "whatever am" Dickinson feels for God "is more than balanced by rage at his power and distance, not to mention fury at his possible non-existence."¹⁹ Alan Schucard in Modern American Poetry (1989) describes Dickinson as one who was "too committed to earth to let go of it and too attached to a Heavenly Father to relinquish hope for His Heaven".²¹ As if this ambivalence were not enough, Schucard also says that Dickinson "rejected the divinity of Jesus".²²

Dickinson indeed holds herself equal with God and Jesus and thus addresses them with no humility. In poem #964, the persona holds an imaginary dialogue with Jesus in a series of rapid-five questions and answers:

"Unto me?" I do not know you -
where may be your House?
"I am Jesus late of Judea -
Now - of Paradise" -
Wagons - have you - to convey me?
This is far from Thence -
"Arms of mine - sufficient Phaeton -

Trust omnipotence" -
I am spotted - "I am Pardon"
I am small - The Least
Is esteemed in Heaven the chiefest
Occupy my House" ~

The poet in this poem proves her knowledge of scripture as well as the resistance she puts up against it. The persona raises every objection she could think of before allowing herself to trust Jesus. But He has an answer that puts down all her reasons almost as soon as she voices them. All that Jesus wants is to lead her to 'Paradise', for her to trust in "Omnipotence", still the persona is reluctant. It is as if she is hoping that she would be disqualified somehow. She argues till she has run out of excuses. The persona's resistance to commitment even after all her reasons for not doing so cleared is much the same as Dickinson's when she resisted the popular wave of Evangelism in her youth. During her teenage years, the poet had written to her friend Abiah Root that she felt more elated without God:

The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to
buffet the sea - I can count the bitter
wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and
hear the murmuring winds, but oh I love
the danger! You are learning control and
firmness. Christ Jesus will love you
more. I'm afraid he dont love me any.²³
(L.1, 104)

This letter however appears to be a mere show of bravado, or a youthful boast. No doubt the writer meant it at the time it was written, but it is, by no means an expression of a lifetime conviction. She might not be awed by God, calling

Him "Burglar! Banker and Father" and even refer to Him as "Papa above" in an irreverential playful way; still neither Dickinson nor her persona know any other God to surrogate Him. Nor does the poet have a substitute religion for the one she was contemptuous of, or seemingly indifferent to.

In the poem "How brittle are the piers", the poet manifests her "acceptance of the Christian Trinity"²⁴ while at the same time admitting the 'brittleness or fragility of her faith.

How brittle are the Piers
On which our Faith doth tread -
No bridge below doth totter so -
Yet none had such a crowd.

The ambivalence in the rhetoric is brought out by the conjunction 'yet' used in the last line. The bridge of faith may be brittle and tottering. But nevertheless, 'none had such a crowd' waling on it. The reasons, provided in the next stanza is that God Himself had built the bridge and sent His 'son' to "test the Plank" and "He" has 'pronounced it firm'.

There is one poem in which the poet persona describes a poignant "loss of something", identified only at the end of the poem as "the kingdom of Heaven". In a rhetoric full of ambivalence, the poet, prompted by spiritual hunger writes:

A loss of something ever felt I -
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was - of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect
.....

Elder, today, a session wiser
And fainter, too, as wiseness is -
I find myself still softly searching
For my Delinquent Palaces -

And a suspicion like a Finger
Touches my Forehead now and then
That I am looking oppositely
For the site of the kingdom of Heaven. (#959)

This poem describes, in the words of A.R.C. Finch, the "ambivalent relationship with Christianity"²⁵. After losing Paradise, the persona is still futilely searching for it and suspects that she is perhaps looking in the opposite direction. At first, the persona did not know what she was 'bereft' of, indicated by the rhetoric of ambivalence: "Bereft I was - of what I knew not". Later when she turns older and wiser, then "And fainter too as wiseness is" not "wisdom" as commonly used noun, she is "still softly searching". This poem is reminiscent to a certain degree, to Henry Vaughan's "The Retreat" where the poet describes his longing to travel back to the days of his Angel-infancy. Dickinson's persona may also be longing for "some shadows of eternity" not knowing where to look for them.

In her search for the kingdom of Heaven, the poet-persona rejects the orthodox view of salvation. It has become dated and useless. This is the theme in the poem "Those-dying then":

Those-dying then
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -

That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

(#1551)

Despite this attitude that God cannot be found anymore, the Dickinson canon consists of a number of poems relating to the life and sacrifice of Christ. In an essay titled "Tender Pioneer - Emily Dickinson's poems on the life of Christ", Dorothy Huff Oberhaus examines the poems describing the love and sacrifice of Christ and says that Dickinson "stresses the Gospel's contemporary relevance and makes them freshly available to her 'sweet countrymen' with her wit and American colloquial language."²⁶ The poems that Oberhaus picks up for her study are "The Savior must have been" #1487 on the birth of Christ; "The Test of Love - is Death" #573 and "One Crown that no One Seeks" #1735 on Christ's sacrifice "He gave away his life" #567 on the resurrection. She compares the poet with other devotional poets such as Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw among others. Noting the "deep structure of her Gospel poems" Oberhaus places Emily Dickinson in "the poetic tradition of Christian devotion" to which the aforesaid poets belong. She defines the "poetic tradition of Christian devotion" as the poets' "reverential attention to the life of Jesus Christ and their acceptance of such données as the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption. The poets also, says Oberhaus, 'regard the life of Christ as not merely a picturesque fable providing vivid metaphors but rather as their model.'" This definition is fine, but contrary to

Oberhaus" opinion that Dickinson is part of the tradition of Christian devotion, the very definition she gives exclude her. Dickinson's poems are anything but reverential. In fact, it is her irreverence that is one of the most striking characteristic of her devotional poetry. For instance, in the poem on the birth of Christ, one cannot fail to notice the subtle sarcasm:

The Savior must have been
A docile Gentleman -
To come so far so cold a day
For little Fellowmen -,

or miss the impertinence of the speaker in

"Heavenly Father" - take to thee
The Supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid Hand
In a moment contraband -
Though to trust us - seem to us
More respectful - "We are dust" -
|| We apologise to thee
|| For thine own duplicity. (#1461)

This poem is addressed to the "Heavenly Father" but the following lines are not what one expects to be said to the Heavenly Father. Starting off seemingly as a prayer, it is actually an accusation of God for His 'duplicity'. The speaker assumes moral superiority to God as she apologises to God for the 'Supreme iniquity' which His own Hand had fashioned. It implies that the persona holds God Himself responsible for temptation and the Fall.

Emily Dickinson's knowledge of the Bible is faultless, but as a poet, she takes the liberty either to critique, mock

or satirise as she please. In "A little east of Jordan" #59, she narrates the story of Jacob, describing him as a "Gymnast" who had "worsted God". She re-writes the Biblical incident to give a humorous twist to the tale:

Till morning touching mountain -
And Jacob waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast - to return -

Then in "Papa Above" #61, she parodies the "Lord's Prayer" while putting on an obvious mask of "a bad little good girl". The speaker prays that God reserve a mansion in Heaven for the poor mouse overpowered by the cat. She solicits God to provide food for the mouse to last eternity. The speaker is boldly impudent not only in the way she addresses God, but also in the way she contradicts the orthodox idea of the kingdom of God. By introducing the mouse "snug in seraphic cupboards", the poet vulgarizes Paradise. The rhetoric, on one hand affirms the poet's belief in the Biblical concept of "many mansions" in Heaven, and on the other hand, reveals her ambivalence towards God - She ridicules the concept of Christianity by making her prayer for the mouse. And Ronald Wallace comments in God Be With the Clown (1984) that the comedy of the poems serves the twin purposes of "affirming conventional truths about God, immortality ...", and enabling the poet "to bring God down to a manageable size".²⁷

In a similar manner, Dickinson has no qualms about calling God "Burglar Banker - Father" parodying the Holy

Trinity in "I never lost as much as Twice" #357. Acknowledging God as 'Father', she nonetheless reduces Him to a 'burglar' and a 'banker' using her own yardstick to measure Him. She calls Him a "distant stately lover" who 'woos' 'us' through His Son in "God is a distant stately lover", #357. Her only concern is that we might prefer the 'envoy' to the Groom. In another poem, #1719, taking God's self proclaimed attribute from the Bible, she says that God is indeed a jealous God who "cannot bear to see/That we had rather not with Him/But with each other play.

The poems on the life of Christ are neither exaggerated nor satirical. Neither are they inspirational. The poet treats the theme as literal truth and not spiritual truth. In "The Test of Love - is Death"#573, the poet describes the love of Christ:

The Test of Love - is Death -
Our Lord - "so loved" - it saith -
What Largest Lover - hath -
Another - doth -

The words within quotation "so loved" is lifted from the Gospel of John 3:16, and the next - "it saith" referring to the Bible brings out the ambivalence of the rhetoric. Christ may be the "Largest Lover", but it is put on the balance by "it saith" a deliberate phrase which neither affirm nor negate. The poet leaves the choice to the reader without committing herself.

Dickinson's Christology lacks the fervour of Rossetti's. Alan Schucard makes the interesting observation that Dickinson's God was "really coequal with nature and her ego in a kind of tripartite worldview"²⁸. It explains why her religious poems are so lacking in depth. Placing her persona as an equal and she being only human like the rest of us, she fails to bring out in her rhetoric, the qualities and attributes of Rossetti's God. Thus, in their Nativity poems, Rossetti's "Lord God Almighty" becomes a "Docile Gentleman" for Dickinson. Oberhaus' definition of the poetic tradition of Christian tradition describes Rossetti better than it does Dickinson.

Dickinson's ambivalent attitude towards God and Christ is expressed in a number of poems as in "At least - to pray - is left - is left" #502.

At least - to pray - is left - is left -
Oh Jesus - in the Air -
I know not which thy Chamber is -
Im knocking - everywhere -

Here she portrays Jesus as an indifferent, uncaring and unresponsive God, quite different from the one, who came to earth for the sake of "little fellowmen". The poet who declares Jesus as the "Largest Lover" here portrays Him as an inaccessible deity. The speaker urgently searches for Him everywhere, but in vain. But the first line of the poem reveals that the persona has thought of prayer to Jesus as a last resort when she has exhausted her other known resources.

"At least to pray is left" is self-explanatory about how low prayer is in the speaker's priority list - so low that she does not know where to reach Jesus.

The silence and indifference of this God is again the theme of the poem "Of Course I Prayed" #376. There is a hint of defiance and challenge in the tone of the rhetoric as the speaker rants about an uncaring God. The scant attention which her prayer elicits from God is expressed thus:

Of cause - I prayed -
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird - had stamped her foot -
And cried "Give me" -

The persona challenges the usefulness or effectiveness of prayer in this poem. She cannot, however, cancel prayer from her life, but evidently, there is no answer from 'God'. In the light of God's vast indifference, she feels it would have been better not to exist at all. Ambivalently, however, the poet persona believes that God has singled her out if only to bear the brunt of His partiality, "God gave a Loaf to every Bird -/But just a Crumb - to Me -" (#791) while in another, she declares,

Nature and God - I neither knew
Yet Both so well knew me
They startled, like executors
Of My identity. (#835)

Around the same time the poem, "Of Course - I Prayed" was written, the poet also wrote the poem "I prayed at first, a little girl" #576, in which the persona confides how she

used to pray when a little girl because 'she had been told to. But when she became 'qualified' to guess how her prayers would sound to God, she 'stopped' praying.

I prayed at first, a little Girl,
Because they told me to -
But stopped when qualified to guess
How prayer would feel - to me -

In the above poems, the persona betrays her ambivalence - she prays and not prays to God, whose existence she believes in, even when she does not get an answer for her prayers. The notion that God is inaccessible and impersonal is again expressed in the poem "My Period had come for Prayer" #564:

My period had come for Prayer -
No other Art - would do -
My Tactics missed a rudiment -
Creator - was it you?
.....

Infinitude - Hadst Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?
The Silence condescended -
Creation stopped - for me -
But awed beyond my errand -
I worshipped - did not "pray".

In Emily Dickinson: The Metaphysical Tradition (1982), Anand Rao Thota describes this poem as the poet's "visit to the Creator" and remarks that here, Dickinson "comes to terms with the Creator"²⁹ as she does in no other poem. The persona resorts to 'prayer' since no other 'Art' would do and her earlier 'tactics' had failed. But the ambivalence of the poem is that the persona has no faith. She needs to "see this Curious Friend" and to behold the "face" of "Infinitude".

