

A GOD OF THEIR OWN: RELIGION IN THE POETRY OF  
EMILY BRONTË, CHRISTINA ROSSETTI, AND  
CONSTANCE NADEN

Nour Alarabi

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# A God of their Own: Religion in the Poetry of Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Constance Naden.

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to portray the different ways in which nineteenth-century women poets perceived God and religion, exemplified by the works of Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Constance Naden. From the 1960s onward, there have been considerable efforts to redefine Victorian women's spirituality, and to eliminate the 'angel of the house' image that was attached to them by their male contemporaries. As a result, the works of many Victorian women poets have been revived and re-evaluated. Brontë and Rossetti have been the focus of many individual studies which have explored their religious orientations, mainly by identifying in their works the religious doctrines of the movements with which they were associated. In contrast, Constance Naden's status as an atheist scientist and a philosopher has made modern scholars overlook the representation of religion in her poetry.

By focussing on the less familiar poems of Brontë (the Gondal poems) and Rossetti (the secular early poems), the thesis will offer a new interpretation of their relationship with God. This will not be based on a consideration of their religious beliefs but on the lack of them in their early works. The chapter on Naden, however, will demonstrate how her scientific training did not stop her from sympathizing with theists, and admiring prophets and mystics.

The ultimate aim of the thesis will be to illustrate the individuality of these poets and the uniqueness of their thought. This will be achieved through a close analysis of the poems, with a minimal use of feminist and other literary theories. It will also demonstrate the problematic interpretations that may arise from associating these poets with one religious movement or one school of thought.

## Preface and Acknowledgments

This study aims to portray the religious world of three nineteenth-century women poets: Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Constance Naden. In the last two decades there has been a movement to revive the works of Victorian women poets and redefine their religious orientations. Religion and spirituality had played enormous role in Victorian England. Women, however, were mainly associated with passive spirituality, whereas the issues of religion and theology were the fields of men. For this reason, modern scholars have been trying to explore the ways in which women poets represented religion in their writings, emphasizing the active role they played as theologians. This has resulted in imprisoning these women poets, Brontë and Rossetti in particular, in the framework of religion, ignoring hence the other more secular sides of their poetry. Constance Naden, however, was an atheist scientist. This has made modern scholars take her views on religion for granted, without any attempts to study the religious themes in her poetry, namely her representation of Christ and mysticism. The thesis aims to approach Brontë, Rossetti, and Naden from a different perspective. It will illustrate how these poets negotiated the religious doctrines of their society, and adapted them to their own individual thoughts. The focus will not be on religion in the writings of these poets but on the lack of it. I will argue that reading their works within the poets' social and family contexts deprives these poets of their creative individuality by considering them the products of their environment. To do this, the thesis will approach the poets through their biographies and their works, with a very minimal use of literary theories.

While researching this topic, I was fortunate to enjoy the help and support of many people. I would like mainly to thank my supervisor Prof. Joanne Shattock, Dept. of English, University of Leicester, for all the great help and advice she has offered me while working on this thesis. I also would like to express my appreciation to all the staff of the English Department at the University of Leicester, and the British Library, London, in which a considerable part of this research has been accomplished.

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars are more than ever engaged in studying the lives and works of the Victorians. At the same time, television series exploring Victorian life and culture and the adaptations of major Victorian novels in main-stream media are indicative of a more popular interest in the period as a whole<sup>1</sup>. The current interest in nineteenth-century women's poetry is part of this ongoing process of re-reading and re-evaluating the Victorian literature, prompted, in the case of women poets, by the fact that until the middle of the century there seemed to have been comparatively few who were widely known.

This has led to an attempt to revive and retrieve the poetry of many nineteenth-century women writers. Jennifer Breen published *Victorian Women Poets 1830-1901: An Anthology* in 1994<sup>2</sup>; Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds edited their *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* in 1995<sup>3</sup>; Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow, and Cath Sharrock published their *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An*

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<sup>1</sup> In the last year alone there have been BBC productions of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *Little Dorrit* (1857), in addition to Channel 4's *Queen Victoria's Men* and Jeremy Paxman's BBC1 programme *The Victorians*.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Breen, ed., *Victorian Women Poets 1830-1901: An Anthology*, Everyman's Library (London: J. M. Dent, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, eds., *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

*Oxford Anthology* in 1996<sup>4</sup>; William B. Thesing contributed his *Victorian Women Poets* to the Dictionary of Literary Biography series in 1999<sup>5</sup>; and Virginia Blain published her *Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology* in 2000<sup>6</sup>.

Beside these anthologies, there have been many critical readers such as Joseph Bristow's *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti* in 1995<sup>7</sup>; Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*<sup>8</sup>; Tess Cosslett's *Victorian Women Poets*<sup>9</sup> in 1996; Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain's *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900* in 1999<sup>10</sup>; and Alison Chapman's *Victorian Women Poets* in 2003<sup>11</sup>. In addition to these general works, there have been numerous new studies investigating the works of the major nineteenth-century women poets such as the Brontës, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and George Eliot; and less known ones like Augusta Webster, Michael Field, Amy Levy, and Charlotte Mew.

One of the important aspects of the Victorian period which has attracted scholars' interest is religion and spirituality. The nineteenth century was an era of profound religiosity. Religion became a central topic of discussion in both the public and the private spheres. After the Enlightenment's scientific discoveries, which directed society towards a more materialistic way of thinking, new religious

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<sup>4</sup> Isobel Armstrong, Joseph Bristow, and Cath Sharrock, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> William B. Thesing, ed., *Victorian Women Poets*, Dictionary of Literary Biography Series (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Lyman, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Blain, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: A New Annotated Anthology*. (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Bristow, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti*, New Casebooks (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Angela Leighton, ed., *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Tess Cosslett, ed., *Victorian Women Poets*, Longman Critical Readers (Harlow: Longman, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, eds., *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Alison Chapman, ed., *Victorian Women Poets*, Essays and Studies (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003).

denominations emerged as part of an attempt to rediscover religion and reconfirm its role and authority in people's lives. Vanessa D. Dickerson in her book *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* suggests that the Victorian spiritual frame of mind was very similar to that of a ghost:

Although the telling and apt designation of the age as a period of change, transition, and progress is no misconception, it proves imprecise if not problematic when applied to Victorian spirituality, for in this arena the Victorians did not necessarily have a sense of moving on. They were caught between belief in the old order and faith in the new one evidenced in science and technology....At the intersection of a world dying if not dead and one all alive with potential though not yet born, the wonderings and wanderings of Victorians describe a condition of...suspension and ambiguous animation that constitutes ghosthood. The figure of the ghost can represent very well the paradox of the Victorian frame of mind, touted for its utility and rationality, yet tenacious of its spirituality.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of this, and in addition to the old dissenting denominations, new sects and religious movements were born in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Methodism, Evangelicalism, and the Oxford Movement. Each of these new movements introduced its own interpretation of the Bible, in addition to its own view of the relationship between human beings and their Creator, dealing mainly with the issues of salvation and the role of the Church in achieving it. The emergence of these denominations, along with the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1829, created unprecedented diversity in the English religious scene, leaving its mark on each individual living in the nineteenth century.

Religion played an important role in the lives of most people living in the nineteenth-century, but it bore a special significance in the lives of women. Religion and spirituality were among the few domains into which women were allowed to venture, as long as they were kept within their private sphere. Although women's

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<sup>12</sup> Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*. (London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p.14.

spiritual superiority was emphasized in Victorian society, theology was still a male-exclusive field. Julie Melnyk, in her introduction to *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, explains how in the nineteenth century 'Religion was regarded as one of the few socially acceptable areas of interest, experience, and even a degree of predominance for women. Women responded by pouring their energies into religious life and religious literature' while theology 'remained a clearly masculine discourse'<sup>13</sup>. Because of this, it was inevitable that religion appeared constantly in the writings of nineteenth-century women poets.

This study aims to explore the ways God and religion were represented in the poetry of three nineteenth-century women poets: Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Constance Naden. The reason for choosing these three women poets in particular is the diversity of their religious and social backgrounds. The poets came from three different periods in the nineteenth century. Emily Brontë was born in 1818 and died in 1848 in Haworth, Yorkshire; Christina Rossetti was born in London in 1830 and died there in 1894; and Constance Naden was born in Birmingham in 1858 and died in London in 1889. This variation reflects the diversity of the religious movements with which they were associated. Emily Brontë is considered by many scholars to have been a follower of Evangelicalism because her father was an Evangelical clergyman, and her sisters exhibited in their writings some attraction to their father's faith. Christina Rossetti was labelled the product of the Oxford Movement because her mother moved the family to a church affiliated to the Oxford Movement when Rossetti was young. Her father, however, was a Roman Catholic, though he never

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<sup>13</sup> Julie Melnyk, ed., *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*. (London: Garland, 1998), p.xi.



tried to impose his beliefs on his children. Constance Naden was brought up by her Baptist maternal grandparents but was attracted to science and philosophy from a young age and later became a representative of late nineteenth-century scientific atheism.

The way these three poets are classified in the recent anthologies of Victorian women poets is interesting. Virginia Blain does not include Emily Brontë in her anthology, although all the other anthologies do, perhaps because Brontë has been considered by some scholars, contemporary and recent, to be a Romantic poet, a fact which will be discussed in the next chapter. Christina Rossetti appears in all the above mentioned anthologies except Thesing's, where all three Brontë sisters in addition to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Constance Naden are present. Instead, Rossetti is mentioned in the Dictionary of Literary Biography volume number 35 *Victorian Poets After 1850*, edited by William E. Fredeman and Ira B. Nadel in 1985. She is also included in volume number 163 *British Children's Writers 1800-1880*, edited by Meena Khorana in 1996. This places her writings in the canon of Victorian poetry by suggesting that her poems reflect the themes and techniques of Victorian poetry in general rather than placing them in the sub-category of Victorian women poets. Constance Naden is included in all the anthologies apart from Blain's.

Although many Victorian women were interested in religion, their interest was inspired by different sources, and it varied in degree according to their social and educational background. This study aims to represent examples of the ways in which nineteenth-century women poets tried to negotiate religion, and adapt it to their own individual circumstances. Despite being associated with certain denominations and movements, these poets did not follow the teachings literally. Instead, they tried to present their own understanding of God and religion, which

resulted in an amalgamation of their inner individual beliefs and the religious movements with which they were associated.

This study utilises the biography of these three poets and their religious background to make a close analysis of their works. Some feminist critics like Toril Moi in *Sexual Textual Politics* (1985) and Jan Montefiore in *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), have warned against considering the woman poet as the speaker of her poem, advocating instead Roland Barthes' 'death of the author' approach<sup>14</sup>. However, it would be impossible to isolate the text from the writer in the cases of the three poets considered here. The speaker of their poems need not necessarily be the poet herself, but it is usually a female in a situation very close to that of the poet. The storms and extreme weather of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* cannot be isolated from Haworth and Yorkshire, and her Gondal poems cannot be understood without a full knowledge of the Brontës' imaginary world. Similarly, Rossetti's religious poems have been influenced by the religious poetry of the Oxford Movement and the novels of Robert Charles Maturin, as will be discussed in chapter two. Constance Naden's 'Evolutionary Erotics' and 'A Modern Apostle' cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of her theory of Hylo-Idealism and Herbert Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. Reading such works without the knowledge of their writer's life and thought would deprive the work of its original context and the writer of her individual creativity.

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<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Walker, 'The Whip Signature: Violence, Feminism and Women Poets', in Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, eds., *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp.35-6.

Each chapter aims to represent the way in which the named poet diverged from the main stream of the movement with which she was associated. Due to the diversity of the poets' backgrounds, it has been necessary to provide a separate introduction to each poet, in which a detailed account of her social and religious background, as well as a bibliographical summary, is given. Because this study is based on a close reading of the texts, it has proved necessary to provide lengthy quotations from individual poems. Many of the poems are not familiar to readers, and not usually anthologised, as in the case of Brontë's Gondal poems and Rossetti's early poetry. Due to Naden's posthumous reputation, very few libraries possess copies of her works, which have been out of print in the United Kingdom for almost a century. Because of the extensive quotations, the thesis is slightly over the required length of 80 000 words.