Prayer, the poet tells us, in another poem, is "the little implement"

Through which men reach
Where Presence - is denied them
They fling their speech
By means of it - in God's Ear (#437)

The persona finally 'worshipped' the condescending 'silence' or 'Infinitude', but 'did not pray'. Burke interprets this poem in "Religion of Poetry" to mean that Dickinson views 'divinity' as indifferent to individual prayers "but as so indifferent to individual prayers "but as so impersonal and indifferent in an overwhelming way as to call for 'worship' rather than prayer".³⁰ It is uncertain whether the poet holds the 'Creator' or God in the same bracket as 'silence' and 'infinitude'. She is 'awed' by whatever she has confronted, in this case, the vast expanse of sky. But the question that the persona asked, "Creator was it you" in the beginning is not answered just as she does not finally pray at the end, after stating that her 'period had come for prayer' at the first line of the poem.

In the poem "Houses" #127 the speaker says of the Father that she does not know Him: "'Many mansions' by his 'father'/I don't know him; snugly built!" Of course, this is an allusion to Christ's promise to prepare a place in the many mansions in His Father's house. However, in her typically irreligious manner deprives it of its spiritual dimension in the last two lines: "Could the children find the

way there -/Some, would even trudge tonight." The persona denies any knowledge of the Father at the same time she has Biblical knowledge about Christ's promise of mansions. The rhetoric of ambivalence is used in another poem where the speaker again denies knowledge of God while acknowledging is knowledge of her: "Nature and God - I neither knew/Yet Both so well knew me." (#835). The poet who wrote "I went to Heaven" also has written,

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven -
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the checks were given (#1052)

The word 'yet' as conjunction occurs in both the poems to express the ambivalence of the rhetorics.

The poet expresses ambivalent attitudes in her poems. In "Only God detect the Sorrow", the persona proclaims her acceptance of the Christian Trinity, but in such a way as to be almost blasphemous:

The Jehovahs - are no Babblers -
Unto God
God the Son - confide it -
Still secure -
God the spirit's Honour -
Just as sure. (#626)

More glaring than anything is the note of profanity, as if the persona is taking the name of the Lord in vain. The poet may believe in God, but only on her terms. As in her youth, so also in her poetry, perhaps in her entire life, Dickinson

refused to surrender completely to God. In poem #1403, she solicits as humbly as she possibly can,

My Maker - let me be
Enamored most of thee -
But nearer this
I more should miss -

Still, the persona never ever feel that her prayers are heard, much less answered. She tells us that she prays, but only because "no other Art would do" and because she has "no one else" to tell:

Savior! I've no one else to tell -
An so I trouble thee
I am the one forgot thee so -
Dost thou remember me? (#217)

The persona would, no doubt not 'trouble' the 'Savior' if she had someone else to tell her problem. She claims to be the one to forget Him and she wants to be remembered by Him. Since she needs Him to give her audience. The Savior is ambivalently either the only one she trusts enough with her news, or, her last bid for finding someone to share her news.

The persona in "I got so I could take his name" #293 resorts to prayer when she remembers a 'Grace' called 'God' - "Renowned to ease Extremity/When Formula, had failed -". She simply 'shapes' her hands 'petitious way' without knowing a word to say. In such poems as this, no personal faith is discernible in the persona.

In the poem "Those - Dying then" #1551, the speaker comments, perhaps with a trace of envy on the faith of those who have died:

Those - dying then,
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -
The Abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small -

There is ambivalence even here. The speaker feels the desertion of God because she has no contact with Him. God's saving arm does not reach her because either she does not see it or refuses to grasp it. "Abdication of Belief" however implies that the persona is responsible for her loss of faith, one who amputated God's arm. But "And God cannot be found" contradictorily implies that the persona has searched for Him while He has deliberately stayed away from her. Those already dead were fortunate to go to "God's Right Hand" while for the speaker and those still living, He cannot be found anymore.

The rebellious non-conformist Dickinson also writes such poems as "He Strained my Faith" and "Life is what we make it" where the speaker declares a deep and abiding faith. In "He Strained my Faith" #497, the speaker heroically clings to her faith in the face of strong opposition from Jesus, the obvious 'He' of the poem. She uses words such as 'strained'; 'shook', 'hurled', 'racked' and 'wrung' to describe the

attack on her faith. But never once did she doubt Him or let herself be shaken, even though she is ignorant of the reason of this siege on her faith and trust. At the end, the speaker identifying herself as "John", the beloved disciple begs for "sweet forgiveness". The poem, has no Biblical context and therefore should not be assumed that the disciple is the speaker. Rather, "John" is a mask assumed by the poet to identify the speaker of her poem.

In "Life is what we make it" #698, the poet portrays Jesus as a "tender pioneer" who, out of love first tested and experienced death for humanity to follow:

He would trust no stranger
Other - could betray -
Just His own endorsement
That - sufficeth me -
.....
His sure foot preceding -
Tender Pioneer -
Base must be the coward
Dare not venture - now -

Here Christ is depicted as a trustworthy Savior since He has tested all the distance from earth to Paradise. There is no reason for anyone not to follow Him unless if one was a 'Coward'.

Contradictorily, the poet in #1360 describes an ambivalent attitude towards the Gospel, also referred to as the Good News:

I sued the News - yet feared - the News
That such a realm could be -
"The House not made with Hands" it was -
Thrown open wide to me.

The speaker of this poem is overwhelmed by the magnitude of Divine Love. Referring to the celestial mansion that Christ prepares for believers, the speaker confesses that such love for her makes her fear the News at the same time she follows it. Possibly, Emily Dickinson, like Christina Rossetti felt herself unworthy of salvation.

Sometimes, the poet expresses her ambivalence in the same poem itself. In "Sumptuous Destitution", Richard Wilbur describes Emily Dickinson as "inconsistent in her attitudes".³¹ For example, the poem "I know that He exists" begins with an assertion of faith, only to expose a horrifying doubt at the end.

I know that He exists
Somewhere - in silence -
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eye.

This four lines are a confession of implicit faith from the poet who has also written "Hadst thou no face that I might look on thee." 'He' has hid his 'rare life' so as to increase the joy of the beholder when he or she finally meets him. But faith turns to doubt as the poet once again uses the rhetoric of ambivalence:

'Tis an instant's play
'Tis a fond Ambush -
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!
But - should the play
Prove piercing earnest -
Should the glee - glaze -
In Death's - stiff - stare -

Would not the fun
Look too expensive!
Would not the jest
Have crawled to far!

The ambivalence is expressed by the use of "But" at the beginning of the third stanza. The faith with which the poem begins completely disappears at the end as the poet exclaims that it would be a cruel joke played on us if there were no God and no salvation at the end. Paul J. Ferlazzo comments on this poem in Emily Dickinson (1976). He says that the last line "suggests an evil sense of humour that is at play with its connotations of the serpentine or the monstrous."³² The last two stanzas also raise the question of whether there really is immortality. This doubt comes as a contrast to a number of Dickinson poems in which the poet declares her belief in immortality and existence after death.

Another poem beginning with an assertion of faith only to end with a declaration of unbelief is 'Going to Heaven' #79. In contrast to the more sinister poem "I know that He exists", this one is light-hearted and playful. The poem opens with the certainty of going to heaven.

Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd's arm!

The speaker requests the "you" to save her "a little space" "the smallest Robe" and "just a bit of Crown" should he/she

go "home" before she does - "For you know we do not mind our dress/when we are going home." In the last stanza, there is a shift in the persona's stand and she denies her belief in Heaven. Without any change in the tone, the speaker says that she is "glad" that she does not believe in the idea of going to heaven.

Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds
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The speaker requests the "you" to save her "a little space" "the smallest Robe" and "just a bit of Crown" should he/she go "home" before she does - "For you know we do not mind our dress/when we are going home." In the last stanza, there is a shift in the persona's stand and she denies her belief in Heaven. Without any change in the tone, the speaker says that she is "glad" that she does not believe in the idea of going to heaven.

Im glad I don't believe it
For it would stop my breath -
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious earth!
I'm glad they did believe it
Whom I have never found
Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
I left them in the ground.

The denial of faith in the above stanza, however, does not sound very convincing. It is as if the speaker is enjoying a simple jest. There is none of the horror described at the end of "I know that He exists".

Totally opposed to the two poems discussed above is the poem "Some keep the Sabbath" #324. It contrasts conventional worship with the freer and more individual kind:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -
I keep it, staying at Home -
With a bobolink for a chorister -
And an orchard, for a Dome -
Some keep the Sabbath in surplice -
I just wear my wings -
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little sexton - sings
God preaches, a noted clergyman -
And the sermon is never long.
So instead of going to Heaven at last -
Im going all along.

This poem has been variously interpreted. It is sometimes read as Dickinson's rebellion against a traditional form of worship and her subscription to a more personal form of worship. It has also been described as a contrast between traditional religious practice and a religion of nature. Garbowsky in The House Without the Door (1989) even suggests that the poem reveals "Dickinson's fear of crowds and public gatherings." Read outside the context of Dickinson's life, this poem is a celebration of a simple child-like faith. As such, it is the utterance of a soul at peace with God and nature. The speaker does not need clergymen to preach to her, as she can listen to God, 'a noted Clergyman' speak directly to her to the accompaniment of the bobolink as chorister. The speaker, whether it be the 'supposed person' or the poet herself has found a unique form of worship. She is a one-man

congregation. Her abstinence from the Church does not make her irreligious. She has a daily communion with God, unlike those who go to Church only on Sundays. So, instead of going to Heaven after death, she declares that she is "going all along". The last line is contradictory to what is expressed in "Going to Heaven", where the speaker declares that she does not believe in going to Heaven. In this poem, through its simplicity of imagery, the poet recreates the essence of pre-lapsarian Eden.

The ambivalence of Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson on the subject of faith form an important part of this study. Rossetti held on firmly to her faith in God despite being washed by waves of self doubt. The rhetoric of ambivalence in Rossetti's devotional poems operates through the juxtaposition of contradictory words. To illustrate, here are two poems:

O Christ my God who sees the
unseen,
O Christ my God who knowest
the unknown ...
O Thou who seest what I cannot
see,
Thou Who didst love us all so
long ago
O Thou Who knowest what I
must not know
Remember all my hope, remember
me.

and,

Before the beginning Thou hast
foreknown the end

Before the birthday the death bed
was seen of Thee:
Cleanse what I cannot cleanse, mend
What I cannot mend.
O Lord All Merciful, be merciful
to me.

In the case of Emily Dickinson, Ferlazzo says that she "permitted herself to experience the extremes of faith and loss", and this is reflected in her poetry, which expresses both belief and disbelief. As illustrations, here are some extracts:

I know that He exists
Somewhere - in Silence
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

and

Those - dying then
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

What one tries to do in this chapter, is to prove that Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson have written poems that stamp them as believers, whose faith, like the rest of us, sometimes flickers and falters, to the point where it almost dwindles to doubt and disbelief. The saintly Rossetti and the agnostic Dickinson are more alike than they seem to be at a glance. In fact, Dickinson is more insistent than Rossetti in her effort to claim the attention of God the Father. Why else should she hurl her bombastic rhetoric "Burglar! Banker and Father" at Him? Or call Him "Papa above"

and pray for a mouse? She can no more get away from Him than a willful child from a loving father. Her seeming indifference and irreverence are masks that hide a sensitive soul demanding attention and love. Rossetti's soul, in contrast, is timid and lowly. She puts herself solely at the mercy of God, yet daring to claim His love. Only because He is love. Through all their poems, they touch readers in a special and unique way, because they echo the same sentiments and sometimes, the same hurts and bewilderments. The feelings and thoughts in them may not always be approved by all, but they are human and realistic. They may not always reflect the poets' real thoughts, at all times, but the sincerity make them creditable. Through it all, the rhetoric of ambivalence is what gives the poems strength, variety and uniqueness.

END NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, p.xxxvi-vii.
5. Stephen Gurney. British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century, Ch. nine "The Pre-Raphaelite Circle", p.257.
6. Christabel Coleridge, "The Poetry of Christina Rossetti", The Monthly Packet 89(1895): 277 reproduced from "A View from "The Lowest Place": Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose" by Colleen Hobbs.
7. The Divine Poems, Gardner intro. p.xxxi.
8. Sharon Smulders mentions this in her essay "A Form that Differences": Vocational Metaphors in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Victorian Poetry Summer 1991 volume 29 no.2, p.170.
9. Bell, pp.196-7.
10. Rossetti's letter to Augusta Webster, Bell p.124.
11. See The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol.1 ed. Anne Oliver Bell. Hogarth Press, London 1977, pp.178-9.
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13. Robert Browning in "Pippa's Song".
14. Alicia Ostiker, Feminist Revision and the Bible 1993, p.69.
15. Gurney, pp.267-8.
16. *Ibid.*, p.268.
17. Ostiker, p.63.
18. *Ibid.*, p.67.

19. Tselentis-Apostolidis, Persephone "And I will be Socrates: Greek elements in the Poetry of Dickinson." Dickinson Studies, No.52 (2nd Half 1984): 3-21.
20. Ostiker, p.64.
21. Schucard, p.12.
22. *Ibid.*, p.10.
23. This is reproduced here from Emily Dickinson by Paul J. Ferlazzo.
24. Oberhaus, "Tender Pioneer" Emily Dickinson A Collection of Critical Essays, Ed. Judith Farr, p.108.
25. A.R.C. Finch, "Dickinson and Patriarchal Metre", A theory of Metrical Codes", PMLA 102 (March 1987): 166-176.
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27. Wallace "God be with the Clown: Honour in American Poetry." Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984.
28. Schucard, p.10.
29. Anand Rao Thola, Emily Dickinson: The Metaphysical Tradition, New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, Atlantic Highlands, NJ Humanities 1982.
30. Sally Burke, 'A Religion of Poetry: The Prayer Poems of Emily Dickinson". Emily Dickinson Bulletin No.33 (1st Half 1978).
31. Wilbur, "Sumptuous Destitution" Emily Dickinson A Collection of Critical Essays, Ed. Judith Farr, p.54.
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Chapter—IV

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Life after death, Immortality or Eternity, however one chooses to describe the continuity of the spirit after the death of the body is an intriguing phenomenon. Not surprisingly, it fascinated Emily Dickinson, who regarded it as a flood-subject of her poetry. She asserted her belief in immortality in a letter she wrote to T.W. Higginson on the 25th April 1862: "When a little Girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality —" In her poems, she describes immortality as a 'shapeless friend' in the chamber of her mind and as a third "presence" accompanying her on her journey with death. But when actually confronted with the death of her loved ones, Emily Dickinson suffered anguish and wondered where the departed had gone. Personal faith was not enough to provide satisfactory answers. On the death of the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, she exclaimed, "Lives he in any other world/My faith cannot reply" (#1557). On the death of her mother, she cried "We dont know where she is, though so many tell us"¹. In one of her new poems discovered by William Shurr, she has written, "To still have her, but tears forbid me/My own is in the Grave." When a friend James Clark died,

she questioned, "Are you certain there is another life? ..."² The uncertainty, doubt and pain in her voice is a far cry from the confident voice of the poet. The poet in her has no doubt about the certainty of her going to Heaven or about the state of post-mortal life. Judith Farr, in the introduction of Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays writes that Dickinson's "great preoccupation is not love, not death, but the question of eternal life, of consciousness beyond the grave."

As for Christina Rossetti, her biographer, Mackenzie Bell, stated that she "no more doubted the existence of a state of coming blessedness than the traveller doubts the existence of the place for which he is bound when setting out on a journey".³ But unlike the converted John Donne, Rossetti held an ambivalent ~~view on the state of the soul after death.~~ Donne believed that the soul, created by God is immortal and cannot perish. He believed that after death, the soul immediately went to Heaven instead of waiting till the Last Day, when it would be reunited with the body.⁴ Rossetti, by contrast depicts "varying aspects of the supernatural"⁵ by introducing "ghosts" lingering on earth. These poems are found side by side with those in which the poet describes the gathering of souls in Heaven.

Both Christina Rossetti, a devout Christian and Emily Dickinson, a non-practising Christian believed in the concept

of the spirit and also in the concept of Heaven as the final destiny of the soul after death. Rossetti's faith allowed her to believe in the Biblical concept of Heaven, but Dickinson's poetry both affirms and denies the reality of Heaven. But both poets are curiously silent about Hell, the alternative place to Heaven, where there will be an eternity of misery. Incidentally, William Michael Rossetti writes that his sister disliked⁶ Milton's Paradise Lost, which features Satan, the alleged arch enemy of man and God, as well as the fallen angels. In the case of Emily Dickinson also, it is likely that she knew about Hell, the place reserved for unsaved souls. But apart from the lines, "And Bad men - 'go to Jail' -/I guess -" (#234) she does not feature Hell in her poetry. In some poems, both Dickinson and Rossetti imagined and visualised the dead as living in Arcadian Eden while in some, they are depicted merely as ghosts, who are desperately seeking to maintain their contact with the living. The poets' rhetoric on post-mortals life therefore reveal more than their hope of eternal bliss. Ranging from the religious to the bizarre, the poems depict conflicting ideas and attitudes towards life after death. Both poets give a unique treatment to this particular theme. As in the other themes discussed in the previous chapters, the rhetorical ambivalence of the poems on this theme manifests the fact that not all the poems can be interpreted as the poets' personal convictions. As

before, their imagination, creativity and poetic licence, play a dominant role in the making of the poems. This chapter explores the range of ideas and speculations about life after death and the sometimes contradictory attitudes of both the poets that finds expression in their poems.

For Emily Dickinson, immortality is neither strange nor extraordinary. It is a mere continuation and part of mortality. In poem #1234, "If my Bark Sink", she describes immortality as the "ground floor" of mortality:

If my Bark sink
'Tis to another Sea -
Mortality's Ground Floor
Is Immortality.

The difference between mortality and immortality is a mere shift in space, like the different floors of the same structure. In just four lines, the poet conveys the concept of burial through the imagery of the 'bark' which might 'sink' to 'another sea'. Immortality being the 'ground-floor' is, in fact, the support base, without which there can be no life in the perceivable surface of the sea. The speaker of the poem "Conscious am I in my Chamber" (#679) attests to the presence of 'a shapeless friend' in the "chamber" of her mind whom she identifies as 'Immortality'. Neither by 'posture' nor by 'word' does this 'friend' assert himself but by 'Presence' only. The speaker, however, refers to it in the masculine gender. Immortality is the very essence of being in the Dickinson canon.

Dickinson's immortal soul does not necessarily go to heaven. Life after death is more of a continued consciousness, a concept also subscribed to by Christina Rossetti in some of her poems. In one of Dickinson's masterpieces, "I heard a fly buzz when I died", the speaker is a dead person narrating the final moment of her death:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The stillness in the Room
Was like the stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

There are others in the room, gravely and sombrely waiting for death to claim the speaker. The speaker's attention is hypnotically drawn to a fly, whose presence in the room has been interpreted by Caroline Hogue as a 'grim omen' of decay of the body in the grave.⁷ The presence of the fly, however, dispels some of the grimness of the situation by its sheer banality. The speaker, who had finished signing her will is mesmerised by it, staring at it, till finally it blocked away the light from her sight. All her attention is focussed on the fly, which indirectly implies that there is no earth-shattering experience at the moment of dying. On the contrary, the 'uncertain stumbling buzz' of the fly, trivial as it is, is in fact, the one thing the speaker remembers most significantly in the course of her narration.

And then the windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

There is a sense of incompleteness, as if the speaker has been deprived of light or life rather abruptly. But even if death has dimmed her eyes, the speaker continues to be herself. She does not mention, however, in the course of her narration, how long ago she has died or where she is, after her death. The poem ends with the ambivalent line that she could not see to see. Was it the fly that blocked the light or that the light of life faded from within and made the fly invisible. The speaker is neither a voice from Heaven nor Hell, although Anantharaman is of the opinion that "although she longs for salvation, damnation is her predestination - as she was not a devout Christian." The author of Sunset in a Cup (1985) no doubt has made the common error of mistaking the speaking 'I' of the poem for the poet herself. Karl Keller finds the narration "deliberately funny", that a "woman sitting somewhere hereafter" should be "telling other dead how she died".⁸ But whether the speaker is addressing other dead or has come back from the grave to address the living has been left deliberately vague by the poet. What is important is that the poem affirms immortality, that the physical death of the body is not the end of existence.

Christina Rossetti has a similar poem in which the narrator describes the scene after her death. The poem "After Death" is a sequence to the poem "A Pause", although chronologically, it was written prior to it. In "A Pause" the

death.

One of Dickinson's best known poems, "Because I could not stop for Death" describes the journey from this life to that of beyond. Death, in the guise of a courteous gentlemen comes to call on the persona and takes her for a ride in his carriage. The carriage, with its third presence, identified as "Immortality" heads towards eternity. This makes it clear that the soul or spirit is infinite and death can claim only the body which is finite.

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

.....
We paused before a House that seemed
A swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cormice - in the Ground -

This is perhaps the most discussed poem in the entire Dickinson canon, with no two interpretations being exactly alike. Whether the speaker is the poet, imagining her own death or talking about "her encounter with death in the death of another",⁹ the focal point in the poem is the continuity of awareness of the soul, or the essence of being, of a person, after the body is dead and buried. The presence of Immortality in the carriage affirms that it is also, to use the words of Budick, a "component of consciousness itself, somehow co-extensive not only with death, but with life as well."¹⁰ It is true, that the soul is not depicted as "flying

from her house to a home above", but the voice is not exactly the voice of the damned either. There is an air of gentility and placidity, if not contentment, in the well modulated tone:

Since then - tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the Horses Heads
Were towards Eternity. (#712)

This last stanza asserts that the speaker is one who is long dead physically, but one who continues to exist, perhaps, for "Centuries" after her death. The carriage in which Death comes calling on her, takes her to 'Eternity', only pausing before what obviously is a graveyard. Joanne A. Dobson in "Oh, Susie, it is dangerous" notes the "pregnant swell of the grave, his destination proves a barren and eternal disappointment" and that the speaker has obliged to accompany 'Death' only to land herself in "eternal nothingness". The time elapse, since the day 'Death' came to collect her and the present, actually "feels shorter than the day" she went for her ride. She may not be transported to Heaven, but contrary to Marder's¹¹ view that the soul "longs endlessly for life" from eternity, the speaker is contented to be where she is. As Ronald Wallace suggests in God be with the Clown: Honour in American Poetry (1984), death has paradoxically given her life. The speaker betrays no sign of pain or distress about her present existence in eternity.

The ambivalence of the poem lies in the fact that the

persona is dressed in a bridal attire of 'Gossamer' and 'tulle' in her outing with gentleman Death. The imagery is that of a genteel couple with none of the malignity one usually associates with Death. Another poem which is profoundly ambivalent is #1053, "It was a quiet way". The persona related an extraordinary climatic experience which is at once a religious or a sexual ecstasy. She is borne on by an undeterminate 'He' from this world and transported "with swiftness, as of Chariots/And distance, as of wheels" to a state of bliss? expectations? Who exactly is 'He'? and where is 'He' taking the speaker? Is 'He' the same gentleman-caller, 'Death' encountered in "Because I could not stop for Death" or is it Christ come to take a soul to Heaven? These are possible explanations, which the poet has left to our own surmise. The lines, 'This World did drop away/As acres from the feet/Of one that leaneth from Baloon/Upon on other Street", suggest that Death/Christ/Lover has transported the speaker beyond this 'World' of process to where 'eternity it was before/Eternity was due'. It is impossible to determine for certain whether the persona's narrative is mystical or eschatological. Or is it one of Dickinson's superlative imagination of sexual ecstasy. The general atmosphere of this poem as well as "Because I could not stop for Death" is

transcendental. In another poem, Dickinson refers to Death as a "supple suitor" that wins at last.

A similar view, that the grave serves as home for the spirit and that life there is not distasteful is expressed by Rossetti in the poem "The Ghost's Petition". The "ghost" of a dead husband comes back at midnight to comfort his grieving wife. His wife who waits for him at midnight gladly calls out his name, but he warns her not throw herself in his arms, because he is only a 'shadow':

Lay not down your head on my
breast:
I cannot hold you, kind wife, nor
fold you.
In the shelter that you love best.

To all appearances, he may look the same as when he was alive, but the ghost "cannot hold" his wife in an embrace anymore. To his wife's questions about what he does in the underground and what he has found there, he replies:

What I do there I must not tell
But I have plenty; kind wife,
content ye:
It is well with us - it is well.

The ghost may not/cannot report about life in the grave, but he assures his wife that life is good where he is. He has come out of the grave temporarily because of his wife, who weeps with grief at home. The rhetoric of ambivalence is operational here. The ghost cannot reveal his new life inside the grave as that would put the poet's credibility at stake. She might create a ghost who returns from the grave, but she

There is a certain term
For their bodies to the worm
And their souls at heaven gate:
Dust to dust, clod to clod
These precious things of God,
Trampled underfoot by man
And beast the appointed years -

These lines express the view that the dead spend some time in the grave before they get to Heaven. The body returns to dust and is given to the worms for a "certain term" before reuniting with the soul at heaven-gate. This view is again at odds with others expressed by Rossetti herself and Dickinson.