## CHAPTER 1: EMILY BRONTË'S GOD AND THE IMAGINATION

### Brontë's Religious and Social Background:

Many recent critics have emphasized the influence of religion in Emily Brontë's life and works. To do this, they have explored the various denominations that had an impact on her. Lisa Wang, in the introduction to her thesis 'The Use of Theological Discourse in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters', gives a detailed account of the different Christian movements with which she supposes the Brontë sisters were familiar. She explains that the diversity of the religious influences they encountered 'begins with the Brontës' ancestry, which consisted of Roman Catholics and Irish Episcopalians on one side and Wesleyan Methodists on the other'. She believes, however, that their direct religious experience was a result of 'the Anglican Evangelicalism of their upbringing and education, the Methodism both of the aunt who helped raise them and of the area they inhabited, the Anglo-Catholicism of local curates and the Roman Catholicism of the Brussels school where the sisters studied'<sup>15</sup>. Still, she emphasizes that:

Evangelical Anglicanism represents the strongest and most pervasive religious influence in the lives of the sisters. This is largely due to the

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<sup>15</sup> Lisa Wang, 'The Use of Theological Discourse in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters', Ph.D. thesis, (Birkbeck College, 1998), p.21.

fact that their father was an Evangelical Anglican clergyman....It is to be emphasised that the Brontës were baptised, confirmed, (and Charlotte Brontë married) within the Anglican Church, and were given a strictly Evangelical education and upbringing. No other religious tradition had the same opportunity to exert such an unbroken influence on the most formative years of the Brontës' lives.<sup>16</sup>

Emma Mason, however, in her thesis 'Religious Intellectuals: The Poetic Gravity of Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti' suggests that Methodism had the most direct influence on Emily Brontë, and that all her works are marked by her attempt to free herself from Methodism. Mason argues that Brontë was 'locked within Methodist ideology' and that she 'questioned it by attempting to manipulate the characteristic expression of intense feeling within her poetry'<sup>17</sup>. She suggests also that Brontë's recurring theme of prison and imprisonment signifies the poet's perception of Methodism as a prison<sup>18</sup>.

Marianne Thormählen in her book *The Brontës and Religion* notes that the Brontë household 'was peculiarly representative of Evangelical Christianity as a family home'<sup>19</sup>. Yet she still maintains that this 'Evangelical home of the Brontës may be said to have promoted the individualistic licence with which they moved within the sphere of religion'<sup>20</sup>. She also refers to the idea that 'while Calvinist tenets caused Anne, Charlotte, and Branwell much spiritual anguish, there is no evidence that they had such notions specifically impressed on them by their elders'<sup>21</sup>.

It seems that most critics at least agree on Methodism, Evangelicalism, and Calvinism as the major religious influences on the Brontës. Hence, a clear definition

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<sup>16</sup> Wang, p.23.

<sup>17</sup> Emma Jane Mason, 'Religious Intellectuals: The Poetic Gravity of Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti', Ph.D. thesis, (University of Warwick, 2000), p.viii.

<sup>18</sup> Mason, p.x.

<sup>19</sup> Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.20.

<sup>20</sup> Thormählen, p.43.

<sup>21</sup> Thormählen, p.16.

of these movements and an emphasis on the ways in which they differed needs to be made before approaching Emily Brontë's views on religion. In *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*, Mark Knight and Emma Mason define Evangelical Dissent as 'a pietistic religion that invested deeply in the primacy of the believer's own experience of religion and in the variety of the experiences of others'. They also suggest that Evangelicals believed 'Christ is a saviour figure sent to spread the "good news" as it appears in the Gospels....[and] considered the heart and affections as the guides of the will and understanding'<sup>22</sup>. Evangelicalism's main focus, thus, is on the individual's direct unmediated relationship with Christ, as well as on the significance of 'Christ's sacrificial death to save mankind'<sup>23</sup>.

Methodism is in many ways similar to Evangelicalism. The founder of Methodism John Wesley (1703-1791) distinguished between the two by emphasizing that:

Methodists were more interested in personal conversion and the Atonement of Christ (the reconciliation of the world with God through Christ). Its driving message was that of justification by faith, which...insisted that Christ had done all that was needed for men and women to achieve salvation, belief, and therefore, holiness, through the crucifixion and its consequent message of forgiveness.<sup>24</sup>

Like Evangelicalism, however, Methodism differed from the Church of England on the role of the Church and clergymen in securing salvation for the believers. Methodists believed that the relationship between a believer and God should be direct. It needed no mediation from any clergy. As Mason stresses:

Services were deemed devotional exercises wherein the participants could commune directly with God, and they were warned not to call

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.22.

<sup>23</sup> Thormählen, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Knight and Mason, p.30.

preachers 'ministers' to avoid all allusion to ecclesiastical authority. Methodism thus came to signify non-conformism.<sup>25</sup>

The similarities between Evangelicalism and Methodism created some confusion, even for their followers. Wesley, however, 'held fast to the idea that Methodism was neither Church nor sect, and he preferred the title "Society" to describe the public forum in which believers were encouraged to personally relate to God'<sup>26</sup>. This is another proof of Methodism's concentration on the private nature of belief. By not considering it a Church or a sect, Wesley further disassociated it from both the Established Church and Dissent.

Calvinism believed in the 'doctrine of predestination, that only the elect shall be saved'<sup>27</sup>. While Evangelicals and Methodists believe that despite their sinfulness, humans still have the chance of salvation through Christ, as long as they believe in him; Calvinists believe that, despite Christ's Atonement, only very few will be saved, and those are the elect. It comes as no surprise that such a belief could cause the Brontës 'spiritual anguish'.

Emily Brontë spent most of her life in this diverse religious environment. However, the extent to which these movements influenced her can only be speculative. Brontë has always been an elusive character who continues to fascinate and puzzle her critics. There are few surviving diary-papers and very few letters written by her that could help scholars understand her ideas on religion and literature. She lived most of her life in Haworth where she had a very limited number of friends who could shed some light on her personality and thought. The only direct

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<sup>25</sup> Mason, 'Religious Intellectuals', p.74.

<sup>26</sup> Knight and Mason, p.32.

<sup>27</sup> Knight and Mason, p.31.

statement she was ever reported to have made about religion was ‘that’s right’, in agreement with an opinion expressed by Charlotte’s friend Mary Taylor that religion was a personal affair between a human being and God<sup>28</sup>. Some critics have tried to understand Emily Brontë’s works by assuming similarities between her character and her sisters’ characters, since they all grew up in the same household. Others have tried to draw similar conclusions by analyzing her relationship with her father. Both approaches, however, are extremely problematic.

Patrick Brontë was, as indicated above, an Evangelical clergyman. Brontë’s biographers have all documented her father’s eccentric character. Katherine Frank in *Emily Brontë: A Chainless Soul* refers to an incident when Patrick Brontë ‘burned the little pairs of coloured boots the nurse had set out for [the children’s] return when their feet would be wet and cold from wandering the pathless, muddy hills’<sup>29</sup>. Edward Chitham, another Brontë biographer, however, defends Patrick’s strange attitude:

Cutting the arms off a silk dress, whether for a joke or not, seems consistent with [his] admission of eccentricity; and it appears perfectly possible that Mr. Brontë could have burnt shoes or even mutilated chairs, without being any the less affectionate to his wife and children. His robust sense of humour and firm religious principles are part of his varied character, like his charm and warmth.<sup>30</sup>

Biographers also suggest that Emily Brontë was the closest to her father’s heart, always referring to the fact that her father in 1842 taught her how to fire pistols so she could take part in his favourite hobby:

He still insisted upon personally discharging his loaded pistol each morning, even at the risk of hitting one of his flock crossing the churchyard rather than the tower of St Michael and All Angels. But he would be helpless in the face of a more challenging or dangerous

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Chitham, *A Life of Emily Brontë*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.155.

<sup>29</sup> Katherine Frank, *Emily Brontë: A Chainless Soul*. (London: Hamish Hamilton: 1990), p.33.

<sup>30</sup> Chitham, pp. 21-2.



moving target, and so he decided that Emily must be taught how to handle his revolver.<sup>31</sup>

The role Patrick Brontë played in his children's religious indoctrination has been hugely disputed. Wang portrays Patrick Brontë as a stern, rigid patriarch who 'enforced prayer, Bible reading, and Church attendance' upon his children<sup>32</sup>. John Maynard in his chapter 'The Brontës and Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, believes the Brontës suffered from what he calls the 'curse, to be born a child of a clergyman', referring to Patrick as an 'interesting and intelligent if sometimes irascible father'<sup>33</sup>. Thormählen, however, insists that Patrick Brontë gave his children the freedom to choose their own religious path:

Many unsuccessful attempts have been made to blame Patrick Brontë and/or Aunt Branwell for the religious tribulations that occasionally beset Charlotte, Branwell and Anne. The meagre scraps of indirect evidence favouring the allegation are nullified by the astounding mental and spiritual liberty which the Brontës demonstrably enjoyed in their religious development, as well as in their reading and study.<sup>34</sup>

Thormählen builds her argument on the fact that Patrick Brontë was following the example of Evangelical clergymen whom he admired, like Henry Venn, who were against children's religious indoctrination. Hence the freedom the Brontës exhibited in expressing their religious views is a proof of Patrick Brontë's liberalism. Knight and Mason, on the other hand, argue that the teachings of Wesleyan Methodism were the ones responsible for such freedom:

Methodism fostered a new image of woman that emphasized her role as a guardian of moral standards and piety, rather than as a licentious Eve. She was granted opportunities for self-expression, equality with men, female solidarity, and even economic power.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Frank, p.184.

<sup>32</sup> Wang, p.24.

<sup>33</sup> John Maynard, 'The Brontës and Religion', in Heather Glen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.195.

<sup>34</sup> Thormählen, p.16.

<sup>35</sup> Knight and Mason, p.33.

So the influence of Wesleyan Methodism could be another reason behind the Brontës' freedom of religious expression.

The view of the Brontë home as a liberal household, one has to admit, seems very persuasive, especially when considering the fact that Emily Brontë was given the liberty not to attend church without jeopardizing her close relationship with her father; a fact many of her biographers have recorded. Winifred Gérin in *Emily Brontë: A Biography* confirms:

It is a measure of the freedom Mr. Brontë allowed his children that he never obliged Emily to teach in the Sunday-school—general as the practice then was for the daughters of clergy. She did not do so even in the absence of her sisters when help would have been needed. He showed even greater tolerance in putting no pressure on her to attend church regularly.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, one could safely conclude that whatever Emily Brontë's reasons for belief or disbelief were, they were not the result of a troubled relationship with her father or a reaction against patriarchal aggression, as some would be tempted to believe.

It would be equally misleading to apply Charlotte and Anne Brontë's religious views to Emily Brontë's works. The Brontë sisters were very close but that does not mean they shared similar views. Many Brontë scholars have lately drawn attention to the sisters' different attitudes towards religious issues. Janet Gezari devotes the final chapter of her book *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems* to exploring the impact of Charlotte Brontë's revisions on her sister's posthumous poems, and how Charlotte's alterations completely obliterated the original message Emily had intended to convey. Gezari suggests that, trying to defend her sister's reputation, Charlotte's revisions 'produce a declaration of faith of the sort that

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<sup>36</sup> Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p.148.

Charlotte believed was required to sustain any claim for Emily's goodness and greatness'<sup>37</sup>. This, perhaps, explains the apologetic tone in Charlotte's Preface to the *New Edition of Wuthering Heights* which was published in 1850:

Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. But this I know; the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules and devise principles, and to rules and principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time when it will no longer consent....Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption.<sup>38</sup>

Charlotte's attempt to find excuses for her sister's lack of judgment when portraying a character like Heathcliff reveals her disapproval of her sister's writings and the ideology that lay behind them. It is remarks like these that deem any attempt to approach Emily Brontë through the writings of Charlotte as problematic.

Anne Brontë, Emily's younger sister, was perhaps closer to Emily than Charlotte. The two sisters were the sole creators of Gondal, the secret imaginary world in which they spent hours playing and exchanging notes on its history and characters. However, the closeness between the two sisters does not necessarily mean they had similar mentalities. Mary Summers, in an article entitled 'Anne Brontë's Religion: First Signs of a Breakdown in Relations with Emily', suggests that the distance between the two sisters started to grow after Anne's departure to Roe Head School in 1835. She believes that the main reason behind this distance was their different attitudes towards faith:

As [Anne] was to prove in life, it was only on matters of faith that she ever became really agitated, so one obvious deduction is that any

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<sup>37</sup> Janet Gezari, *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.128.

<sup>38</sup> Charlotte Brontë, 'Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* 1850', in Jean-Pierre Petit, ed., *Emily Brontë: A Critical Anthology*, Penguin Critical Anthologies (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p.43.

division between herself and her beloved Emily must have arisen from that quarter.<sup>39</sup>

This provides further evidence of the uniqueness of Emily Brontë, both as a writer and a woman. Using her father's or her sisters' writings as a way to approach her works is not only erroneous, it is also risky, as it might lead to putting labels on Brontë's views and identifying in them beliefs she might have completely rejected.