Dickinson's poems on the state of life after death is widely ambivalent. She begins one poem with a bold assertion that this world is not conclusion, for a "species" exist "beyond" it:

This World is not Conclusion
A species stand beyond -
Invisible as music
But positive as sound -
It beckons and it baffles -

The rhetoric of this poem is full of ambivalence as the poet gives a series of reasons to doubt her premise. Scholars and wisemen are unable to give satisfactory explanation about this order of reality because it is "beyond" this world. Neither can conventional belief provide a convincing answer. Philosophy, sagacity and even theology have only proved their inadequacy. But despite their failure to explain or prove this existence beyond earthly life, the reality of it is as 'positive as sound' though as "invisible as music". The hope

and belief in it is right there in the soul: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul -". No drug is strong enough to make the soul forget that 'this world is not conclusion' nor is it the end of life. In spite of the inconclusive answer provided by human learning, the soul is aware that the death of the corporeal body is not the end of itself.

So far, the trend has been to read this poem as a negative poem. This has been possible due to the ambivalence of the rhetoric. Daniel Orsini in "Emily Dickinson and the Romantic use of Science" has observed that the poem never proves the narrator's thesis."¹² Cynthia G. Wolff also observes that this poem "examines the leakage and finally the loss of faith."¹³ Paul Ferlazzo too, interprets the poem in a similar vein, and comments that "Dickinson seems to be suggesting none of our intellectual or spiritual institutions offer, upon closer inspection, a lasting peace of soul".¹⁴ He challenges that "rousing sermons and loud hymns" may drug the senses into submission but they cannot ease the pain of gnawing doubt in her [Dickinson's] soul. These charges may however be refuted by pointing out the fact that the poet is aware that no branch of learning is equipped to explain Infinity in concrete terms. Only the soul, itself immortal, feels "a nibbling" which no drug may stupefy. The poet has declared not only the reality of Infinity, but also

the fact that the wisdom of this world, which is finite, cannot fully comprehend what is beyond itself. These critics are right in pointing out the inadequacy of dogmatic religion to prove that this world is not conclusion. But what they have all failed to point out is that the poet relies on the ".... Tooth/that nibbles at the soul", to prove her posit at the start of the poem. The poem, however, goes no further than stating the fact of immortality. It makes no statement or speculation as to 'where' or how the 'species' might live except for the fact that it is "beyond" this world. There is no proof save the innate knowledge that death is not the "conclusion" or end of the soul's existence.

If this world is not conclusion, the logical question is where do people go after leaving this world. In one of her most beautiful poems, Dickinson asks if anybody can tell her where the dead have gone. Only their statues and pictures remain to indicate that they too, had once lived on this earth.

Those fair - fictitious people -
The women - plucked away
From our familiar Lifetime -
The men of Ivory -

Those boys and Girls, in Canvas -
Who stay upon the wall
In Everlasting Keepsake
Can anybody tell?

We trust - in places perfecter -
Inheriting Delight
Beyond our faint conjecture -
Our dizzy Estimate -

Remembering Ourselves, we trust -
Yet Blessed - than we -
Through knowing - where we only hope -
Receiving - where we - pray -

Of expectation - also -
Anticipating us
With transport, that would be a pain
Except for Holiness -

Esteeming us - as Exile -
Themselves - admitted Home -
Through easy miracle of Death -
The Way we ourselves must come. (#499)

If it were not for the usual Dickinsonian 'dashes', this poem with its quiet dignity and hopeful anticipation could have been one of Christina Rossetti's devotional poems. The poet depicts the dead to be in a 'perfecter' place where there is joy and gladness beyond the imagination of the living. The rhetoric does not go beyond credibility. Less definitely is more, as by not venturing to describe the measure of 'Delight', instead saying that it is 'beyond our faint conjecture' and 'estimate', the poet conveys the sense of indescribable joy. The dead are also 'blesseder' than 'we' who are still living because they have received and known what we still hope and pray for. They know the now while we know the old. These happy blessed souls do not return to earth where, once dead, they are relegated to the status of 'fictitious people', to give an account of their lives beyond this world. It is 'us' who 'trust' that they are not only sublimely happy, but that they also remember and wait for us

to join them. They are already 'home' and thinking of the living as being still in 'exile'. The dividing wall or barrier between life on earth and the new world is 'death' which the poet describes as a 'miracle'. It is the gateway that marks the passage from 'exile' to 'home'. However, the whole structure of life after death rests on the pivotal phrase "we trust". It is the key phrase in the poem, which supports and holds it together. The word 'trust' carries a more profound weight than 'belief' and the poet's choice to use it endows the poem with a sense of religiosity, even with the absence of words like 'Heaven' or 'God'. Envisioning a better and happier state of existence for the dead brings hope and encouragement to the living. Even death is viewed without bitterness, but rather as a doorway to our permanent 'home'. There is no sense of morbidity at the mention of death at the end of the poem. With its lack of the usual Dickinsonian flippancy and irreverence colouring even the religious poems, this poem is perhaps the closest that Dickinson comes to professing the Christian theme of faith. The unnamed "places perfecter" where life is "blesseder" can be easily transcribed as Heaven or Paradise. The speaker, using words such as 'we', 'our' and 'ourselves' is a representative of all believers.

Dickinson's rhetoric on post-mortal state is full of ambivalence. For example, in "Heaven is so far of the Mind"

(#370), she declares that Heaven is an idea that exists only in the mind and has therefore no reality:

Heaven is so far of the mind
That were the mind dissolved -
The site - of it - by Architect
Could not again be proved. -

This poem denies the existence of the "places perfecter" of the previous poem by stating that Heaven 'exists' only in the mind. The poet says that Heaven is as 'vast' and as 'fair' as our imagination can grasp. The poem reduces Heaven to a mere figment of the imagination, the only advantage being the possibility to invoke it right 'Here' in this life. The poem also negates the hope of going to Heaven after death, since death will have stopped the mind's capacity to think and imagine Heaven. Heaven then ceases to be, along with the death of the body. Or else, the mind after death dwells on its idea of Heaven, which, if it were the case would mean a special individualised Heaven for each person. The rhetoric of this poem is one of scepticism and totally contradictory to the poem "Those fair fictitious people" where the speaker inspires hope with the sheer beauty of the rhetoric.

Denying geographical location to Heaven in poems like "Heaven is so far of the Mind' and "Of Paradise' Existence" (#1411) where she says:

Of Paradise' existence
All we know
Is the uncertain certainty -,

the poet ambivalently reaffirms that Heaven does exist, wherever it may be located no one knows except that it is beyond this life. One may get there only after being summoned by the messenger death. In some poems like "Arcturus is his other name" (#70) and "Heaven has different Signs to me" (#575), the poet identifies the visible sky as the location of Paradise, a place which is brighter and fairer than the sun, where she proposes to go "When Time's brief masquerade" would be over. Then again, in "How far is it to Heaven" (#929), she declares that Heaven is as far as death when viewed from this side of the grave. But beyond death, "Of River or of Ridge beyond/Was no discovery". The rhetoric of this poem neither affirms nor negates the presence of a place called Heaven. But it states the fact that so far, it has not been discovered by anyone. What lies beyond earth is after all, beyond the reach of the living and if the cliché may be used, dead men tell no tales.

The poet creates a pastoral Eden where the dead spend their lives in the poem "There is a morn by men unseen" (#24). She describes an idyllic place, a sylvan paradise whose inhabitants spend their time in dancing and merry-making:

There is a morn by men unseen -
Whose maids upon remoter green
Keep their seraphic may
And all day long, with dance and game.
And gambol I may never name -
Employ their holiday.

This poem is reminiscent of the poem "The Echoing Green" from the Songs of Innocence by William Blake. The first stanza of the poem is quoted below:

The Sun does arise
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the spring;
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush
Sing harder around
To the bell's cheerful sound
While our sports shall be seen
On the echoing Green.¹⁵

The Blakean glen echoes with the sound of the Children's happy laughter which reminded the old folks of their own youth spent gambolling on the same 'echoing green'. In a similar manner, the imaginary scene that Dickinson creates is filled with joyful sounds and activity. Chiming bells and sweetly singing birds give accompaniment to dancing feet. The scene is 'wondrous' and 'serene', such as she has never seen before. It is as if the stars themselves, with their luminous twinklings have joined in the revelry:

Ne'er saw I such a wondrous scene -
Ne'er such a ring on such a green -
Nor so serene array -
As if the stars some summer night
Should swing their cups of Chrysolite -
And revel till the day -

In these lines, Dickinson weaves a web of magic whose delight and frolic, transport readers into the enchanted world of faery. Notwithstanding its arcadian nature and setting; Dickinson's "remoter green" is no ordinary countryside. It is

a "mystic green" as yet "unseen" by human eyes. It is "wondrous" as well as "serene". The poet-persona's desire is to be transported to this 'dell', so that she too may be with the frolicsome people. But she can go there only after her life on this earth is over. Only then will the far, distant bells ring to 'announce' her coming. The poet-persona is as confident of the existence of this Eden as she is of going there herself someday:

Dickinson's use of the term 'men' in this poem is generic and it denotes all human beings to whom the reality of the poet's vision is still denied. It does not stand for the male sex alone as it has been alleged by some critics and scholars. Alike Barnstone, for example, says that Dickinson has created a uni-sex heaven motivated by the idea of freedom, since "men" represent lack of freedom.¹⁶ Amy L. Cherry says that "the speaker (poet) is safe whilst among women and can even reach spirituality thru this chaste sensuality."¹⁷ But while describing the light-hearted activities of the maids, the poet in no way denies the presence of the menfolk. In the last stanza, she addresses the "People of the mystic green", which is a proof by itself that the inhabitants are not single sexed as has been commonly interpreted. By popular understanding, 'People' denotes a collection of men and women. Death being universal, it is unreasonable to think that the poet has imagined a

heaven exclusively for women. The poet also does not imagine a heaven where there will be no division of the sexes. Her 'remoter green' is not the conventional idea of Heaven nor is it too other-worldly. The locale could easily have been "Tempe or the vales of Arcady".¹⁸ The first and the last line of the poem describe this Eden in terms of 'morn' and 'dawn', signifying a new beginning to which the soul awakens after the sleep of death. There is an implied paganism in this particular description of post-mortal ecstasy, as if one might encounter satyrs frisking amid the dancing feet. The poet, without any mention of pagan gods creates an atmosphere usually associated with myths, just as she endowed "Those fair fictitious people" with an air of Christian hope and faith.

Two years after writing "There is a morn by men unseen", Dickinson does a poetical volte face by writing "What is Paradise" (#215), where the poet-persona claims an apparent ignorance of Paradise, and puts forward a series of mundane questions about it:

What is "Paradise"
Who live there -
Are they "Farmers" -
Do they "hoe" -
Do they know that this is "Amherst" -
And that I - am coming - too -

The poet, to borrow the words of Carton in The Rhetoric of American Romance (1985), "Somewhat domesticates the mysterious" and "also mystifies the oppressively common-

place" through associating Paradise with the exceedingly common. The speaker knows that one day, when she 'dies', she too will go to Paradise. She wonders if this place will be pleasant or if she might get homesick for this earth. This fear of being homesick, perhaps for this "curious earth" lay in contrast with the earlier expressed desire to be with the 'people of the mystic green'.

If the earlier vision of Eden was idyllic and pagan, then this one is cold and grim, the inhabitants as solid and earthy as the inhabitants of the other are frolicsome. This poem heavily underscores the ambivalent ideas about Heaven which the poet entertains. The only consolation the poem offers, that too, qualified by 'may be' is that it is less lonesome than New England. Equating 'Eden' and 'Paradise' the persona feels no attraction towards it while acknowledging it as the place where one goes to after death. The rhetoric points a cold comfortless Heaven reminding one of the title of one of Yeats' poems "The Cold Heaven". If the poet delights in treating spiritual things in terms of the common place, she however, finds no delight in this particular vision of Paradise. The Christian concept of Heaven, as the place where 'ransomed' souls are gathered after death, is drawn upon in this poem. But in no way does the poem qualify as a religious poem. The speaker, perhaps, is afraid that she will not fit in among the ransomed souls and therefore tries

to make light of the matter in order to hide her apprehension. The speaker is certain that she is destined for this Paradise and mentions it as a matter of course.

Dickinson comes closest to describing a believer's concept of Heaven in the poem "I Shall know Why" (#193). In this poem, the speaker anticipates a meeting with Christ, who will explain every question baffling her in this life:

I shall know why - when Time is Over -
And I have ceased to wonder why -
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky -
He will tell me what "Peter" promised -
And I - for wonder at His woe -
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now - that scalds me now! (#193)

The speaker is obviously one who is acquainted with suffering and anguish. She is one who is mature enough to be resigned to whatever Fate gives her. In "Emily Dickinson and the Disappearance of God", Vincent Anderson notes that Dickinson has made an important point in this poem; that "at the heart of her own and Christ's experience", there is "suffering and anguish" which binds the two together.¹⁹ Looking at Christ's suffering will make her forget her own 'Anguish' which is a mere 'drop' by comparison with His. But this will only happen when "Time" is over and she loses all her desire to 'know'. Her interest by then, would have shifted from her own suffering to Christ's. The satirical description of heaven as a "schoolroom" has no impact on the general mood of the poem. Cristanne Miller, in Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar (1987)

says that Dickinson's speaker "proves herself more generous than Christ both in her willingness to accept His refusal to care for her and in her anticipated empathy at His "woe", despite His apparent indifference to her's."²⁰ This is true, since the speaker bears no grudge against Christ for the delayed explanation. The pain and anguish of the moment would lose their acuteness and serve only to recognise His woe. The speaker is almost humble in her unquestioning acceptance of her present suffering, which, she hopes, she will forget in the presence of Christ. She anticipates Heaven as a place where she will learn about things she is, in this life, ignorant of. But she is also astute enough to foresee that it would not matter to her anymore. Heaven is represented as a place where earthly sufferings will be forgotten, where there will be no mysteries because Christ will explain, answer and reveal all that is denied and hidden in life. This idea of Heaven as a "Schoolroom of the Sky" with Christ as the Teacher is satirical in spirit but serious of tone. This itself is ambivalent. It is not the aim of the poet, here, to ridicule Christ, but the unusual seriousness of tone is somewhat spoilt by her description of Heaven. When the speaker gets to Heaven finally, it will be to realise that answers to questions asked on earth are not important anymore. Her being's attention will be focussed wholly on Christ. The rhetoric of the poem indirectly hints at human

self-centredness that obstructs one's relationship with Christ. It is only after death, when the soul reaches Heaven that it will fully comprehend the depth of Christ's sacrifice.

If the speaker of "I Shall Know when Time is Over" is an adult acquainted with anguish, then the speaker of "I never felt at Home-Below" (#413), is a child or the poet speaking with the voice of a child. It is a typical Dickinsonian poem in its unconventional treatment of the theme. Paradise, which is also referred to as the 'Handsome Skies' in the poem is depicted as an eternity of Sundays. This vision of Paradise is inspired by the poet's experience of going to Church on Sundays. Her rebellion from Church is reflected in the poem that describes Heaven as a place where one has to be on one's best behaviour under the watchful eyes of an ever-present God:

I never felt at Home - Below
And in the Handome skies
I shall not feel at Home - I know
I don't like Paradise -
Because its Sunday - all the time
And Recess - never comes -
And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday Afternoons -

This poem is another example of the poet's ambivalence about eternity. In a mockingly playful tone, the speaker reveals, perhaps, Dickinson's own impatience over the propriety and sobriety of the New England Sunday School. An eternity of such a Sunday without 'recess' would be intolerable to her.

The poet draws on the conventional concept of Heaven as the soul's destination after death. But the speaker's reaction is not at all conventional. On the contrary, it is almost anti-religion. Instead of the usual anticipation of joy and blessedness, the speaker is afraid she is going to find God's presence in Heaven irksome and tedious. The rhetoric of ambivalence is found from the very start of the poem. The speaker "never felt at home-below", meaning on earth; she declares, almost in the same breath, that she will not feel at home in Heaven either. She says that Heaven would be tolerable if only God's 'perennial' presence could be removed for a little while. If possible, she would even prefer to run away than spending an eternity in God's presence:

Myself would run away
From Him - and Holy Ghost - and All -
But there's the "Judgement Day"!

The poet-persona takes it for granted that going to Heaven is an inevitable prospect irrespective of whether one is saved or not. Dickinson knew the pre-condition for going to Heaven according to the Christian belief: she had been the only one who resisted conversion during her stay at the Mount Holyoke female seminary. Yet the poem makes no mention of the prerequisite for religious conversion. This is because, the poet imagines Heaven not from the point of view of a 'Ransomed soul' but from the point of view of that youthful reprobate who stuck to her guns by remaining unconverted and "standing

alone in her rebellion and growing very careless".²¹ The image of Paradise in this poem is synonymous with the Church Dickinson rejected all her life. The poem also proves her acceptance of dogmatic faith even if she does not believe in it personally. Her mention of Holy Ghost in such an irreverential manner may be considered blasphemous by the orthodox reader. The orthodox reader might even be tempted to argue that with her particular frame of mind, it is doubtful the speaker will ever be allowed entry into Paradise. She probably knew this herself as she says she will "not feel at home" in the "Handsome skies". The speaker's attitude towards Paradise is not the same as in "I shall know why when Time is Over", proving once again the poet's ambivalence of ideas. In fact, in another poem, the speaker is not very sure if there is a heaven, much less the possibility of her going there. She uses her reasoning that since

So much of Heaven has gone from Earth,
That there must be a Heaven
If only to enclose the saints. (#1228)

This poem rules out the possibility of going to Heaven for ordinary men and women, including the poet-persona. If there is a Heaven at all, then it will be for the 'Saints' only. The belief that there must be a Heaven is not based on any religious conviction on the part of the poet-persona, but rather on a logical inference.

The poem that best illustrates the poet's ambivalence is the poem "Going to Heaven" (#79), where the speaker affirms both the idea of going to Heaven and her disbelief of the very same idea:

Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd's arm!
I'm glad I don't believe it
For it would stop my breath
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a Curious Earth!

In the course of one poem, the poet completely denies what she has affirmed with such conviction at the start. She is actually glad not to believe in Heaven "for it would stop my breath". The idea of going to Heaven might be 'dim'; but the truth of it is asserted by the use of "and yet it will be done". Going to 'Heaven' is compared to going 'home' and in the second stanza, the speaker asks the 'you' to reserve a 'space' and a 'robe' for her, should 'You' reach Heaven before her. But in the third stanza, the speaker declares her disbelief in going to Heaven, saying however, that she is glad that the two whom she left on the ground one 'mighty autumn afternoon' had believed in it.

While Dickinson does not ~~believe~~ in going to Heaven in "Going to Heaven", in another poem, "Where Bells no More Affright the Morn" (#112), the persona displays a distinct impatience for reaching Heaven:

Where tired Children placid sleep
Thro' Centuries of Noon
This place is Bliss - this town is Heaven -
Please, Pater, pretty soon!

Heaven is described as a place where nothing ever disturbs those who get there. Alluding to Moses viewing the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo, the speaker too wishes she could "view the Landscape O'er". Like most of her poems on Heaven, in this one too, Dickinson imagines Heaven from a purely human point of view. There are no 'Cherubims' 'Seraphs' or saints in her Heaven. It is merely a place which is not-earth, a place which is free from earth-pains and disturbances.

In "I Went to Heaven" (#374), Dickinson describes Heaven as a small town lit by a single ruby whose inhabitants constitute a 'unique society'. The speaker who claims she 'went to Heaven' compares it to a picture such as 'no man drew'. She makes a small concession in her narration by allowing that she could be "almost - contented" in this Heaven. The narrative turns confusing as the rhetoric becomes unclear whether the speaker is an already dead person or one who is merely imagining things. One thing is clear: the speaker is not living in Heaven. Unlike any of her descriptions of Heaven, Dickinson begins by calling Heaven a 'small town' but eventually reduces the picture to something insubstantial and dream-like. Even the inhabitants of this Heaven have neither the solidity of the New England farmers nor the sprightliness of the revellers of the 'mystic green'.

Rather, they are as illusive and wispy as dreams. The reality of such a Heaven becomes questionable except in the local parameter of the poem.

Emily Dickinson's ambivalence on life after death is that, on the one hand, she believed that she is Heavenward bound, on the other hand, she does not think of going to Heaven as a privilege at all. Neither does she draw on the Biblical Heaven. Some of her speakers like the one in "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a fly buzz-when I died" are deceased persons living somewhere in eternity.

Taking into consideration the polarity of Dickinson and Rossetti regarding their religious faith, one would expect no ambivalence from Rossetti about the soul's destination. As a devotional poet, Rossetti looks forward to going to Heaven after death. In fact, all her hopes for the future are anchored on the Christian Heaven. Life on earth is a temporary sojourn as the following poem express:

Life that was born today
Must make no stay
But tend to end
As blossom-bloom of May
O Lord confirm my root
Train up my shoot
to live and give
Harvest of wholesome fruit
.....
Two things I ask of Thee
Deny not me
Eyesight and light
thy Blessed Face to see

(p.271)

and

Here life is the beginning of our death.
And death the starting point
whence life ensues;
Surely our life is death, our
death is life: (p.256)

The rhetoric states the ambivalent fact that life that is born is bound to end. The end, for a Christian like Rossetti is the beginning of a new life with God in Heaven. The following sonnet is one of Rossetti's most beautiful poem in which she supplicates God to help 'us' remember that we are heavenward bound:

Nerve us with patience, Lord, to toil or
rest
Toiling at rest on our allotted
level;
Fulfilling the good will of thy behest:
Not careful here to hoard, not
here to revel;
But waiting for our treasure and
our zest
Beyond the fading splendour of the West,
Beyond this deathstruck life and
deathlier evil.
Not with the sparrow building here
a house:
But with the swallow tabernacling so
As still to poise alert to rise and go
On eager wings with wing-out-
speeding wills
Beyond earth's gauds and past her
almond boughs,
Past utmost bound of the everlasting hills.
(264-5)

Life on earth is temporary and the poet seeks to emphasize this through the imagery of the swallow, a migratory bird. Alluding to the Old Testament times, she advocates living in Tabernacles instead of houses, to ensure easy mobility. The

idea behind this suggestion is to make men realise that they are not permanent on earth but that their real home is in Heaven. Part of the poet's prayer is that men should not 'hoard' or 'revel' on earth, lest they should forget the real treasures laid up for them "beyond the fading splendour of the west". This world is equated with 'flesh' or 'devil' which consists of 'deathstruck life' and deathlier evil'. Beyond it are the 'everlasting hills' where there will be 'zest' and 'treasure'.

The poet believes that man is bound for a better country than this earth. In a poem called "Now They Desire", Rossetti describes the New Jerusalem, "the fair city of Delights' prepared for the redeemed. The geographical location of this city is not mentioned, but it is described as an ideal city, having its existence in space and time:

There is a sleep we have not slept,
Safe in a bed unknown
There hearts are stanch'd that long
 have wept.
Alone or bled alone:
....
There is a sea whose waters clear
Are never tempest tost
There is a home whose children dear
Are saved: not one is lost.
There Cherubim and Seraphim
And Angels dwell with saints
Whose lustre no more dwindleth dim
Whose ardour never faints. (187)

The poet derives this image of the new Jerusalem from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, complete with the sea of glass and streets of virgin gold. It is a heaven where homes

are safe, where one can sleep peaceful dreamless sleep. The sea is never 'tempest-tost' in this fair Jerusalem, because it is built on the bosom of the Savior, embodied by the Rock and the Vine.

This poem, written two years before Dickinson wrote "There is a morn by men unseen" is the Christianized version of Dickinson's later poem. In these two poems, the poets have produced an exquisitely detailed description of places where a person is transported after death. There is the same longing in both the poems, but Rossetti also imagines the city of delight to be equally eager to receive its new citizens:

We yearn, we famish thus -
Lo in the far-off land of life
Doth it not yearn for us?

Rossetti, in another poem tells us that this 'Holy City' is 'built of gold', 'crystal, pearl and gem'. It is a city, whose citizens, garbed in white drink from the River of life and feed on the fruits of the Tree of Life. To this Jerusalem, "where song nor gem/Nor fruit nor waters cease," the poet prays that all will be shepherded in:

God bring us to Jerusalem
God bring us home in peace
The strong who stand, the weak
 who fall
The first and last, the great and small
Home one by one, home one and all. (206)

Just as 'Paradise', 'Heaven' and 'Eden' are synonymous in Dickinson's poetry, so also are 'Jerusalem' 'Heaven' and

'Paradise' synonymous in Rossetti's. The New Jerusalem or Paradise is prepared for "myriads of earth's myriads' who will meet again after being parted on earth, for these would be

Safe gathered home around Thy Blessed Feet
Come home by different roads
from near or far
Whether by whirlwind or by flaming car
From pangs or sleep, safe folded
round Thy seat. (265)

This anticipation of Heaven is based on Rossetti's religious faith. It is a far cry from the 'Small Town' that Dickinson's persona claims Heave to be.