The difficulties surrounding any study of Emily Brontë's works are manifested in the numerous interpretations critics provided for Brontë's religious orientations. They vary from Methodism and Anglicanism, as discussed above, to absolute atheism, which is the suggestion of Stevie Davies in her book *Emily Brontë: Heretic*<sup>40</sup>. Scholars have also tried to find links between Brontë's poetry and mysticism, as Jacques Blondel did in *Emily Brontë: Experience Spirituelle et Création Poétique*<sup>41</sup> in 1955, David P. Drew in 'Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson as Mystic Poets' in 1968<sup>42</sup>, and Oscar Arnedillo in his article 'Emily Jane Brontë and St Theresa of Avila: Twin Souls in Different Contexts' in 2002<sup>43</sup>. Her poetry has also been associated with paganism and pantheism. John Maynard suggests that in Brontë's poetry 'If God begins in self, God may very well end in a world of spirits all manifestations of godhead, or indeed in a kind of pantheism or paganism'<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Summers, 'Anne Brontë's Religion: First Signs of a Breakdown in Relations with Emily', *Brontë Society Transactions* XXV (April, 2000), 29.

<sup>40</sup> Stevie Davies, *Emily Brontë: Heretic*. (London: The Women's Press, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Blondel, *Emily Brontë: Experience Spirituelle et Création Poétique*. (Paris: Université de Clermont-Ferrand, 1955).

<sup>42</sup> David P. Drew, 'Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson as Mystic Poets', *Brontë Society Transaction* XV (3, 1968), 227-32.

<sup>43</sup> Oscar Arnedillo, 'Emily Jane Brontë and St Theresa of Avila: Twin Souls in Different Contexts', *Brontë Studies* XXVII (March, 2002), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Maynard, p.205.

In addition to different spiritual interpretations, feminist critics have associated Brontë's works with the Romantics. One of the most important studies in this area is Margaret Homans' *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* which was published in 1980<sup>45</sup>. In this book, Homans studies the difficulties these three women writers had encountered under the influence of the Romantic tradition that treated the feminine, be it nature or the female muse, as the subject of the poem rather than the writer or the creator. Other writers who also located Brontë's poetry within the Romantic tradition are Carol Jacobs in her book *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist*<sup>46</sup>, and Steve Vine in his article 'Romantic Ghosts: The Refusal of Mourning in Emily Brontë's Poetry'<sup>47</sup>.

Emma Mason argues that Brontë's works should be categorized as neither Romantic nor Mystical: 'Criticism's consideration of Brontë as either a mystic or Romantic ignores the poet's location in a specifically Methodist environment, and thus her intellectual reception of such environment'<sup>48</sup>. Indeed, ignoring the religious environment in which Brontë lived is ill-advised. However, understanding her works as mainly religious, in the way Mason and Wang do, ignores the arguments of writers like Janet Gezari and Stevie Davies who insist that Brontë was not an adherent of Christian doctrines.

One of the reasons behind this controversy is Brontë's complex relationship with God and her inconsistent representation of him in her works. Critics who see Brontë's works as mainly religious, like Wang and Mason, base their views on the

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>46</sup> Carol Jacobs, *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist*. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> Steve Vine, 'Romantic Ghosts: The Refusal of Mourning in Emily Brontë's Poetry', *Victorian Poetry* XXXVII (Spring, 1999), 99.

<sup>48</sup> Mason, 'Religious Intellectuals', pp.1-2.

belief that her famous statement ‘O God within my breast / Almighty, ever-present Deity’, taken from one of her last poems ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’, refers to the God of the Bible. They link him then to the ‘God of visions’ with whom she pleads in her poem ‘Plead for Me’. Scholars like Davies who assert Brontë’s atheism base their claims on the lack of biographical accounts of her religiosity and emphasize works like *Wuthering Heights*, where God and religion in general do not play any role in the lives of the characters. A third group of critics, mainly feminists, interpret the ‘God of visions’ who is ‘within [Brontë’s] breast’ as her male muse who played a similar role to the female muse in Romantic poetry, yet with more confusing results as this figure caused the poet both anguish and exhilaration.

The aim of this chapter is to suggest that in Brontë’s poetry the signifier ‘god’ could have two, rather than one, signified concepts. It can, in some poems, refer to God as represented in the Bible, yet in other poems it refers to something completely different: something akin to the poetic imagination. One of the important and influential studies of Brontë’s relationship with God is J. Hillis Miller’s book *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* published in 1963<sup>49</sup>, where Miller argues that God disappears in the world of *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff and Catherine centre their attention on themselves and their love for one another, and this relationship becomes the centre of the novel while ‘God in his heaven is ignored or dismissed’<sup>50</sup>. Miller believes that Brontë represents God throughout the novel as a distant transcendental entity who plays no role in the lives of the characters. However, at the end of the novel, he argues that ‘God has been transformed from the transcendent deity of extreme Protestantism, enforcing in

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<sup>49</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>50</sup> Miller, p.175.

wrath his irrecoverable laws, to an immanent God, pervading everything, like the soft wind blowing over the heath'<sup>51</sup>. Miller explains Brontë's belief that 'God is more immanent than transcendent, more a ubiquitous presence than an external object'; however, 'though God is present now in the depths of each human spirit, as well as everywhere in nature, the separateness of each person, as well as the opacity of his body and the world's body, prevent enjoyment of this identity'<sup>52</sup>.

Miller recognizes Brontë's representation of different, opposing characteristics of God, describing him sometimes as external and others as internal. He argues that despite this contradictory representation, Brontë always meant the God of the scriptures, and the contradiction in her portrayal of his character was based on humans' misapprehension of him. Miller, however, fails to prove that at the end of *Wuthering Heights* the immanent God is actually brought back into the lives of the characters. There is no suggestion that Joseph's version of the transcendent God of wrath is destroyed, despite the kirk's decay at the end which Miller believes to signify the transformation of this god into the god of love. There is no indication that Joseph and his rigid religious views will stop interfering in the lives of the surviving characters who, according to Miller, have finally found God within themselves. The ending of the novel itself problematizes such a reading with its famous final lines 'how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth'<sup>53</sup>: is order restored and the sleepers finally at peace, or is God still angry and the souls of the dead roaming the moors?

Another problem that rises from Miller's analysis is that Brontë does not always represent this process of transformation in her poetry. Sometimes, as will be

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<sup>51</sup> Miller, p.211.

<sup>52</sup> Miller, pp.172-3.

<sup>53</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Height*, ed. Pauline Nestor, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1995), II, xx, 337. Hereafter cited as *Wuthering Heights*.

discussed later, she portrays the inner and outer gods as two separate forces fighting over the speaker. Miller bases his argument on the assumption that Brontë means the same God and tries to reconcile the two contradictory descriptions into a united image.

Of course the argument of two separate meanings of the word god existing in Brontë's poetry could pose the difficulty of determining to which meaning in each poem she refers. This chapter tries to solve this problem by drawing attention to the different places in which these 'gods' dwell. There will be an attempt to prove that God in Brontë's poetry is always portrayed as external, belonging to the outer world surrounding the poet. Whereas the internal god to whom she constantly refers as the 'Comforter' and the 'God of visions' is a symbol for her poetic imagination. This definition might at first sound simplistic, yet scholars have commented before on Brontë's usage of dichotomies and doubles in her poetry. Cosetta Veronese, in her article 'Patterns of Doubles in Emily Brontë's Poetic World', explains how by the age of twenty Brontë had 'already consider[ed] some of the dichotomies which will haunt her: truth and fancy, freedom and dungeon, rest and care'<sup>54</sup>. This chapter aims to extend this idea to include the dichotomy of the inner and outer God.

In order to do so, the chapter will first attempt to examine Brontë's true feelings towards God as represented in the Bible by studying the attributes she ascribes for him, and by deciding whether they correspond with the Evangelical or Methodist representation of the image of God. This will be through poems in which Brontë is undoubtedly referring to the God of the Bible. In this section there will also be an analysis of Brontë's representation of the church and resurrection, and how this could further explain her feelings towards God. Following this, the discussion will

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<sup>54</sup> Cosetta Veronese, 'Patterns of Doubles in Emily Brontë's Poetic World', *Brontë Studies* XXVIII (March, 2003), 47.



move to study Brontë's representations of her inner god, attempting to prove that this is not the Biblical God but rather something closer to her imagination. To do this, I will discuss poems like 'To Imagination' and 'My Comforter' which contain direct references to imagination as her sole comforter. The last section will study the poems 'Stars' and 'The Philosopher' in which Brontë portrays both God and the imagination as two separate forces in conflict. Finally, there will be a discussion of the role of nature as an agent of God, and the ways in which Brontë differed from the Romantics in her treatment of this agent.

This chapter does not in any way attempt to categorize or define Brontë as an atheist. Such a claim should never be made because it can never be proven—not unless a document was discovered, written by Brontë, stating her disbelief in God. What this study is trying to demonstrate is that Brontë, in her poetry, drew a distinction between an inner and an outer god, portraying God as external, strong, wrathful, and sometimes cruel; while using the metaphor of the inner god to represent the imagination as a comforter and a comrade. Whether she believed in the existence of this outer God or in a different god altogether is a claim very difficult to prove.

#### The Gondal Saga and the 'God of Hate':

In 1826 Branwell Brontë received a set of wooden soldiers as a gift from his father. Branwell allowed each of his sisters to choose a soldier of her own from the set<sup>55</sup>. Emily called her soldier Parry, and the wooden soldiers became the centre of

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<sup>55</sup> Gérin, p.11.

the children's imaginative play. They created a complete world with a capital town, called Glass Town, around which these soldiers lived, fought, and died. The four siblings used to register all the events taking place in their unique imaginary world in what they called 'The Young Men's Magazine'. It was a monthly magazine and they were its sole readers<sup>56</sup>. However, after Charlotte's departure to Roe Head in 1831, the younger sisters:

grew weary of Branwell's management of the Glass Town Confederacy. He was obsessed with complicated political feuds and military affairs and spent hours and days on espionage, plots, arms and fortification. With Charlotte gone the human dimension of Glass Town evaporated. Emily boldly decided to secede and took Anne with her....[They] emigrated to the other side of the world, to an island kingdom in the north Pacific which they named Gondal.<sup>57</sup>

And the great world of Gondal was born.

Emily Brontë was engaged in the world of Gondal until her death in 1848, and she and Anne kept enriching it with events and characters. Unfortunately, none of the Gondal prose has survived to tell the stories of this magnificent world. What is left, however, are the poems the two sisters composed to go along with the prose narrative. Emily Brontë transcribed her poems into two notebooks, Gondal and non-Gondal. Some critics warn against using this distinction in approaching her poetry. Gezari suggests:

Although she separated Gondal poems from non-Gondal poems by transcribing them into separate notebooks, Brontë composed both kinds of poems intermittently for as long as she wrote poems. For me, a Gondal poem is one in which a lyrical impulse converges with an occasion provided by a narrative about invented characters with aristocratic names. One way to look at Gondal is as intentional dreaming, a release like the one we experience in a dream when the self is freed to act various roles, but always under the aegis of an

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<sup>56</sup> Frank, p.75.

<sup>57</sup> Frank, p.78.

informing self-idiom that organizes and unifies whatever experience is being represented.<sup>58</sup>

Gondal poems, thus, included similar aspects of Brontë's other personal poems as well as *Wuthering Heights*, so it would be reasonable to use such poems in order to understand Brontë's representation of God.

The two major attempts to recover the world of Gondal are Fannie E. Ratchford's *Gondal's Queen: A Novel in Verse by Emily Jane Brontë*, published in 1955<sup>59</sup>; and *An Investigation of Gondal* by W. D. Paden in 1958<sup>60</sup>. The two works try to reconstruct Gondal characters and events by cross-referencing Brontë's poems and manuscripts with her diary-papers that sometimes included a passing reference to the saga. The two works agree on many points, but what they mainly differ on is the centrality of the character Augusta Geraldine Almeda, or A.G.A. as Brontë referred to her in some poems. Ratchford believes that the whole saga centres on the life and adventures of Augusta, the beautiful seductive queen of Gondal, and her love for Julius Brenzaida. She believes that all the different names of queens in Gondal, like Rosina and Geraldine, refer to Augusta. Paden, on the other hand, finds no proof to substantiate Ratchford's claims, especially Augusta's love for Julius. He, instead, believes that while Geraldine was the wife of Julius, his lover has always been Rosina. Augusta, therefore, despite her numerous love affairs, was never connected to Julius:

Miss Ratchford...asserts that Augusta deserted Alfred for Julius Brenzaida, the conqueror of Gondal, and caused her husband to be sent into exile. A number of considerations militate against this solution...no poem explicitly connects Julius and Augusta...one may

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<sup>58</sup>Gezari, p.7.

<sup>59</sup>Fannie E. Ratchford, *Gondal's Queen: A Novel in Verse by Emily Jane Brontë*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955). Hereafter cited as *Gondal's Queen*.