Rossetti accords equal devotion to the three Persons of the Godhead and mostly uses the term 'Lord' to address both God the Father and Christ the Savior. Rossetti's Heaven, unlike Dickinson's is Christocentric. It would never have occurred to her to think of a Heaven where there is no Christ; nor could she ever, like Dickinson, be ready to forego Heaven because of God's eternal presence in it. Rossetti's Heaven is not, also, the inevitable destination of the soul after the death of the body. It is a place where God is, where only the chosen may go, to live forever with Cherubim and Seraphim', 'angels and archangels'. Unlike Dickinson's persona, who takes it for granted that she is going to Heaven, Rossetti is often in doubt about the worthiness to be allowed entry into Paradise. A large part of her devotional poetry, therefore, is made up of prayers for

mercy and grace. The following are some of Rossetti's typical prayers:

Thou art Thyself my goal, O Lord
my King.
Stretch forth Thy Hand to save
my soul.
What matters more or less of journeying
While I touch Thee, I touch my goal
Sweet Jesus. (224)

and

O Lord Christ, whom having not
seen. I love and desire to love,
O Lord Christ, who lookest on me
uncomely yet still Thy dove
Take me to Thee in Paradise, Thine
own made fair
For whatever else I know, this
thing is so:
Thou art there. (231)

Although not as confident as Dickinson's speaker often is, Rossetti is equally certain that Heaven awaits the Christian after death. As for herself, as expressed in the poems, she trusted on God's grace to transport her unworthy self to this Heaven. "Uncomely yet still Thy Dove" is her own estimation of herself in God's eyes.

Rossetti's rhetoric on life after death is not entirely free from ambivalence while it is not as varied as Dickinson's. There are two major movements in the poems concerning after-life. One is the expectation of trans-mundane ecstasy, a Heaven for the Chosen, based on Christian theology. This finds expression in the devotional poems discussed above. With vivid imagination, the poet sees

Refreshing green for heart and eyes
The golden streets and gateways pearly
The trees of Paradise.

The 'New Heavens' that awaits one after death is a land where

There shall be no more blight nor need
No barrier of the sea.
No sun and moon alternating
For God shall be the light thereof
No sorrow more, no death no sting
For God who reigns in Love. (197)

The other movement, so far left unexplored, perhaps has never been even noted before. It is found in poems which depict ghosts haunting the living, as in "The Hour and the Ghost", and "The Poor Ghost" or simply comforting the living grieving relations as in "The Ghost's Petition" and "A Chilly Night". Rossetti's attitude towards life after death is ambivalent. Georgina Battiscombe writes that the poet "longs for the Christian Heaven" accessible after death. She has conjectured that Rossetti must have been taught "somewhere in the course of her education" "that the Church is divided into three parts, namely, the Church militant, expectant and triumphant."²² Whatever this is supposed to mean, Battiscombe is of the opinion that it accounts for the poet's "contradictory nature of her view of life after death". To make her point, Battiscombe quotes the twin sonnets 'Two Thoughts of Death'. The first one speaks of corruption of the body after death, while the other affirms the glory after death. But Battiscombe makes no mention of the poems dealing

with ghosts while discussing Rossetti's view on life after death.

In the poems that describe or anticipate Heaven, the persona assumes that she will be with the saints in Paradise. If not, she pleads God for love and grace so she may be allowed to enter in His presence. But the poet also has another way of imagining post-mortal existence. In some of her poems, the spirits of the dead come back to the world of the living as 'ghosts'. Stephen Gurney's explanation about the presence of ghosts in Rossetti's poetry is not only beautiful but unusual. He accounts for their presence as the nostalgic glances which the poet cast backwards in the direction of what she has renounced. These "glances" are then "transformed into the ghosts that stand in the doorways of her poems."²³ It is neither Heaven nor Hell that these spirits have come back from. On the contrary, they are depicted as coming back from the graves where their bodies have lain buried.

In "The Hour and the Ghost", a bride is haunted by a tortured soul, the ghost of her dead husband, who threatens to take her away from her present husband. He wants to carry her off and make her watch her bridegroom find a new wife to take her place. The poem is regarded by Leder and Abbott in The Language of Exclusion (1987) as an 'anti-marriage' poem. They point out that the bride's "Consciousness is controlled

by her dead husband's ghost who demands loyalty from her beyond the grave."²⁴ The ghost tells the bride:

Thou shalt visit him again
To watch his heart grow cold
To know the gnawing pain
I know of old;
To see one much more fair
Fill up the vacant chair
Fill his heart, his children bear:
While thou and I together
In the outcast weather
Toss and howl and spin. (327)

It is plain old jealousy speaking here, and not the guilty conscience of the bride over her second marriage. The first husband's ghost cannot bear to see the bride happy with someone after his own life has ended. The poet invokes a spine-chilling imagery of a damned soul. The very words 'outcast weather' points towards an existence beyond the pale of human habitation, outside the world of the living. The last line of the poem evokes visions of the tormented restless souls. Theirs is an unending paroxysm of pain and agony. Everything is awry and disorderly as they are thrown out of orbit and out of control. The ghost's proposition to the bride is no less terrifying than eternal damnation in the Biblical lake of fire. The bridegroom does not see or hear the ghost tormenting his bride. He tries to reassure her that he will protect her and let no harm come to her. He tells her,

Lean on me, hide thine eyes.
Only ourselves, earth and skies
Are present here: be wise

He urges her to quieten, to "cease" her dreams and terrors. But though sight unseen and unheard, the ghost will not let go of her, determined as he is to drag her with him back to wherever he has come from. Even the grave seems decidedly safer and familiar as compared to the total gravity-defying chaos described by the ghost.

Rossetti's "ghosts" poems form a different category of their own. They remain mostly neglected, being overshadowed by either the love lyrics or the highly ambiguous "Goblin Market". They reveal the poet's ability to reconstruct an existence beyond this life, which is neither a conventional idea of Heaven nor Hell. While in "The Hour and the Ghost", the ghost, itself invisible controls the consciousness of the bride, the ghost in "The Poor Ghost" comes back from "the other world" to visit her beloved. The poem, written in a dialogue form between one who is living and one who has come back from the world of the dead illustrates the incompatibility of life and death. Unlike the wife in "The Ghost's Petition", the 'friend' is not happy to encounter someone who has already been dead. He 'shrinks' from the sight, as he urges her to go back to the grave where he had planted a violet for her.

The ghost, golden hair hanging below her knees looks macabre with her dew-drenched white face. With a voice "as hollow as the hollow sea" she tells her friend,

From the other world I come back
to you
My locks are uncurled with dripping
drenching dew
You know the old whilst I know the new.
But tomorrow you shall know this too. (p.360)

The rhetorics express the ambivalence of life and death. Juxtaposing the words 'old' and 'new', the poet delineates the difference between this life and the hereafter. The ghost has come back to earth to take her friend away with her to let her know the 'new' 'order' too. Her reason for wanting to take away her friend is a far cry from the one given by the ghost in "The Hour and the Ghost". The "poor ghost" is disturbed by the 'tears' and 'sobs' of her friend and because he had been her 'only love' in life, she wants him to be with her in death. It is with an attitude of caring that she comes back with her friend. But though her feelings may remain the same, there is a change in her friend's feelings for her. Death has changed the appearance of the poor ghost, making her frightful and unsightly to her friend. He tells her,

Indeed I loved you, my chosen friend
I loved you for life, but life has an end;
Through sickness I was ready to tend:
But death mars all, which we cannot mend.
(p.360)

Unlike the poor ghost, her friend realises that Death alters love and friendship. His love for her had been 'for life' and death is beyond life. To those who are living, a deceased person who reappears takes on a new identity of a 'ghost',

which is an altogether offensive and unwelcome entity. The poor ghost means well, but her friend who is not yet ready to leave life behind bids her return to the grave. Life and death cannot co-exist. The poor ghost has no alternative but to go back to the world of the dead:

I go home alone to my bed
Dug deep at the foot and deep at the head,
Roofed in with a load of lead
Warm enough for the forgotten dead.

The 'poor ghost' shows an unexpected docility by agreeing to her friend's commands without any fuss. While her appearance may be dreadful, she does not threaten a dire future like the vile ghost in "The Hour and the Ghost". Instead, she will sleep till the Judgement Day. According to the Scriptures, all the dead shall rise on that day to receive either eternal bliss or damnation. Till that day dawns, the dead will sleep on the grave. Emily Dickinson gives a more elegant description of the dead in "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" (#216).

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
Untouched by morning
And untouched by Noon
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection
Rafter of Satin
And roof of stone.

The rhetoric of this poem draws a different picture of the dead from the one Rossetti has about 'dust to dust, clod to clod' period of waiting in the grave.

thoughts and grief bring the ghost up from the grave, so also these three see and hear the living talking about them. Estelle even plaintively cry out to her friend Peter who is still on earth, that as long as he thinks of her, she feels that only half of her is in Hell, while the other half is still on earth. But once the living stop remembering them to go on with their lives, the three lose their connection with the world. They are forced to accept that they are truly dead. While Satre's characters are accommodated in a drawing room with "Second Empire" furniture, Rossetti's ghosts rest in the grave, which Dickinson in her famous poem "Because I could not stop for Death" has described as

a House that seemed
A swelling on the ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The cornice in the ground.

In Christina Rossetti's ghost rhetorics, the ghosts come wandering back to the world of the living. But death is an insurmountable barrier which prevents closeness or even communication between those it has separated. Both the living and the dead realise this. In "A Chilly Night", the speaker rises up at midnight to seek her mother's ghost for comfort. Having been failed by all her friends, and acquaintances, she is forced to seek the 'ghosts' who appear 'warmer' than all her friends. She says,

I looked and I saw the ghosts
Dotting plain and mound:
They stood in the blank moonlight

But no shadow lay on the ground:
They spoke without a voice
And they leaped without a sound. (321)

The rhetoric of ambivalence functions as a means of describing the supernatural. The ghosts who come out in large number cast no shadow on the ground on the moonlit night. They speak without a voice and leap without a sound. The eeriness of the atmosphere is suggested through the use of the rhetoric of ambivalence. The speaker's purpose is to find solace and company, yet she cannot help feeling uneasy at such a grisly sight. Her 'flesh crept' on her bones and the hair stood up on her body at the sight of her mother staring at her with blank sightless eyes. The ghost toss her 'shadowless hair' and wring her hands together as she strains to let her soundless voice be heard. The sight is so disturbing that the speaker begs her mother not to let the other ghosts see her 'night or day'. Loneliness has forced her to seek out her mother's ghost, but the sight of her amidst all the other ghosts is too much to bear. Mother and child can no longer have the close relationship like before. There is an unbreakable barrier between them for they have been separated by death. Then as the night wanes, the ghost's slowly disappear:

From midnight to the cockcrow
I watched till all were gone,
Some to sleep in the shifting sea
And some under turf and stone
Living had failed and dead had failed
And I was indeed alone.

This poem is in conformity with the popular and common notion that ghosts appear at midnight, especially on moonlit nights. Devoid of any religious overtones, the poem is a simple narrative that proves Rossetti's versatility as poet. The speaking 'I' is definitely not Rossetti herself but an imaginary young girl. The poet imaginatively describes ghosts appearing at midnight from their turf and watery graves and then subtly disappearing at sun-up. They stand and leap in the 'blank moonlight' as if that were a nightly ritual. In reality, the sighting of not one, but a host of ghosts is unheard of. With their ghastly appearances, they form a horrendous sight in the eerie night. The poet does not portray them as either happy or tormented; but simply as awful as ghosts are popularly believed to be. Their appearance at night, when the world is sleeping is an indication of their reluctance to sever ties completely with the living even though they are aware that there can be no interaction between the living and the dead. This is proved by the mother's failure to communicate with her daughter.

"A Chilly Night" by Rossetti is an affirmation to Dickinson's speculation in poem #432 "Do People Moulder Equally":

Do people moulder equally
They bury in the grave?
I do believe a species
As positively live.