<sup>60</sup>W.D. Paden, *An Investigation of Gondal*. (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958).

discuss every poem explicitly or implicitly related to Julius without mentioning Augusta.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Ratchford's attractive suggestion of the romance between Julius and Augusta, Paden's cautious attitude is more than justifiable. One should not base any understanding of Brontë's poems on the affair between these two characters without any evidence proving such a link. However, readers can still approach the Gondal saga by following the major lines Ratchford and Paden have drawn, as long as these lines are supported by reasonable explanations. This is exactly what this section will do. Studying the representation of God in the Gondal saga will be done by using only the facts upon which both Paden and Ratchford have agreed, regardless of Augusta's centrality in the saga and her relationship with Julius.

The first point to start with is the fact that the Gondal kingdom is not portrayed as devoutly Christian, despite some references to Christianity as being the religion of the Gondalians. None of the characters in the saga bears a Christian name; most of them have Roman names instead: Julius, Augusta, Amedeus. The church also is mentioned rarely in the Gondal poems, which signifies its minimal role in the lives of Gondalians. The church is introduced in one poem as the place where Julius is crowned as the joint sovereign of the kingdom of Gondal. Both Paden and Ratchford agree that Julius was able to be a king only after a bloody and violent war. The poem was written by Brontë in 1838 and situated half-way through Ratchford's narrative. The venue is the Great National Cathedral in Regina, the capital city of Gondal:

The wide cathedral aisles are lone,  
The vast crowds vanished, every one;

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<sup>61</sup> Paden, p.37.

There can be nought beneath that dome

But the old tenants of the tomb.

.....

All mute as death regard the shrine

That gleams in lustre so divine,

Where Gondal's monarchs, bending low

After the hush of silent prayer,

Take, in heaven's sight, their awful vow,

And never dying union swear.

King Julius lifts his impious eye

From the dark marble to the sky;

Blasts with that Oath his perjured soul,

And changeless is his cheek the while,

Though burning thoughts, that spurn control,

Kindle a short and bitter smile,

As face to face the kinsmen stand,

His false hand clasped in Gerald's hand.<sup>62</sup>

Paden believes that Julius's coronation begins with the funeral of the old monarch, which explains the gloomy atmosphere in the church. The two kings then, Julius and the old king's son Gerald, vow to rule together 'in heaven's sight', taking God and the church to be their witnesses.

Reference to the cathedral occurs again in Ratchford's narrative, but not in the poems. This time it is Augusta's own coronation, and it is depicted in the poem

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<sup>62</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.99.

‘The organ swells, the trumpets sound’, written in 1837. Ratchford believes that Augusta ‘was crowned in the same cathedral where Julius lay buried’<sup>63</sup>. However, considering the cathedral as the setting of this poem is problematic because the poem does not involve a direct reference to the cathedral, and Ratchford herself states that ‘the manuscript of this poem...has no identifying heading. The text itself suggests its place and story’<sup>64</sup>. This reference to the cathedral, then, should not be taken into account when studying the church poems.

Another direct reference to the church in Gondal is in the poem ‘O mother, I am not regretting’. The speaker of the poem is a young dying woman explaining to her mother her mixed feelings of relief at leaving this agonizing world and sadness for leaving the people she loves behind. The church in this poem is represented first as an abbey:

I hear the Abbey bells are ringing:  
Methinks their chime-sound faint and drear.<sup>65</sup>

The church appears again in the same poem when the dying girl makes one request of her mother:

No; tell me that, when I am lying  
In the old church beneath the stone,  
You’ll dry your tears and check your sighing,  
And soon forget the spirit gone.

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<sup>63</sup> *Gondal’s Queen*, p.125.

<sup>64</sup> *Gondal’s Queen*, p.125.

<sup>65</sup> *Gondal’s Queen*, p.135.

In these two poems where it appears, the church is associated with death. The first one marks the funeral of an old king and the usurpation of power by a treacherous dictator. The reference to the shrine and the vow the new kings take does not make the situation more pleasant, especially as the poem foreshadows Julius's vow-breaking and his murder of the other king. The second reference is in a death scene in which the abbey bells are not reassuring for this young dying woman, but rather threatening, announcing her death. The bells of the abbey stop ringing only after the girl's death and burial in the church. In both accounts, the presence of the church foreshadows violence and tragedy.

The church is mentioned rarely not only in the Gondal saga but also in all of Brontë's works. One very famous church in her works is the kirk of *Wuthering Heights*. Stevie Davies rightly notes that '*Wuthering Heights* describes only one church service, and that is a bad dream'<sup>66</sup>; a service that ends in violence and terror for its attendants. Lockwood's famous dream, with its boring sermon and the violent humiliation he faces there, says it all:

The whole assembly, exalting their pilgrim's staves, rushed round me in a body, and I, having no weapon to raise in self-defence, commenced grappling with Joseph, my nearest and most ferocious assailant, for his. In the confluence of the multitude, several clubs crossed; blows, aimed at me, fell on other sconces. Presently the whole chapel resounded with rappings and counter-rappings. Every man's hand was against his neighbour; and Branderham, unwilling to remain idle, poured forth his zeal in a shower of loud taps on the boards of the pulpit, which responded so smartly that, at last, to my unspeakable relief, they woke me.<sup>67</sup>

As comic as this dream may appear, with all the possible psychological explanations which could be brought to bear, the fact remains that the chapel was the setting of a very violent attack against one unarmed man who dared to question the validity of

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<sup>66</sup> Davies, p.152.

<sup>67</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, I, iii, 24.

the preacher's sermon. These staves, which were supposed to help the pilgrims in their spiritual journey, are used to beat an unarmed person just for expressing his feelings of boredom, as if the mission of these pilgrims were actually to oppress all those who disagree with them, turning their quest to a violent battle. The preacher, on the other hand, seems to be orchestrating this violent attack with the tapping on the platform. This very unsettling dream gives way to a more horrifying dream, with the preacher's fingers tapping on the pulpit changing to Catherine's fingers knocking outside the window, thus announcing her return from the world of death. So the church here not only portrays violence, it announces death and terror.

The sermon's theme was based on Matthew 18:21-22: 'Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven'. The preacher and the crowd are ignorant of the essence of Christ's words and they take their literal meaning rather than the ultimate meaning of unlimited forgiveness. Davies explains that Brontë is using Lockwood's dream to express her view of the Protestant Church and the violence stemming from its focus on the personal unmediated understanding of the Bible:

All hell breaks loose in the Lord's House on the Lord's day. This delectable extravaganza reveals the church as the theatre of the unconscious, presided over by the forces of unreason. Emily Brontë has built into the dream a caustic abridgment of the whole history of Protestantism; 'each man his own priest', schism, dissent, 'private ...interpret[ation]' of Scripture, the inner voice, acrimonious in-fighting and universal anarchy.<sup>68</sup>

It could be argued that Brontë's view of the church represents the Methodist and Evangelical criticism of the role of the Church of England and its clergy. But one should keep in mind that the church played a huge role in the Brontë household, with

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<sup>68</sup> Davies, p.155.



the Evangelical father being a clergyman, and the sisters and Methodist aunt being regular church-goers. The lack of any positive representation of the church in Brontë's poetry illustrates her opinion of the church, which, thus, was not influenced by the way she was brought up; it was rather the result of her own thoughts on the role the church played in the lives of people.

Associating churches with death appears again in Brontë's non-Gondal poem 'A Sudden Chasm of Ghastly Light', where Brontë portrays another church in ruins. After a battle, the speaker wanders around a city full of soldiers' dead bodies. However, the only places she names that contain dead bodies are churches:

A sudden chasm of ghastly light  
Yawned in the city's reeling wall  
And a long thundering through the night  
Proclaimed our triumph – Tyrdarum's fall –  
.....  
'Twas over – all the Battle's madness  
The bursting fires the cannons' roar  
The yells, the groans the frenzied gladness  
The death the danger warmed no more  
  
In plundered churches piled with dead  
The heavy charger neighed for food  
The wounded soldier laid his head  
'Neath roofless chambers splashed with blood.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Emily Brontë, *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*, ed. Janet Gezari, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.51. Hereafter cited as *Complete Poems*.

The whole city is destroyed, yet the only places she specifically describes as being full of dead bodies are churches, and she does so in such a sinister manner that the reader can almost smell the stench of dead bodies and hear the moans of the dying. Here again the church seems to be the scene of another violent act, most likely a battle.

The speaker, sitting in a lonely destroyed 'Hall', hears the sound of a 'black yew- tree' and fears it to be the sound of a person dying, so she descends the stairs to check. Upon opening the doors, she discovers a cathedral:

My coach lay in a ruined Hall  
Whose windows looked on the minster-yard  
Where chill chill whiteness covered all  
Both stone and urn and withered sword

The shattered glass let in the air  
And with it came a wandering moan  
A sound unutterably drear  
That made me shrink to be alone

One black yew-tree grew just below  
I thought its boughs so sad might wail  
Their ghostly fingers flecked with snow  
Rattled against an old vault's rail

I listened – no 'twas life that still  
Lingered in some deserted heart

O God what caused that shuddering thrill?

That anguished agonizing start?

An undefined an awful dream

A dream of what had been before

A memory whose blighting beam

Was flitting o'er me ever more

A frightful feeling frenzy born –

I hurried down the dark oak stair

I reached the door whose hinges torn

Flung streaks of moonshine here and there

I pondered not I drew the bar

An icy glory [caught] mine eye

From that wide heaven where every star

Glared like a dying memory

And there the great cathedral rose

Discrowned but most majestic so

It looked down in [serene]<sup>70</sup> repose

On its own realm of buried woe.

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<sup>70</sup> Gezari is uncertain about the reading of the words 'caught' and 'serene', hence she places them in brackets. Both words, however, appear in Hatfield's edition without brackets.

Gezari, in her edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*, believes the two stanzas describing the ‘shattered glass’ letting in a ‘wandering moan’ and the yew tree’s ‘ghostly fingers’ to be linked to Lockwood’s dream of Catherine’s ghost<sup>71</sup>. Both of Lockwood’s dreams are represented in this poem, yet in reverse order. In *Wuthering Heights* the church dream comes as a warning, an epilogue for the more terrifying dream of Catherine’s wraith. While the reader of *Wuthering Heights* is always certain that the sermon *is* just a dream, s/he can never be sure whether the ghostly hand reaching through the window is a real event or just another dream. In the poem, the yew tree is not a dream, but its wailing sound comes to announce a horrifying ‘undefined’ and ‘awful’ dream. The movement from reality to dream is ambiguous. There is no definite indication of when reality stops and dream begins. Just like Lockwood’s dream of Catherine, it is not clear whether the scene of the cathedral at the end is real or a dream, especially since the speaker of the poem was lying in a ‘couch’ before hearing the sound, which suggests that she might actually be asleep. The sound made by the tapping on Lockwood’s window could have been caused by the tree or by a ghost, and in the same manner it is also unclear whether the wailing sound in the poem was made by the yew tree branches or was the moaning of someone on the verge of death.

The portrayal of the destroyed cathedral draws feelings of sympathy similar to those readers have for the wandering lost ghost of the novel; but these feelings do not make the cathedral’s presence less threatening for the speaker. In the first stanza she declares that the battle had ended with ‘our triumph’, signifying her being on the winning side of the aggressors. Perhaps this scene exposes the speaker’s guilt for being on the side of those who ‘discrowned’ the cathedral. However, the feelings of

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<sup>71</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.245.

fear are more dominant than those of guilt. Emma Mason, in her article “‘Some God of Wild Enthusiast’s Dreams’: Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm’, argues that ‘the cathedral dominates the Hall as it does the poem, a symbolic representation of God, and thus a destructive and frightening construction that the narrator feels to be forcibly penetrating the rest of the scene’<sup>72</sup>. The first line of the poem ‘a sudden chasm of ghastly light’ foreshadows the final scene of the cathedral in ruins. Christ has always been described as the light of the world. This light is described here as ‘ghastly’ and terrifying. This poem takes the association between the church and death to a different level, the church here does not only host violent acts and dead bodies; it is an instigator of horror and violence to the speaker.

A study of Brontë’s attitude toward the afterlife could perhaps further illustrate her view of God. Brontë’s representation of life after death has received a lot of attention from scholars. She did not represent death as an end of life as much as a beginning of another new one, yet her vision of this afterlife was not Christian. Critics have noted before the rare references to heaven and hell in Brontë’s poems and novel. Gezari in her analysis of the four last things<sup>73</sup> in Brontë’s poetry observes that:

In the poems, hell appears infrequently, and when it does, it figures either as a metaphor...or a curse....Although heaven appears more frequently in the poems, this can be explained by the word’s standing in for sky....Together, heaven and hell turn up in the poems as halves of an outcome imagined indifferently.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Emma Mason, “‘Some God of Wild Enthusiast’s Dreams’: Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* XXXI (Mar. 2003), 271.

<sup>73</sup> From *The Penny Catechism*: ‘What are the four last things to be ever remembered? The four last things to be ever remembered are Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven’.

<sup>74</sup> Gezari, p.109.

Gezari believes that in Brontë's works heaven and hell do not appear as a reward or a punishment, that is, they do not make part of her vision of the afterlife. To justify this reading, Gezari uses a stanza taken from Brontë's poem 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)':

Yet I would lose no string, would wish no torture less,  
The more the anguish racks, the earlier it will bless;  
And robed in fires of hell, or bright with heavenly shine,  
If it but heralds death, the vision is divine!<sup>75</sup>

Gezari in her reading goes against Thormählen who believes that:

The fact that [the Brontës] avoided description [of heaven and hell] might be taken to imply that they, like many of their contemporaries...viewed Heaven and Hell as states of mind, soul and body which reflected the position of the person concerned in relation to God.<sup>76</sup>

Although these critics differ on the meaning of heaven and hell in Brontë's poetry, they both agree on the idea that she did not mean the literal heaven and hell represented by the Bible.

Brontë offers two representations of heaven in *Wuthering Heights* in the famous conversation between the second Cathy and her cousin Linton. While Linton's idea of heaven is 'lying from morning till evening on a bank of heath in the middle of the moors, with the bees humming dreamily about among the bloom, and the larks singing high over head, and the blue sky, and bright sun shining steadily and cloudlessly'; Cathy's heaven is more vibrant and luscious. It involves:

rocking in a rustling green tree, with a west wind blowing, and bright, white clouds flitting, rapidly above; and not only larks, but throistles,

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<sup>75</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.15.

<sup>76</sup> Thormählen, p.111.

and blackbirds, and linnets, and cuckoos pouring out music on every side, and the moors seen at a distance, broken into cool dusky dells; but close by great swells of long grass undulating in waves to the breeze; and the woods and sounding water, and the whole world awake and wild with joy. [Linton] wanted to lie in an ecstasy of peace; [Cathy] wanted all to sparkle, and dance in a glorious jubilee.<sup>77</sup>

No wonder Linton calls his cousin's heaven 'drunk', with its intoxicating and seductive imagery. Mason considers Cathy's heaven to be the 'fervent vision of the enthusiast, an enlightened but intoxicating realm that Brontë depicted to convey powerful emotions'<sup>78</sup>. Both heavens involve nature, but the attitude of the speaker to nature differs. While Linton wants to lie on the moors and observe the beauty of nature from a distance, being only a beholder, a passive recipient of this beauty, Cathy wants to take part in the celebration; she wants to be as active as the birds, the wind and the water. Cathy's heaven is not only full of life, she herself is part of this life. Since this heaven will be attained after death, Cathy and Linton's representations indicate their understanding of the soul's state after death. For Linton, the soul will be 'lying', in a grave on 'the moors', observing nature. For Cathy, her soul will be part of nature, flying with birds while 'the moors [are] seen at a distance'. This brings to mind her mother's words in her final illness. She was 'yearning to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there, not seeing it dimly through tears'<sup>79</sup>, and so she did. Death offers her a chance to retain her 'glorious' heaven, the moors, where she spends eternity. The soul of the dead will not be lying in a grave, it will be haunting nature.

Gezari suggests that 'In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë explores the unsatisfactoriness of...a spiritual survival after death, in keeping with the Christian

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<sup>77</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, x, 248.

<sup>78</sup> Mason, 'Religious Intellectuals', p.77.

<sup>79</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, i, 162.

doctrine'<sup>80</sup>, and for this reason the reader does not find Brontë's ghosts in heaven, or even hell, but on the moors. Cathy in Lockwood's dream says she has been lost in the moors for twenty years. At the very end Nelly Dean tells Lockwood how the locals see the spirits of Heathcliff and Cathy haunting the moors:

The country folks, if you asked them, would swear on their Bible that [Heathcliff] *walks*. There are those who speak to having met him near the church, and on the moor, and even within this house – Idle tales, you'll say, and so say I. Yet that old man by the kitchen fire affirms he has seen two on 'em, looking out of his chamber window, on every rainy night, since his death – and an odd thing happened to me about a month ago....I encountered a little boy with a sheep and two lambs before him, he was crying terribly....'What is the matter, my little man?' I asked. 'They's Heathcliff and a woman, yonder, under t'Nab,' he blubbered, 'un' Aw darnut pass'em.' I saw nothing; but neither the sheep nor he would go on.<sup>81</sup>

Lockwood's ambiguous comment at the end of the novel describes the souls of Catherine and Heathcliff as 'sleepers in that quiet earth', contradicting in that way the locals' stories of the dead lovers. Yet due to all his misjudgements throughout the novel there is a sense of mistrust of Lockwood's account in the reader. His comment on the sleeping dead sends signals to the reader that the truth is the exact opposite, and that the dead are far from being 'sleepers'.

Nelly says the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine are reported to be seen near the church, the moors and inside the house. The ghosts can haunt *Wuthering Heights* for a very simple reason: the Heights has always been considered part of a wilder nature; and with all its 'civilized' residents, namely the second Cathy, Nelly and Lockwood, leaving it for The Grange, it becomes even wilder. Although it is a house, the rampaging storms inside it and the characteristics of its old inhabitants brings it closer to wild nature:

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<sup>80</sup> Gezari, p.112.

<sup>81</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, xx,336.



The storm which blows at the exterior of the house and gives it its name is echoed by the storm within the house, a tempest whose ultimate source, it may be, is the people living there. Lockwood's encounter with Heathcliff's dogs is really his first encounter with the true nature of their owner.<sup>82</sup>

Hence, Joseph's story of seeing these ghosts in Heathcliff's room is not at all surprising. Such ghosts would never haunt The Grange because they do not belong there.

Nelly, as a devout Christian, and despite her ghost sighting stories, believes the spirits of the two lovers are finally resting in peace in their graves. When Lockwood says the Heights will be left 'For the use of such ghosts as choose to inhabit it' Nelly strongly disagrees: "No, Mr Lockwood," said Nelly, shaking her head. "I believe the dead are at peace, but it is not right to speak of them with levity"<sup>83</sup>. Perhaps for this reason Nelly never admits to seeing these ghosts, instead she relates stories of how others saw them, whereas Joseph's religious yet less sophisticated nature makes him believe that these ghosts are sharing the Heights with them.

At one point earlier Heathcliff tells Nelly that he sees Cathy in each and every detail in Wuthering Heights, yet it is not her ghost he sees:

What is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree – filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object, by day I am surrounded with her image! The most ordinary faces of men, and women – my own features – mock me with a resemblance. The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Miller, p.166.

<sup>83</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, xx, 337.

<sup>84</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, xix, 323-4.

What he means here is that every aspect of the house reminds him of her, rather than that he sees her ghost haunting him in the house. This incident is quite different from that in which he digs up Cathy's grave and feels her actually breathing near him. It is her ghost that he senses, and that ghost is not in the grave but in nature, as he confirms: 'Certainly I felt that Cathy was there, not under me, but on the earth'<sup>85</sup>. Heathcliff later describes Cathy's corpse as perfect, not disintegrated. Yet before his death he says that his and Cathy's bodies will disintegrate together. This means that Heathcliff is certain that Cathy will be waiting for him to be disintegrated, resurrected, to start their new life together<sup>86</sup>.

The immortality of the soul ensured by Christianity appears in Brontë's works, but it is nature who guarantees this immortality, not heaven. The spirits in Brontë's works are never, as established by Gezari and Thormählen, in heaven or hell, or even in the grave; instead, they roam the moors and haunt nature. For this reason, with *Wuthering Heights* being an exception, Brontë's ghosts rarely haunt houses, but rather fields and swamps. In her poem 'How Do I Love on Summer Nights', another Gondal poem, the ghost of Lord Alfred, Augusta's late husband in Ratchford's and Paden's interpretations, is described as haunting the land near his palace:

For round their hearths they'll tell the tale,  
And every listener swears it true,  
How wanders there a phantom pale  
With spirit-eyes of dreamy blue.

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But why, around that alien grave

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<sup>85</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, xv, 290.

<sup>86</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, II, xv, 288-9.

Three thousand miles beyond the wave,  
Where his exiled ashes lie  
Under the cope of England's sky,  
Doth he not rather roam?<sup>87</sup>

The ghost here does not haunt his old palace where he lived with Augusta, nor does he haunt his distant grave, he chooses to haunt the land surrounding his castle.

The Gondal saga, just like *Wuthering Heights*, uncovers more of Brontë's non-religious themes. A careful study of the story as a whole as well as some of its individual poems will clarify this. The very first poem in Ratchford's narrative was written in 1836, making it one of the earliest poems written by Brontë, and describes the morning after the birth of Augusta or A.G.A., the heroine of the narrative and the queen of Gondal. In this poem, instead of finding references to heavenly angels hovering around her bed, one reads about Venus, the ancient Roman goddess of love and passion. This goes against Mason's early argument that locates Brontë's poems only within Methodism. It also contradicts the argument Dorothy Mermin makes in her book *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*, where she claims that:

Emily Brontë wrote powerful verse rooted wholly in English tradition, and her idiosyncratic poems received almost no attention. For poets the lack of a classical education was both a perceived and a genuine disadvantage.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.90.

<sup>88</sup> Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.53.

Brontë did not lack a classical education, despite her isolation in Haworth. Gezari records that she was well acquainted with the philosophy of Epictetus and the Stoics, and that she was influenced by it in some of her poems<sup>89</sup>. Augusta's birth poem further demonstrates Brontë's awareness of the classics. The speaker of this stanza is believed to be the soothsayer after completing 'the Child's horoscope':

Cold, clear, and blue, the morning heaven  
Expands its arch on high;  
Cold, clear, and blue, Lake Werna's water  
Reflects that winter's sky.  
The moon has set, but Venus shines  
A silent, silvery star.<sup>90</sup>

Venus is certainly not mentioned here casually. The aim of making it the only planet in the sky the night the queen was born suggests a turbulent and passionate future life. Indeed, Augusta grows up to be a real Venus. Both Ratchford and Paden agree that in her later life she aimed to seduce young men and then send them to prison or exile. Her passions and disloyalties make her similar to the classical description of the goddess Venus.

This idea is repeated in another poem when one of the characters describes Augusta's picture and the way she treated her previous husband Alfred:

No; turn towards the western side:  
There stands Sidonia's deity,  
In all her glory, all her pride!  
And truly like a god she seems:

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<sup>89</sup> Gezari, p.133.

<sup>90</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.47.

Some god of wild enthusiast's dreams;  
And this is she for whom he died:  
For whom his spirit, unforgiven,  
Wanders unsheltered, shut from heaven—  
An outcast for eternity.<sup>91</sup>

Ratchford believes that Sidonia is a reference to the old Phoenician city Sidon in modern Lebanon, and it is used to represent Augusta as the Phoenician goddess of love and sexuality Astarte or Ashtaroth. This is a very valid point especially because Ratchford brings to the reader's attention Charlotte Brontë's poem 'Gods of the Old Mythology' which 'reveals that the parsonage girls were familiar with the names and characteristics of heathen gods, including Ashtaroth by name'<sup>92</sup>. The aim of this poem is to juxtapose the image of Alfred with that of Augusta to show how cruel and lustful she is, and one way to illustrate this is by linking her to Ashtaroth.

The reference to Augusta as Venus or Ashtaroth is used to foreshadow the future of the princess. This idea is reinforced in the second poem of Ratchford's narrative 'Will the Day be Bright or Cloudy?'. Ratchford introduces this poem by assuming that 'On some significant summer day in the infant's life, *perhaps* on her christening morn, the mother inquired of the soothsayer the course of her child's life'<sup>93</sup>[my italics]. There is nothing in either the poem preceding this or the poem following to indicate that the event is the christening of the baby, and there is no description of the church where this would happen. What is apparent in the poem,

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<sup>91</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.91.

<sup>92</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.69.

<sup>93</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.47.

however, is that the speaker is a soothsayer predicting a baby's future. The seer refers to Apollo in his prophecy:

Will the day be bright or cloudy?  
Sweetly has its dawn begun;  
But the heaven may shake with thunder  
Ere the setting of the sun.

Lady, watch Apollo's journey:  
Thus thy firstborn's course shall be—  
If his beams through summer vapours  
Warm the earth all placidly,  
Her days shall pass like a pleasant dream in sweet tranquillity.

If it darken, if a shadow  
Quench his rays and summon rain,  
Flowers may open, buds may blossom:  
Bud and flower alike are vain;  
Her days shall pass like a mournful story in cares and tears and pain.

If the wind be fresh and free,  
The wide skies clear and cloudless blue,  
The woods and fields and golden flowers  
Sparkling in sunshine and in dew,  
Her days shall pass in Glory's light the world's drear desert through.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.48.