As I who testify it
Deny that I - am dead -
And fill my lungs for witness -
From Tanks - above my Head -

Dickinson prefers the use of the term 'species' here and elsewhere, whereas Rossetti uses the plainer and cruder term 'ghost' to describe the spirit after the death of the body. Dickinson's belief in the existence of this 'species' has been discussed in "This World is not Conclusion". Despite a personal faith that promises Heaven after life on earth is over, Christina Rossetti shows a remarkable ambivalence about post-mortal life in her poetry. There is a seeming contradiction between the creation of ghosts who are spirits of the dead who reappear and walk on earth again and the anticipation of post-mortal bliss in Heaven. The trans-mundane ecstasy that the poet looks forward to, is part of the faith she adamantly clung to all her life. The ghosts are part of her poetical ambivalence and like Dickinson, Rossetti creates a different truths in the context of each poem.

All the ghosts she describes, with the exception of one are shown to be living in the graves. From what meagre account of the grave they impart, there is no suffering or torment there. On the contrary, they know the new order after passing the old. The only reason two of the ghosts ("The Poor Ghost" and "The Ghost's Petition") give for not being able to rest in their graves are the sound of their loved ones weeping and sobbing on earth. The interim period between

death and going to Heaven (The poor ghost says she will sleep till Judgement Day) is neither Limbo nor Purgatory. In fact, in the poems that feature ghosts, there are no Heaven nor Hell. The ghosts simply exist in the grave which apparently is their home. This is totally contrasted with the idea that once a person dies, the soul leaves the body to go to its Heavenly abode. Rossetti does not send her dead to Heaven, nor does she create an alternative paradise for them the way Dickinson does in "There is a Morn by Men Unseen". The only Heaven Rossetti believes in, is the Biblical Heaven. When Rossetti contemplates life after death in relation to herself, it is always with the hope and belief that she will be with the saints in Heaven. Herein lies her ambivalence. She never imagines herself, after death, to be sleeping in the grave or to come out from the grave at night with blank-eyed face and shadowless hair. Neither does she imagine herself lingering, unseen and forgotten among people she left behind. It is as if she has a double standard by which she measured herself and others. She may ask for "the lowest place" in Heaven in all modesty and humility, but even that "lowest place" is denied the ghosts by her.

Rather like the speaker in "Because I could not Stop for Death", the speaker in Rossetti's poem "At Home" is a deceased person, who returns to the 'much frequented house' to see her friends who are still living there:

When I was dead my spirit turned
To seek the much frequented house
I passed the door, and saw my friends
Feasting beneath green orange-boughs.

(p.399)

Here the rhetoric of ambivalence creates confusion as to who or what is the speaker. 'I' is seemingly the spirit after death, but 'I' was dead in which case it cannot be the spirit. But if 'I' is the body that has already died, then it cannot be still alive and narrating her excursion. The spirit and 'I' from the rhetoric are apparently two separate entities - one 'was dead' while the other is still alive.

The narrator watches her friends and listens as they make plans for the morrow. She is sad and hurt that her friends make no mention of her and of the past:

'Tomorrow' cried they one and all,
While no one spoke of yesterday
Their life stood full at blessed noon
I, only I had passed away:
'Tomorrow' and 'today' they cried:
I was of yesterday.

The past is forgotten as the living must go on with life. Life is a forward movement where 'today' and 'tomorrow' matters and 'yesterday', of necessity must be relegated to where it belongs - the past. The narrator is painfully made aware of this as she watches her old friends.

This poem is at odds with Emily Dickinson's poem "Death leaves us Homesick" (#935), in which the poet declares that even though the dead do not remember anymore, the living

continue to love them all the same. Rossetti's narrator, however, is forgotten by her friends.

I all forgotten shivered, sad
To stay and yet to part how loth:
I passed from the familiar room
I, who from love had passed away
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarrieth but a day. (339)

The speaker betrays her disappointment in being forgotten so fast by her friends and reveals her own wish that she could still stay with them. Her ambivalence is conveyed in the rhetoric "sad/To stay and yet to part how loth". Neither she nor the poet mention from where she has come nor where she will go to after leaving her old friends. The poet does not intrude to offer any information and the speaker also makes no mention of the condition of her spirit.

In the other ghosts poems, Rossetti relegates the dead to a position of ghosts wandering about restlessly on the surface of the earth at night. These spirits confirm the poet's belief that death is not the end of life. But they are depicted as nocturnal, sleeping in the grave in the daylight hours. Rossetti does not imagine her dead as living in "places perfecter/Inheriting delight/Beyond our faint conjecture", like Dickinson does in "Those fair fictitious people". Nor does she picture them gambolling in the "remoter green". Instead, these ghosts are frightful and offensive, bringing with them the coldness of the grave and the inscrutability of death. The speakers in "After Death" and

"At Home", while not particularly frightful are the continuous consciousness of a dead person and the spirit after death respectively.

Rossetti's ambivalence on life after death is borne out by the devotional poems and the ghost rhetorics. She envisions, on the one hand, going to heaven, to see "the Shepherd of the Sheep/the Lamb one slain/Who leads His own by living streams" - where "Our feet shall tread upon the stars/Less bright than we." With regard to herself after death, she hopes for a place in the New Jerusalem:

One day may I be
Of that perfect communion of lovers
Contented and free
In the land that is very far off and
far off from the sea. (210-11).

On the other hand, these expectations and hopes notwithstanding, the poet describes the dead as ghosts who inhabit the grave. Unlike Emily Dickinson's speaker in "Because I could not stop for Death", who is dressed as a lady, a fitting companion for the gentleman caller, Rossetti's dead as ghosts are gruesome and terrible to behold. They are certainly not those for whom the city of Delight,

where raiment is white of blood-steeped
linen slowly spun
where crowns are golden of
Love's own largessing
where eternally the ecstasy is but begun

has been prepared. But like most of Dickinson's poems, it would be wise not to read Rossetti's ghost rhetorics as expressions of the poet's personal convictions. Rather, they are products of the 'Poet-mind' which not only create, but also enabled her to put herself in the place of an illegitimate child. The twin sonnets "Two Thoughts of Death" stand midway between the two diametrically opposed views discussed in this chapter. The first sonnet describes death as an end and the body decays after burial:

Foul worms fill up her mouth so
Sweet and red;
Foul worms are underneath her
graceful head;
Yet these, being born of her from
nothingness,
These worms are certainly flesh of
her flesh -

By associating 'foul worms' with the 'graceful head' with its 'sweet' 'red' mouth, the rhetorics of ambivalence proclaim that 'being born of her' 'these worms are certainly flesh of her flesh'. The second sonnet is about the speaker's realization that after death, the soul breaks free of the body. Using the metaphor of a moth, she says, of the soul:

Far far away, it flew, far out of
sight, -
From earth and flowers of earth
it passed away.
As though it flew straight up into
the light. (299)

In this sonnet, the soul is depicted as flying free from the body after death. There will be no more night or darkness for the soul.

Christina Rossetti's ambivalence on life after death is only as far as poetic creation is concerned. Her belief in the Bible gives her the vision of the new Jerusalem where blessed souls will be gathered home. As a believer, her poems echo not just her faith but also her doubts fears and prayers. She sees heaven as the real home of the soul after death. But the expression in the poems provides the ambivalence. For Christina Rossetti suffered from a sense of her own unworthiness regardless of her piety. The poems about ghosts do not in any way affect the sincerity of the devotional poems. Her personal belief in the Christian Heaven do not stand in the way of her creation of ghosts to whom T.W. Higginson's description of Emily Dickinson's poetry may be applied - "... with rain, dew and earth still clinging ..."²⁵. These ghosts come out from their graves at night, only to go back at dawn. As Stephen Gurney sees it, they are the backward glances which the poet cast towards earthly pleasures. Her contemplation and anticipation of post-mortal bliss are often disturbed by nostalgic longings and remembered sentiments.²⁶ These yearnings which rear their heads in the secret chamber of her heart are "transformed" into the ghosts who make their appearance only at night, to

disappear again during the day. More than likely, the 'ghost' poems have their roots in the poet's childhood readings of horror novels. Georgina Battiscombe has mentioned in her biography of the poet that Christina took to reading "the blood-curdling romances of Mrs. Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis and Maturrin and that all the Rossetti children had a "craze for the horrific."²⁷ Dickinson's description of the 'only ghost' she 'ever saw' is by contrast almost fragile and deceptive. He is not macabre but almost attractive like a good fairy. His 'gait' is 'soundless'; his 'conversation - seldom' and his "laughter, like the Breeze -/That dies away in Dimples/Among the pensive Trees".

Emily Dickinson, who chose to remain not only unconverted but also the only member of her family not to formally join the Church, wrote in her poems that there is a Heaven to go to after death. In one of her new poems, she declares almost fervently,

Thank God there is a world,
and that the friends we love
dwell forever and ever
in a house above. (#218 NP)

Mostly, her persona does not regard Heaven as an ideal place to be. Heaven as Dickinson describes is not the Biblical Heaven and certainly not the Heaven that Rossetti covets. It is parochial, a small town at best, inhabited by a few. It has no splendour, glory or joy. The poet-persona feels no sense of unworthiness for this Heaven. Of course, in a number

of poems, the poet describe a continuity of existence after death. But ambivalently, Judith Farr writes that the 'driving question of Emily Dickinson's life was the one she apparently directed to the Rev. Washington Gladden: "Is Immortality True?"²⁸ This may be a personal doubt like Rossetti's personal belief, but like Rossetti, it did not, apparently stand in the way of poetic composition. No one poem can be regarded as the expression of her real self, while all the poems should be read as expressions of the poetic self.

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2. *Ibid.*
3. Mackenzie Bell, Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study, 1898, p.211.
4. Helen Gardner, John Donne: The Divine Poems, edited with an introduction and commentary, 1952. Appendix 'A' Donne's views on the state of the soul after death, p.114.
5. Mackenzie Bell, pp.362-3.
6. William Michael Rossetti, Memoir, p.ixx.
7. Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson, 1976, p.50.
8. Karl Keller, The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America, Baltimore John Hopkins UP, 1979, pp.322-23.
9. Jane Crostwaith, "Emily Dickinson's Ride with Death", Massachusetts Studies in English, 7.4-8.1 (1981), pp.18-27.
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12. David Orsini, Emily Dickinson and the Romantic Use of Science, Massachusetts Studies in English, 7.4-8.1(1981): 57-69.
13. Cynthia G. Wolff, Emily Dickinson, Radcliffe Biography Series, Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1988.
14. Paul J. Ferlazzo, Emily Dickinson, p.35.
15. Blake, Complete Writings with Variant Reading, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford U.P. 1966, p.116.

16. Alik Barnstone, "Women and the Garden: Andres Marvell, Emilia Lanier and Emily Dickinson", Women and Literature 2(1982): 163-65.
17. Amy L. Cherry, "'A Prison Gets to be a Friend': Sexuality and Tension in the Poems of ED." Dickinson Studies, no.49 (June 1984): 9-21.
18. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn".
19. Vincent Anderson, "Emily Dickinson and the Disappearance of God", Christian Scholar's Review, 11.1 (1981), p.9.
20. Christanne Miller, Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar, Cambridge, Harvard U.P. 1987, p.57, 168.
21. L, 1, 94. from Emily Dickinson, Paul J. Ferlazzo, p.30.
22. Georgina Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti, p.78.
23. Stephen Gurney, Private Correspondence with this Scholar.
24. Leder and Abbott, The Language of Exclusion, p.120.
25. Anantharaman, Priyamvada Tripathi, The Sunset in a Cup, Introduction p.3.
26. Stephen Gurney, Private Correspondence.
27. Georgina Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti, p.21.
28. Letter 752 a.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

The studies made in the preceding chapters have established, without question that ambivalence is indeed Emily Dickinson's forte, with Christina Rossetti not far behind. The poems have not only withstood the test of time but literary criticism as well, including that of feminist literary criticism. Anachronistic readings¹ by which twentieth century pre-occupations are retrojected on the poems produce interpretations such as the homosexual leanings of Emily Dickinson. Poems directly addressed to Sue Dickinson and those that are conjectured to be addressed to a woman whose identity is unknown constitute what feminist critics label the "sisterhood" poems. Some of these poems are "One Sister have I in our House", "Dying! Dying in the Night" and "Ourselves were wed one Summer dear".