As used in this poem, ‘Apollo’ does not mean the sun and its journey. Apollo was not the god of the sun but he had the task of driving the sun in his chariot through the sky in Greek mythology. The soothsayer intentionally uses this name here instead of the sun to describe the baby’s future, especially since Apollo’s temple was in Delphi and his priestesses were the ones predicting the future. Brontë was familiar with Apollo’s role as the god of prophecies in Greek mythology and that is why she refers to him here. If Brontë’s poetry was actually rooted solely within Methodism or Christian discourse, references like these to ancient pagan mythologies would not have been made. She could have easily referred to Augusta as Salome or Delilah, for example, instead of Venus or Ashtaroath. The reader finds no reference to God, Jesus or even angels surrounding the child’s cradle, only pagan symbols celebrating her birth.

The Gondal saga includes many other non-Christian details. In fact, the whole story seems to be a continuous challenge to the existence of an almighty deity who looks after the characters and controls their fates. The speakers in many of the poems are always trying to disprove the absurdity and meaninglessness of life by asking God for help and reassurance; however, their prayers are never answered. Thormählen believes that ‘prayer in the writings of the Brontës is rarely orientated towards desired objects and events; instead, it solicits faith, strength and patience’<sup>95</sup>. Although this might be true in the case of Charlotte and Anne Brontë, it is not always the case in Emily Brontë’s works, as some characters do pray for a change of events. An example is Geraldine’s prayer, narrated by her servant, before leaving her child alone to die:

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<sup>95</sup> Thormählen, p.72.

“Bless it, my gracious God,” I cried;  
“Preserve thy mortal shrine;  
For thine own sake, be thou its guide,  
And keep it still divine!

“Say, sin shall never blanch that cheek,  
Nor suffering charge that brow;  
Speak, in thy mercy, Maker, speak,  
And seal it safe from woe!”

‘Why did I doubt? In God’s control  
Our mutual fates remain;  
And pure as snow my angel’s soul  
*Must* go to heaven again’.

The revellers in the city slept;  
My lady, in her woodland bed;  
*I*, watching o’er her slumber, wept  
As one who mourns the dead!<sup>96</sup>

Ratchford suggests that this is Augusta, who is abandoning her child from Julius to freeze and die. Paden, who claims that Augusta and Geraldine are different characters, still believes that Geraldine is leaving her child to die alone. Whether Geraldine is Augusta or not the speaker is still praying for her child’s safety, not for

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<sup>96</sup> *Gondal’s Queen*, p.121.



solace. She wants God to 'preserve thy mortal shrine', it is the body she wants to be saved in the beginning, not the immortal soul. However, when she realizes that her child's fate will probably be death, she prays for 'it' to be at least saved spiritually. In this poem can one find elements of Christianity with Geraldine calling God her Maker, admitting his control over both her and her child's fates. In her moment of despair she finds the power to pray, asking God to save the child, if not in this life then in the next. Thormählen explains the Evangelical attitude towards the obstacles humans face in life:

The heart that must not falter in its love for God has two mighty obstacles to contend with, and both are addressed in the novels of the Brontës: the obvious injustice of this life, including the sufferings of the innocent; and the fear of death and damnation. Christianity had a joint solution for both problems: those who mourn in this world will be comforted in the next, and the merciful God will gather his faithful to himself beyond the gates of death.<sup>97</sup>

Thormählen rightfully acknowledges the two obstacles that are illustrated in Brontë's works, yet Brontë is here questioning the mercy of this God who would put a mother in such a position. Geraldine has to abandon her baby to die alone, and all she can hope for is its salvation in the afterlife. The last stanza, spoken by Geraldine's servant, shows the extent of their desperation. The servant is crying over the fate of the child, and over Geraldine, whose desolation after abandoning her child makes her lifeless like a corpse.

Despite Geraldine's expression of faith, there is no sense of reconciliation to God's will in the poem, as the last stanza suggests. There is no question as to which God Brontë is referring here. The prayer is used to question the justness of God. It is not the god of love but rather the cruel God of the Old Testament who puts a mother in the position of killing her own child. Brontë is wondering what solace a decision

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<sup>97</sup> Thormählen, p.71.

like that would give to a mother, even if she knows her child's soul will go to heaven. The language here is very strong, she seems to be ordering God to accept her child's soul into heaven as her last two lines indicate. The Christian influence in this poem is similar to that in 'The Wide Cathedral Aisles are Lone' discussed above. They both indicate that Gondalians are not devout believers. The religion of the society of Gondal may be Christianity, as opposed to paganism, but no marks of genuine Christian beliefs or values are represented in the poems.

The following poem clarifies this point, as well as Geraldine's real feelings. 'A Farewell to Alexandria' is the poem that follows 'Geraldine' according to Ratchford, and she believes that it takes place after Geraldine/Augusta leaves her daughter to die. Paden believes that the speaker of the poem is Augusta, not Geraldine. Augusta is put in Geraldine's situation and leaves her daughter Alexandria, from Lord Alfred, to die alone. She leaves her in 'a familiar and dearly loved mountain dell, where in summer she might have left her baby as in God's arms. But it was winter now; a mountain storm was raging'<sup>98</sup>. She delivers a speech describing how pretty this dell is in summer and how harsh and cold it is now:

Then, then I might have laid thee down  
And deemed thy sleep would gentle be;  
I might have left thee, darling one,  
And thought thy God was guarding thee!

But now there is no wandering glow,  
No gleam to say that God is nigh;  
And coldly spread thy couch of snow,

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<sup>98</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.122.

And harshly sounds thy lullaby.

Forests of heather, dark and long,  
Wave their brown, branching arms above,  
And they must soothe thee with their song,  
And they must shield my child of love!

Alas, the flakes are heavily falling;  
They cover fast each guardian crest;  
And chilly white their shroud is palling  
Thy frozen limbs and freezing breast.

Wakes up the storm more madly wild,  
The mountain drifts are tossed on high—  
Farewell, unblessed, unfriended child,  
I cannot bear to watch thee die!<sup>99</sup>

These lines expose Augusta's doubt and disbelief in God's mercy. Augusta perhaps admits that she might not be eligible for God's help, but she still would have expected him to save her innocent daughter: 'Thought thy God was guarding thee'. Her words reflect a sense of certainty that God will not come to her daughter's rescue as he is not 'nigh'. What she does instead is entrust her child to nature, for the trees to sing her lullabies and protect her from harm.

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<sup>99</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.123.

Some might analyze Augusta's behaviour in killing her daughter to give her eternal bliss as Brontë's way of criticizing the Calvinist doctrines of predestination and election. According to the doctrine of election 'God decrees that a limited number of designated human beings shall be saved'<sup>100</sup>. Those who are predestined to be saved are considered to be the elect and this belief is usually referred to as Antinomianism. The 'Antinomians held that moral law has no compelling authority over those who are justified by faith in Christ'<sup>101</sup> that is, those who are already saved by Christ have no obligation to follow any moral law; they can carry out any act, no matter how unjust it may be, if they believe they are following God's will. In this way, Augusta considers herself to be one of the elect; hence she condemns her daughter to death in order to save her soul from damnation. The Brontë household was famous for its antagonism to Calvinism<sup>102</sup> so an explanation like this is tempting. But this claim collapses against statements like 'I might have left thee ... / And thought thy God was guarding thee', and 'No gleam to say that God is nigh'. Augusta does not profoundly believe in God, so she does not need to kill her daughter to guarantee the child's salvation. In fact, if she commits her horrible deed out of her belief in God, then this proves that Brontë is indeed describing a God of hate.

Augusta throughout the story appears to be a pragmatic woman; perhaps she is killing her daughter now because she knows that if captured by her enemies Alexandria will face a bleaker future. She understands, after the deaths of all the people she loved, the misery and meaninglessness of life. For either reason, the fact remains that Augusta does not trust in God's will and mercy. Calling her daughter

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<sup>100</sup> Thormählen, p.86.

<sup>101</sup> Thormählen, p.77.

<sup>102</sup> Thormählen, p.22.

‘child of love’ does not link Alexandria with God as being his child in the Christian sense. Love in Christianity, especially Evangelical Christianity, was a vital concept as it denoted God’s love for humanity. As Thormählen comments:

God’s love for mankind was the fundament on which all religious commitment and activity rested, the first cause in every individual’s spiritual peregrination and his/her mainstay to the end. Time and again, an Evangelical divine would remind his readers that ‘God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16).<sup>103</sup>

However, Augusta here does not mean this kind of love between God and his creation. Her description of her daughter as ‘my child of love’ brings to mind the soothsayer’s description of Augusta as a Venus, so it is natural for the child of Venus to be the child of love. Moreover, the daughter is the fruit of the overwhelming passion Augusta felt for her husband<sup>104</sup>, which further enforces the meaning of Alexandria as the child of Venus rather than the child of God. God forsook the child, and the church is always mistrusted in Gondal, so neither of them can offer the baby the rest that nature offers. For this reason she calls her daughter at the end ‘unblessed’ and ‘unfriended’.

Augusta is not the only character who is sceptical of God and his divine ways. Amedeus, the foster brother of Augusta’s step-daughter Angelica, according to Ratchford, expresses his grief and the reasons for his mischief immediately before he attempts to kill one of Gondal’s monarchs<sup>105</sup>:

I mourn not heaven would blast my sight,

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<sup>103</sup> Thormählen, p.53.

<sup>104</sup> In Ratchford’s version of the Gondal saga Augusta loves Julius and marries him despite his being a dictator and a warlord, and Alexandria is the fruit of this love. In Paden’s story Alexandria is the fruit of the overwhelming love Augusta has for Alfred, whom she marries without knowing that her first husband Alexander is still alive.

<sup>105</sup> Again in Ratchford’s story Amedeus is the assassin of Julius but in Paden’s story he tries to kill Augusta by conspiring with Angelica.

And I never longed for ways divine.

Through Life hard Task I did not ask

Celestial aid, celestial cheer;

I saw my fate without its mask,

And met it too without a tear.

.....

And who would dread eternal rest

When labour's hire was agony?

Dark falls the fear of this despair

On spirits born for happiness;

But I was bred the mate of care,

The foster-child of sore distress.

No sighs for me, no sympathy,

No wish to keep my soul below;

The heart is dead since infancy,

Unwept-for let the body go.<sup>106</sup>

Despite planning a murder, the speaker believes he will gain 'eternal rest'. He does not believe he will be tortured in the other life for killing a fellow human. Death for him means his body resting in a grave away from the world. He never sought celestial help because his life of weariness and hardship had taught him despair and

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<sup>106</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.102.

disbelief in a deity. The idea of predestination is very clear here, but it is not expressed in a Christian manner. Amedeus is not worried his soul will be shut out of heaven, nor does he believe it will be damned. Predestination here simply signifies humans' predestined life of absurdity and misery. Amedeus' despair goes against the Christian doctrines of faith in God and his mercy, as Thormählen explains:

What strikes a reader of much early-nineteenth-century devotional literature is the sense of a close and living communion with God, a communion which involves the whole human personality. Religious despair and depression are states induced and exacerbated by a loss of that essential nearness<sup>107</sup>.

Amedeus does not feel God and his love; he does not turn to him because he does not believe God will help him. He, like Augusta, distrusts God and his mercy. Humans are born to die: this is the message conveyed by Amedeus, and between birth and death they lead a harsh existence. Only death seems to be the answer, not for hope of heaven in the Christian manner as much as for rest.

Gondal presents several characters who are suffering under injustice. One of them is Arthur, one of Julius' prisoners and the son of the old king Gerald. Arthur, in his dungeon, writes a long poem portraying the horrors of his prison and asking for revenge against Julius:

Hut and castle, hall and cottage,  
Roofless, crumbling to the ground –  
Mighty Heaven, a glad Avenger  
Thy eternal justice found.  
.....  
Shadows come! What means this midnight?  
Oh my God, I know it all!

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<sup>107</sup> Thormählen, p.53.

Know the fever-dream is over!

Unavenged the Avengers fall!<sup>108</sup>

Arthur dreams of assassinating Julius and liberating Gondal. The last stanza announces the end of his dream and his death. Unlike Amedeus, Arthur here is asking for heaven's help. His prayer could provide him with comfort and solace, but his solace is derived from his feelings that God will avenge him and Gondal. Yet this cry for help is not necessarily Christian, since revenge is against the sense of forgiveness and love on which Christian doctrines focus: 'The worst aspect of hating people and being unable to forgive them is that it closes the heart to love, human and Divine, received and bestowed'<sup>109</sup>. Brontë here makes Arthur use Christian means for an unchristian end. The tortured prisoner can only turn to God to achieve his revenge. If Arthur were outside prison, he would have carried out his revenge himself, perhaps like Heathcliff who answers Nelly's rebuke 'For shame Heathcliff!...It is for God to punish wicked people' by the confirmation 'God won't have the satisfaction that I shall'<sup>110</sup>. Heaven is no more 'a glad Avenger' when people can revenge themselves. Arthur's prayer should have been directed towards his hope for salvation, which is the proper Christian aim for prayers: 'to be made fit to acquiesce in God's will'<sup>111</sup>. There is not any sense of acquiescence in Arthur, Amedeus, Augusta, or any other Brontë character. They all rebel against the injustices under which they are suffering. Perhaps Brontë's message through these characters was, using Dylan Thomas's famous 1951 poem, 'Do not go gentle into that good night / rage rage against the dying of the light'.

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<sup>108</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.107.

<sup>109</sup> Thormählen, p.134.

<sup>110</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, I, vii, 61.

<sup>111</sup> Thormählen, p.72.



Fernando de Samara is another sufferer of the injustices of life. He is the lover Augusta sends to prison 'when her brief interest had run its course'<sup>112</sup>. Having lost hope of earthly happiness, Fernando in this poem concentrates on the afterlife:

...Say not that my early tomb  
Will give me to a darker doom:  
Shall these long, agonising years  
Be punished by eternal tears?

No; *that* I feel can never be;  
A God of *hate* could hardly bear  
To watch through all eternity  
His own creations dread despair!

.....  
Earth's wilderness was round me spread;  
Heaven's tempests beat my naked head;  
I did not kneel: in vain would prayer  
Have sought one gleam of mercy there!

Fernando is anxious that despite his agony in this life, he might still be punished by hell in the afterlife. He tries to assure himself that even a god of hate, not the Christian God of love, would not let one of his creations suffer on earth only to be punished and destroyed in the afterlife; God 'will never destroy what he created' as Helen Burns asserts in *Jane Eyre*. Thormählen believes that the focus on God's love for humanity underlines this 'reliance on Divine aid and comfort which was such a

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<sup>112</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.138.

crucial element in early Victorian Anglicanism'<sup>113</sup>. Fernando is genuinely expressing his faith in God's love and mercy. However, the following stanza proves him to be wrong. As Thormählen points out, it is essential in Anglicanism as well as Evangelicalism that:

Man does not as it were purchase justification by deciding to believe; God grants man pardon for his sins and bestows righteousness on him through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. That is the essence of justification, and by placing their trust in Christ human beings may attain this state of grace. It is thus God who acts and human beings who receive, not the other way around.<sup>114</sup>

Despite his faith in God, Fernando cannot pray. This inability to be relieved by prayer signifies God's rejection of Fernando. His inability to reach salvation indicates Brontë's condemnation of this doctrine of justification by faith, which makes humans subject to God's discretion and discrimination, considering thus the god of this doctrine a god of hate rather than a god of love.

Fernando's regression into damnation is indicated again at the end when he asks God to avenge him from Augusta, driving himself further away from salvation:

Well thou hast paid me back my love!  
But if there be a God above  
Whose arm is strong, whose word is true,  
This hell shall wring thy spirit too!<sup>115</sup>

Fernando begins by asking God for help and mercy, then he moves to desperation which makes him unable to pray, then he completely falls from grace when he asks God for revenge, breaking thus the doctrines of love and trust in God and his will. If

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<sup>113</sup> Thormählen, p.60.

<sup>114</sup> Thormählen, pp.73-4.

<sup>115</sup> *Gondal's Queen*, p.140.

salvation is a gift from God, it is obvious that Fernando is being denied this gift despite his earnest pleas. It resembles Faustus' cry for Christ that was answered by Mephistopheles rather than Christ in Marlow's *Doctor Faustus*. It is not suggested here that Brontë was familiar with this work, but the concepts of the unjustness and aloofness of God which are derived from Fernando's poem are very similar to those of *Doctor Faustus*.

The Gondal saga does not have a moral message. It simply portrays the conditions under which humans live and die: miserable, unjust and godless. Even the innocent and faithful are corrupted while there is no interference from God or angels. No help or hope for salvation are offered for those on earth. Unlike the works of Charlotte and Anne, the reader does not get confirmations of faith in God and his justice. Rather it reinforces feelings of God's remoteness from and carelessness regarding his creatures. All these elements make the Gondal saga very similar to Greek tragedies. Miller explains that 'Gondal events...functioned for Emily Brontë just as religious myths functioned for the Greek poets and tragedians'<sup>116</sup>; that is, they supplied her with the visionary world on which *Wuthering Heights* was based. Georges Bataille in his book *Literature and Evil* also links *Wuthering Heights* and Greek tragedies:

The subject of the novel is the tragic violation of the law. The tragic author agreed with the law, the transgression of which he described, but he based all emotional impact on communicating the sympathy which he felt for the transgressor.<sup>117</sup>

What makes the world of Gondal more like that of Greek myths and tragedies is the way in which the cycle of evil and corruption spreads to include all those who

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<sup>116</sup> Miller, p.160.

<sup>117</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), p.9.

are, directly or indirectly, connected to the sinner or the transgressor; the sinner here could be either Augusta or Julius. Brontë acknowledges God's laws, but she does not approve of them, hence she expresses her sympathies for all the transgressors. There is no happy ending, no light of hope for a better future. All those who were associated with Augusta and Julius die except for one character, Lord Eldred. He, however, plays a role similar to the chorus in Greek tragedies, commenting on the events of the saga, as in the poem describing Augusta's death and her grave. There is no reward for the pure because there is no one pure in the saga, all the characters were polluted one way or another, even Augusta's infant. This situation does not end with Augusta's death, and order is not restored as the reader is told later about a fierce civil war between the Royalists and the Republicans in the Kingdom of Gondal.

The Gondal world was constructed by Brontë according to her own imagination. It is her own private land which reflects her own thoughts and beliefs. The fact that she was attached to this world throughout her adult life and until her death – building it by constantly adding more poems to her notebook – reinforces its significance. To her the Gondal world was not a children's game. If God and Christianity had played an important role in Brontë's life, it would have been very logical to find it reflected in this cherished world. Instead, what the reader confronts in the world of Gondal is a constant challenge to the idea of an almighty loving God who created a fair and just universe.

Imagination and the ‘God within [her] breast’:

Despite Brontë’s attitude to religion in the Gondal saga, some critics still believe Brontë’s poetry to be religious. Lisa Wang, in her article ‘The Holy Spirit in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Poetry’, not only maintains that Brontë’s works are full of religious topoi, she further explains that the most important of these religious metaphors is that of the wind which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit:

Critics have not hitherto observed that many of the poems, though they perhaps do not actually quote from specific scriptural texts, nevertheless make extensive use of biblical tropes and topoi presenting the Holy Spirit as mighty rushing wind, as animating breath of God and as indwelling Spirit of God. This focus on the Holy Spirit is closely linked to the kind of valuation ... of experience over doctrine. For it is the Spirit, more than any other person of the Trinity, who is involved in the *experience* of God in the life of the believer. It is the Spirit who convicts, converts, sanctifies, teaches, directs, comforts, inspires and empowers the believer. It is even by the power of the Spirit that the very Word of God is made incarnate. For Emily Brontë, who tended to eschew the more anthropomorphic analogies for the Deity in favour of those associated with the natural world, the tropes of wind and breath were much more appealing than the images of Father and Son. In this sense she is less interested in the heart of the gospel, forgiveness of sins, than in its fruit, access into the divine presence. It is in this context that the topos of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer becomes a means of articulating her own understanding of the ‘God within my breast’ and the ‘life that in me has rest’.<sup>118</sup>

Wang’s argument stems from the idea that ‘In the Bible, the three English words—“wind,” “breath” and “spirit”—used to translate the original Hebrew word *ruach*, and the Greek word *pneuma*, all refer to the person of the Holy Spirit’<sup>119</sup>. Yet, unlike Christina Rossetti who read the Bible in Latin, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning who read it in Greek and Hebrew, there is no evidence that Brontë knew Hebrew or

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<sup>118</sup> Lisa Wang, ‘The Holy Spirit in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Poetry’, *Literature & Theology* XIV (June, 2000), 162.

<sup>119</sup> Wang, p.162.

Greek, and her reading of the Bible was limited to the English translation, so she might not have been aware of the different references to the Holy Spirit in ancient languages. It is true that Brontë was not interested in the gospels, but this does not necessarily mean that she was interested in getting ‘access into the divine presence’. Her representation of God and creation in the Gondal saga illustrates this.

Emma Mason also believes that Brontë’s poetry is full of references to religious experiences. In her article “‘Some God of Wild Enthusiast’s Dreams’: Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm’, she reads Brontë’s writings as highly Christian because they were influenced by the enthusiasm of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She defines enthusiasm as:

A state of profound divine inspiration wherein the individual was overcome by a spiritual feeling that provokes intense passion, fury, anger, and imaginative powers, each testifying to God’s dominion. Such effusive involvement with one’s faith effected a kind of overdose of religion deemed enthusiastic and the roots of this word, ‘en’ and ‘theos’, suggest that enthusiasts were seen to be ‘in God’ in an unusual way.<sup>120</sup>

Mason, then, believes that Brontë’s experience of communion with her inner god, which appears in many of her poems and which some critics call mystical, is actually enthusiastic. She believes that Brontë used this experience as a way of escaping the prison of the self and the prison of Methodism. Hence, she links the imaginative powers of Brontë and her inner god with this religious enthusiastic experience. However, as explained earlier, Brontë was hostile to the conventional God, so it would be unlikely for her to turn to him for relief and solace.

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<sup>120</sup> Mason, ‘Emily Brontë’s Religious Enthusiasm’, p.264.

‘To Imagination’ is one of Brontë’s most frequently quoted poems. As the title suggests, the poem is addressed to the poet’s imagination, and it explicitly illustrates the importance of imagination for Brontë:

When weary with the long day’s care,  
And earthly change from pain to pain,  
And lost and ready to despair,  
Thy kind voice calls me back again:  
Oh, my true friend! I am not lone,  
While thou canst speak with such a tone!

So hopeless is the world without;  
The world within I doubly prize;  
Thy world, where guile, and hate, and doubt,  
And cold suspicion never rise;  
Where thou, and I, and Liberty,  
Have undisputed sovereignty.

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Reason, indeed, may oft complain  
For Nature’s sad reality,  
And tell the suffering heart how vain  
Its cherished dreams must always be;  
And Truth may rudely trample down  
The flowers of Fancy, newly-blown:

But, thou art ever there, to bring

The hovering vision back, and breathe  
New glories o'er the blighted spring,  
And call a lovelier Life from Death,  
And whisper, with a voice divine,  
Of real worlds, as bright as thine.

I trust not to thy phantom bliss,  
Yet, still, in evening's quiet hour,  
With never-failing thankfulness,  
I welcome thee, Benignant Power;  
Sure solacer of human cares,  
And sweeter hope, when hope despairs!<sup>121</sup>

Despite its title, Wang believes the speaker in this poem is addressing the Holy Spirit who is usually depicted as 'having the power to create and renew'<sup>122</sup>, and she uses terms like 'hovering vision', 'breath', 'Life and Death' to further support her argument. However, as the title clearly states, this poem is addressed to the poet's imagination. Moreover, this imagination resides inside the poet; it belongs exclusively to her inner private world, not to the 'hopeless' outer world. Wang argues that the Holy Spirit resides inside the individual, yet he also resides outside him/her, which makes him belong to the world without as well. Brontë in this poem is addressing no supernatural power; she is specifically addressing her imagination.

Brontë retreats to the world of imagination when her outer world fails her, a world she believes to be full of 'guile, and hate, and doubt'. Yet, her inner world,

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<sup>121</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.19.

<sup>122</sup> Wang, 'The Holy Spirit in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Poetry', p.164.



despite the comforting presence of the imagination, is not as serene as one would expect. The speaker portrays a battle fought inside her between her reason and her imagination. Many writers have suggested Brontë's link to the Romantics in the way she deals with the power of imagination, focussing on the idea of the masculine muse in her poetry. Margaret Homans, in *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, describes how in all of Brontë's poems the mysterious visitant who comes as a comforter or a lover is in fact her masculine muse. Homans explains how Brontë in her poems always attempts to summon her masculine muse or 'masculine visitants'. Yet:

Instead of invoking a visitant's aid and then proceeding with a poem on a chosen subject, Brontë often makes her entire poem an extended invocation. Many of her poems dwell on the masculine figures of alien power, elevating them from the status of agency to that of the major subject. This arrest itself suggests she is not confident of having obtained the visitants' support, and the content of these poems is a continuous effort to wrest the visitants' power away from them and make it her own. It is not inherent in the concept of a masculine muse that he should take and keep more power than does the traditionally feminine muse, but in Brontë's poems he does.<sup>123</sup>

It is true that Brontë tries to invoke imagination in many of her poems, yet this imagination is not necessarily masculine, nor is it an 'alien power', but a power residing inside her. Homans describes a battle between Brontë and her imagination; however, as 'To Imagination' suggests, the battle is between Brontë and her reason. Brontë usually sides with her imagination against her reason, as the ending of the poem suggests. Angela Leighton uncovers the problems beneath Homans' gendered readings of Brontë's poetry:

The anonymity of all these personae means that gendered readings of Emily's work are often difficult to sustain. Certainly, the buried form is more often female than male. But this need not reflect on the sex of

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<sup>123</sup> Homans, p.105.

the speaker. Claims, like Margaret Homans' and Irene Tayler's<sup>124</sup>, that Emily's muse figures are male often assume that the speaker is female. A sexual struggle is thus mapped onto a struggle for poetic identity.<sup>125</sup>

Indeed, Homans' representation of Brontë's 'muse' as masculine certainly creates a sense of unfounded tension between Brontë and her imagination instead of a sense of harmony and unity.