By the same token, feminist critics read Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as either an expression of lesbian relationship or Christian allegory with a female Christ figure. The other so-called 'anti-marriage' poems by Leder and Abbott, namely "Cousin Kate", "Maude Clare" and "An Apple Gathering" do have, in each of them seminal ideas of

feminism. Ambivalence, ellipses and the very nature of the rhetoric used by the poets encourage and sustains feministic reading and interpretation of the poems. At the end of it all, "who was Dickinson's lover?" ceases to be the burning question. The poems convince scholars that Dickinson did not write about only one aspect of love. Love and marriage with the accompanying pain and betrayal are part of the poet's repertoire. With regard to religious faith and the after-life, Dickinson's ambivalence is truly reflected in her poems. Her persona believes and not believes at the same time. Doubting even His existence in one poem, "I know that He exists", she listens to God, "a noted preacher" every day in the poem "Some keep the Sabbath". It becomes less imperative therefore to try to solve the mystery that is Emily Dickinson than to accept Dickinson the poet, whose ambivalence is the truth about herself. If her question to "Infinitude", "Hadst thou no face/That I might look on Thee" were asked of her, the answer, unhesitatingly would be that ambivalence is the real face of Emily Dickinson. Her poetry, like a multi-faceted gem dazzles with the same ambivalence.

T.W. Higginson described Emily Dickinson as a "wholly new and original poetic genius".² Dickinson's poetry is a living example of the truth behind Paul de Mann's statement: Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration".³ In such poems as

"I heard a fly buzz-when I died", "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I started early - Took my Dog", the poet's rhetoric defies simple logic to plunge into new avenues of experience and activity. The same may be said of the love experiences of Dickinson's persona. The clever use of indeterminate terms like "You", "Thee", "Sweet" effectively camouflages whether the lover is a man, Christ or even a woman. A secret ambiguity is established through the strength of vagueness. In such poems as "If I may have it when its dead", "I started early - Took my Dog" or "In Winter in my Room", the experience goes beyond the norm of human experience in a way which is not quite supernatural either. Moreover, the ambivalence makes it impossible to gauge to what extent the poet uses facts from her life, unless of course, the ambivalence is accepted as the basis of her life, therefore, the basis of poetic creation.

Having never been married and often referring to herself as a nun, Dickinson's speaker in such poems as "There came a day at Summer's full" and "Ourselves were wed one summer dear" may be assumed to be the "supposed person". The picture of a faithful woman betrayed or left by a lover is a suitable mask for a spinster poet. It adds the realistic feeling to the texture of the poems. It is also less threatening to her reputation to write about a distant lover separated from her, when obviously there is no one around who

might be identified as the lover. But most of all, it has created a mystery so provocative and tantalising, that reader's interest in Dickinson and her poetry will never wane.

Dickinson's poems on personal faith have all the ambivalence of the poems on love and more. Her personal rejection of conversion colour the poems with shades of irreverence and lack of conviction. Her persona rejects God and Heaven, but partially accepts Jesus. But Dickinson's God and Jesus, are in fact, customized deities, made to fit in the mould of her poetry as these lines, "God is a distant, stately lover" and "The Savior must have been a docile gentleman" illustrate. Her explosive rhetoric "Burglar! Banker - Father", "mastif", 'adamant', 'a God of flint' reduces the Almighty to a mean and arbitrary God who takes delight in tormenting human beings. Yet to this God, Dickinson prays, if only to parody the Lord's Prayer in "Papa above" (#61). Contradictorily, her persona also claims daily communion with God (#324) and boasts of an unshakeable faith in Jesus (#497), the same that she denies knowledge of, elsewhere. The contradictory position is given expression through her rhetoric of ambivalence. Belief and unbelief are proportionately represented in Dickinson's poetry.

Dickinson's hermaneutic of post-mortal existence conveys her ambivalence on the subject. Her rhetoric is not

only an exploration, but the opening of new avenues of consciousness of being. The voices in "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a fly buzz - when I died" are supposedly those of deceased persons, the former being dead for "Centuries". No place is assigned to them by the poet who lets them recollect and narrate the moment when death claimed them:

Because I could not Stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me
The carriage held just Ourselves
And Immortality.

and

And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

Almost at the same time, Dickinson regards going to Heaven after death almost obligatory. Her persona far from looks forward to going to Heaven, which is an entirely different place to the one Rossetti looks forward to going. At other times, the grave is depicted as the final destination, the permanent home of the spirit. Of her own mother, the poet writes: "My own is in the Grave". There is bewilderment in the voice which exclaims: "Lives he in any other world/My faith cannot reply" (#1557) at the death of Rev. Charles Wadsworth. Dickinson's eschatology is neither fully Christian nor wholly pagan. It is ambivalent in a way that is uniquely Dickinsonian. Whereas she pleads ignorance in the above lines, at other times, she is almost blase about going to

Heaven. Her persona is more eager to be announced in the "mystic green" than she is to be in the eternal presence of God.

In contrast to Dickinson's bold, sometimes blistering rhetoric, Rossetti's rhetoric is subdued and calm in the main, but can also be sharp and witty when she chooses. When she chides the persistent suitor in "No Thank You John", her rhetoric is pert and sarcastic:

I'd rather answer 'No' to fifty
 Johns
than answer 'Yes' to you.

Like her persona in "Isidora" who says, "I must choose 'twixt God and man", Rossetti chose God over her earthly love. Her rhetoric expresses the pain of this renunciation. Rossetti's romantic life may be declared to be in a state of twilight zone. The "Monna Innominata" which William Michael Rossetti declares to be "personal utterances" is a monument of love and renunciation. The poet's ambivalence towards her love is set from the very first line of the first sonnet: "Come back to me, who wait and watch for you - Or come not yet, for it is over then". The day the lovers met for the first time is a day that "seemed to mean so little, meant so much"; Renouncing him for the love of God, the speaker says: "Yet while I love my God the most, I deem/That I can never love you overmuch". This love that she feels for the beloved, even though she has renounced him, still has the power of

transforming her. In sonnet #nine, acknowledging her "faithless and hopeless" state, she claims she is "yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite" because she is "not loveless". But the speaker feels the need to commend her beloved to God, since in her own heart there is only "love's goodwill, which is "Helpless to help and impotent to do/Of understanding dull, of sight most dim." The Monna Innominata's purpose is to give voice to the hitherto silent nameless lady of courtly love. But the poet swerves from this purpose by addressing herself to the matter between earthly and heavenly love; between desire and deferral. The rhetoric abounds in repetition and ambiguities throughout the sequence. Starting from sonnet #one, lines 1-2, "Come back to me ... or come not yet", Sonnet #three lines 1-2, "I dream of you, to wake ... would that I might/Dream of you and not wake"; sonnet #five, lines 1-2: "O my heart's heart and you who are to me/more than myself" and so on. Here in this sonnet sequence and in others, ambivalence finds expression in the form of love and renunciation and love and betrayal.

Similarly, in her poems on devotional themes, Rossetti, who was intensely devout portrays her 'Lord' as being full of grace and as a willful scourge at the same time. Rossetti's poetical ambivalence is often expressed through juxtaposition of words that convey opposite meanings:

"I would have gone; God bade me stay
I would have worked: God bade
me rest."

"For though He slay us, we will trust
in Him ...
Yea, though He slay us we will vaunt
His praise"

Rossetti's poems, in the words of Arthur Symonds are "surcharged with personal emotion, a cry of the heart, an ecstasy of the soul's grief or joy," Most of the devotional poems are in the form of prayer. Unlike Emily Dickinson who addresses Jesus as an independent deity, Christina Rossetti uses "Lord" in the New Testament sense of the term to mean Christ. In the poem "Perfect Love Casteth out Fear", she opens the poem with "Lord, give me blessed fear", again juxtaposing words of contradictory meaning. She asks for both fear and love, giving them a common factor "blessed". Her prayer in that with the 'fear' of the Lord, she might love Him more.

Rossetti's poems are often structured as dialogues between the soul and the Godhead to which we, as readers, are also listeners. We cannot help but notice the paradox in the lines "... without a hiding place

To hide me from the terrors of Thy
Face -
'Thy hiding place is here
In mine own heart, wherefore
The Roman Spear
For thy sake I accounted dear' -
My Jesus! King of Grace.

In these lines, Jesus is both the 'terror' from which the soul needs to hid as well as the hiding place. On its part, the soul prays for "blessed fear" of the Lord, who, is, at the same time, the only one who can 'cast out' that 'fear' and replace it with love. Intense faith and love co-exist with an acute sense of unworthiness in the devotional poetry of Christina Rossetti. In lines reminiscent of the Holy Sonnet of John Donne, Rossetti in "Cried out with Tears" supplicates: "Lord, must I perish, I who look to Thee? Look Thou upon me, bid me live, not die".

The attraction of the 'world' that 'woos' her by day inevitably leads to retrogressive glances which in turn are responsible for the feelings of guilt. These nostalgic backward glances towards the world also 'translates' in the words of Stephen Gurney, into 'ghosts' who roam the realms of her poetry.

Christina Rossetti's formulation of post-mortal existence is characterised by the same ambivalence that has marked the poems on love and faith. She has ~~contradictory~~ visions about the state of the soul after the body ceases to live. The poem "At Home" begins with "When I was dead, my spirits turned". The speaker being clearly a deceased person echoes the poet's ambivalence in her attitude: "Sad/To stay and yet to part how loth."

The ambivalence is conveyed by the use of the word "yet". Similarly, the other ghosts too show a reluctance to completely leave the world. The ghost in "The Ghost's Petition" enters the house at midnight after he "shook the door like a puff of air". He tells his wife he has "come from the meadow/where many lie" because he has been disturbed from his rest by her weeping. The 'poor ghost' too come back from "the other world" as the tears and sobs of her friend have awakened her from her sleep. She promises to "go home" to her 'bed/Dug deep at the foot and deep at the head' to 'sleep' till Judgement Day. The appearance of the ghosts expresses, at one level, the attraction that the world still has for those who have gone out from it. At a deeper level, it may be interpreted as signifying the backsliding of a soul towards the world it has renounced for the higher service of God. But from the merely aesthetic point of view, the poems describing ghosts may be regarded as artistic creations signifying art for art's sake.

The devotional poems reflect the vision of a future ecstasy of the soul in the presence of God and angels. After the death of the "mortal crust", the part of her that 'dies not' but only 'sleeps' a while will waken eternally, "with hymns and halleluiahs on its lips. The poem "Of Him that was Ready to Perish" ends with the prayer: "Bid me also to Paradise, also me,/For the glory of Thy Name."

Much as Rossetti's persona longs for Paradise even claiming Christ as her 'Heavenly Lover', she also hopes for a reunion with her earthly love. In the "Monna Innominata" and "By way of Remembrance" the persona voices her hope of claiming her loved one on earth in Heaven, never to be parted from each other again:

In Resurrection may we meet again:
No more with stricken hearts to part in
twain;
As once in sorrow one, now one in mirth
One in our resurrection songs of praise.

In Christina Rossetti's poetry, the earthly lover does not merge into or become the Heavenly Lover. The latter is Christ, whose Godhead the poet never for a moment ever forgets. But the woman in her has equal desire to meet her beloved in Heaven. Rossetti's rhetoric on love and faith, therefore, is a study in ambivalence. Renunciatory love that claims the beloved even in Heaven is juxtaposed with hopes of Heaven through Grace. Unsightly ghosts exist side by side with blessed souls on the pages of her tome. Innocent young girls live with vile sadistic goblin merchants in the same glen. The ambivalence in "Goblin Market" alone draws attention to the poet's rhetorical ability. It has caused the narrative to be interpreted as a feminist version of temptation and redemption with a female Christ figure. It is also read as a lesbian manifesto. The poet herself maintains that 'Goblin Market' is a fairy tale and nothing more. But

the rhetoric itself lends a hand in the way modern critics choose to read the poem.

In the poetry of Christina Rossetti, the function of the rhetoric of ambivalence as a literacy strategy is to infuse a note of realism. It acts as a restraint that prevent the poems from being mere flights of fancy and imagination. Ambivalence does more than simply contradict. It anchors the poet's expressions to a level of verisimilitude that is wholly acceptable. Even the poet's hermeneutics of eschatology seem probable when expressed through the rhetoric of ambivalence. Through this strategy, both Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti have expressed divergent emotions such as love and renunciation, faith and doubt, certainty of Heaven and its non-existence in their poetry. The use of the rhetoric of ambivalence marks the superiority of the poets as artists for whom the only tools of creation are words and more words.

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1. This is suggested by K.K. Ruthven as one way of reading by the feminist literary critic.
2. Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems, ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Introduction p.vi.
3. (Paul de Mann, 'Semiology and Rhetoric', Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josue Harari (London: Methuen, 1980, pp.124-7, 128-30).

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BRIEF BIO-DATA

Name: REBECCA LALRINTLUANGI

Educational Qualification:

B.A. (English - Hons.) - NEHU - 1986
M.A. (English) - NEHU - 1988
M.Phil - NEHU - 1994

Occupation: Lecturer in English (teaching both Pass and Major Courses), Union Christian College, Barapani, since 1992 till date.

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