When Brontë describes her inner struggle she uses terms that carry huge significance in the Romantic tradition, terms like 'Reason', 'Nature', 'Truth', and 'Fancy', yet with a slightly different understanding to that of the Romantics. H.W. Piper, in his book *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets*, explains the relation between judgement the imagination in the early Romantic poetry of Coleridge:

Coleridge sets Imagination against Judgment and...he regards the Imagination as a means of finding the truth, independent of the Reason and superior to it. The knowledge which the Imagination gives, in this case the unity and greatness of things, is not different from that given by the reason rightly used, but the Imagination arrives at this knowledge more quickly and more certainly.<sup>126</sup>

Brontë sets her imagination against reason as well, and she too gives imagination the upper hand. Despite reason's wise warnings the speaker still prefers the elusive 'phantom bliss' of imagination.

Brontë's distinction between imagination and fancy also reflects similarities with the Romantics. As Piper explains, Coleridge distinguishes between the poet of imagination and the poet of fancy: 'The poet of Imagination and passion participates

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<sup>124</sup> Irene Tayler, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily & Charlotte Brontë*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>125</sup> Angela Leighton, 'The Poetry', in Heather Glen, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.66.

<sup>126</sup> H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets*. (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), p.83.

in the *One Life*, and exhibits it in his poetry; the poet of Fancy and mere sensibility does not, and so nature supplies him only with accidental analogies and purely formal similes'. '*One Life*' for Coleridge means that 'each Thing has a Life of its own, and yet they are all our Life. In God they move and live and *have* their being'<sup>127</sup>. In this way, the poets of imagination can extract deeper meanings and deeper understanding from the world surrounding them; whereas the poets of fancy only use superficial 'accidental' images in their poetry. Feeling and 'passion' hence become a very important aspect of the imagination in its endeavour to reach knowledge:

An analysis of the way in which the Imagination deals with images was also for Coleridge an analysis of the way in which the mind acquires knowledge, and hence came the superiority of the Imagination over the Fancy, which, undirected by feeling, did not unify and modify but merely aggregated.<sup>128</sup>

In Brontë's poem reason stands on one side and imagination stands on the other side. It also represents imagination as superior to fancy because of its relationship with knowledge and truth. Truth is dissatisfied with the 'flowers of Fancy' because they are not genuine. Fancy cannot reach knowledge and truth because it is 'undirected by feeling', and that is why truth rejects it and its offerings. Imagination, on the other hand, can always mend what fancy has spoiled. It has the ability to bring visions back and 'whisper, with a voice divine, / of real worlds'. The speaker's imagination, directed by feelings, and despite its 'phantom bliss', can still bring deeper visions and reach the truth of the world.

It should be made clear, however, that Brontë's view of imagination is not fully Romantic. While the Romantic Imagination is sometimes used as a tool to

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<sup>127</sup> Piper, p.140.

<sup>128</sup> Piper, p.141.

reach God, for Brontë imagination is a tool to reach a world outside the realm of God and religion. For the Romantics, especially Coleridge in his poem *The Ancient Mariner*, ‘natural forces are seen through the eye of the imagination, revealing that divinity which was in them’<sup>129</sup>. Brontë in ‘To Imagination’ announces her preference for the world within, which is that of the imagination, over the unjust world without which is associated with both nature and God. Brontë did not like the image of the divine as represented in the Bible; she, as discussed above, found the world of God harsh and unjust. Imagination for her was a temporary refuge from this cruel world rather than a medium to reach its deeper realms<sup>130</sup>. This sets her imagination as a separate force that opposes the conventional God, despite it being less powerful.

Brontë demonstrates the characteristics of her imagination as an inner powerful force in many poems. But the ones that are mostly linked with imagination are ‘Plead for Me’ and ‘My Comforter’. In ‘Plead for Me’, Brontë uses religious terms to refer to the power of imagination, calling it ‘God of visions’. For this reason, many critics, like Wang and Thormählen, mistake it for God. However, the characteristics she gives to her ‘God of visions’ are very similar to the ones she uses in ‘To Imagination’:

Oh, thy bright eyes must answer now,  
When Reason, with a scornful brow,  
Is mocking at my overthrow!  
Oh, thy sweet tongue must plead for me  
And tell, why I have chosen thee!

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<sup>129</sup> Piper, p.102.

<sup>130</sup> The relationship between God and Imagination will be illustrated fully in the last part of this chapter.

Stern Reason is to judgment come,  
Arrayed in all her forms of gloom:  
Wilt thou, my advocate, be dumb?  
No, radiant angel, speak and say,  
Why I did cast the world away.

Why I have persevered to shun  
The common paths that others run,  
And on a strange road journeyed on,  
Heedless, alike, of wealth and power –  
Of glory's wreath and pleasure's flower.

These, once, indeed, seemed Beings Divine;  
And they, perchance, heard vows of mine,  
And saw my offerings on their shrine;  
But, careless gifts are seldom prized,  
And *mine* were worthily despised.

So, with a ready heart I swore  
To seek their altar-stone no more;  
And gave my spirit to adore  
Thee, ever-present, phantom thing;  
My slave, my comrade, and my king,

A slave, because I rule thee still;

Incline thee to my changeful will,  
And make thy influence good or ill:  
A comrade, for by day and night  
Thou art my intimate delight, –

My darling pain that wounds and sears  
And wrings a blessing out from tears  
By deadening me to earthly cares;  
And yet, a king, though Prudence well  
Have taught thy subject to rebel.

And am I wrong to worship, where  
Faith cannot doubt, nor hope despair,  
Since my own soul can grant my prayer?  
Speak, God of visions, plead for me,  
And tell why I have chosen thee!<sup>131</sup>

Some critics believe Brontë is addressing God, or as Wang argues, the Holy Spirit, in this poem, and they use phrases like ‘radiant Angel’ and ‘the common paths that others run’ to support their view<sup>132</sup>. It could be difficult to determine to whom the speaker is pleading if the poem is not read in the light of ‘To Imagination’. It has been established in ‘To Imagination’ that reason frowned upon the speaker’s affiliations with imagination and the visions it brings. Reason appears in ‘Plead for Me’ again as an opposing power to the poet and her comrade, who is described as a

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<sup>131</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.22.

<sup>132</sup> Wang, ‘The Holy Spirit in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Poetry’, p.164.

‘phantom thing’. This is the exact term Brontë uses in ‘To Imagination’ to describe imagination’s ‘phantom bliss’. The speaker, thus in both poems, is addressing the same power that resides inside her.

The characteristics the speaker gives to her special divine power are not related to her representation of God in her Gondal poems. She refers to her ‘God of visions’ as ‘my slave, my comrade, and my king’. It is possible to refer to God as a King, or even a ‘comrade’, since he can be the ‘solacer’ who eases her pain; but it is very unlikely that a devout believer would refer to God as a slave. Brontë already expressed her doubt as to God’s magnanimity and love in the Gondal saga. She turns in this poem to the symbolic god who never disappoints her; the inner god who makes her forget all the worries of the world and creates happiness from misery: her imagination. In the last stanza she emphasizes how her soul can perform dual roles: it can pray and grant prayers, it can be the worshipper and the worshipped. This is how the ‘God of visions’ becomes both a king and a slave. Moreover, since the two acts of praying and granting are done within her soul, the king and slave associated with these acts also reside within her soul, a further demonstration of the exclusiveness of Brontë’s god. Although the speaker’s advocate does not utter any words, he is not silent. The speaker is asking her imagination to plead for her and, since she and her imagination are one, the speaker is the one who will do the pleading. This brings the reader back to the beginning of the poem when the speaker starts pleading for herself and her imagination. This makes them both the defendants and the advocates against ‘Stern Reason’.

‘My Comforter’ is another poem that deals with the calming power of the imagination. It was published with ‘Plead for Me’ and ‘To Imagination’ in Brontë’s first published volume *Poems of Currier, Ellis and Acton Bell* in 1846. The poems

she chose to publish oscillate between two themes: imagination and death. She published her 'To Imagination', 'Plead for me', 'Stars', 'A Day-Dream', and 'My Comforter' along with poems like 'Remembrance', 'A Death-Scene', 'Death', and 'Honour's Martyr'. Perhaps she did this to establish a balance between the two opposing forces in her poems: reason and imagination. Imagination is necessary to survive but it is temporary, one should wake up to the calls of reason and face the problems of the real world again. The speaker in Brontë's poems does not lose herself to her imagination; she does not let herself be absorbed by it. 'My Comforter' is Brontë's penultimate poem in this volume. It comes as an attempt to remind her reader of the healing powers of imagination after all the death scenes in the preceding poems. It also reinforces the idea that this power dwells inside the speaker and is unique to her.

The poem begins with the speaker addressing her old friend and comforter:

Well hast thou spoken, and yet, not taught  
A feeling strange or new;  
Thou hast but roused a latent thought,  
A cloud-closed beam of sunshine, brought  
To gleam in open view.

Deep down, concealed within my soul,  
That light lies hid from men;  
Yet, glows unquenched – though shadows roll,  
Its gentle ray cannot control,  
About the sullen den.



Was I not vexed, in these gloomy ways  
To walk alone so long?  
Around me, wretches uttering praise,  
Or howling o'er their hopeless days,  
And each with Frenzy's tongue; –

A brotherhood of misery,  
Their smiles as sad as sighs;  
Whose madness daily maddened me,  
Distorting into agony  
The bliss before my eyes!<sup>133</sup>

As in 'To Imagination' and 'Plead for Me', the exclusiveness of the speaker's comforter and his ability to bring solace are evident in this poem. The anguished speaker was looking for comfort in the outer world and was disappointed. The 'wretches' and the 'brotherhood of misery' could be a reference to the Evangelicals who 'utter praises' to the Lord, asking him to find them and reveal himself to them. Mason in her analysis of the poem acknowledges that 'Frenzy stood as another signifier for the imprisoning madness she believed religion provoked'<sup>134</sup>. Indeed, this suggestion confirms Brontë's condemnation of the practices in which humans can lose themselves in search for a divine power residing outside them. It also confirms that Brontë's visions are, contrary to what Mason concludes, neither enthusiastic nor religious but imaginative; that is, they are inspired by her own imagination and not an external power. It could be argued that the 'brotherhood of misery' which

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<sup>133</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.29.

<sup>134</sup> Mason, 'Religious Intellectuals', p.105.

‘maddened’ the speaker is a reference to Evangelicalism alone, as opposed to Brontë’s own understanding of God and true Christianity. Again, this reading could be valid if the poem is read outside the context of Brontë’s volume, but not when it is compared to her other imagination poems. The reference to the comforter in Brontë’s poems has been to what she called her inner god. It has already been established earlier in this chapter that God did not give the poet any comfort or solace. Hence, the only meaning that remains valid for that inner comforting power is imagination.

Perhaps those frenzied people are described as ‘mad’ because they have lost all contact with reality. Their smiles are not genuine because they try to ignore their sufferings while living their ‘hopeless days’ searching for God. The God of this brotherhood ‘maddened’ the poet instead of comforting her, so she abandons him and looks for her inner god for comfort again:

So stood I, in Heaven’s glorious sun,  
And in the glare of Hell;  
My spirit drank a mingled tone,  
Of seraph’s song, and demon’s moan;  
What my soul bore, my soul alone  
Within itself may tell!

The two first lines portray the speaker’s defiance of God’s heaven and hell. She is standing in front of his glorious creation, declaring her rebellion against this blinding maddening religion, drinking life with all its pains and its pleasures. The image here brings to mind Eve’s rebellion when eating the apple that made her human. Brontë here, by drinking the cup of songs and moans, is accepting the elements that make

her human, with all the pain they bring. Only human beings have imagination, and the speaker celebrates her humanity because through it alone she can reach imagination.

Like a soft air, above a sea,  
Tossed by the tempest's stir;  
A thaw-wind, melting quietly  
The snow-drift, on some wintry lea;  
No: what sweet thing resembles thee,  
My thoughtful Comforter?

Even nature with all its beauty and soothing effect still is no match to the 'thoughtful comforter' inside the speaker. Such is the effect of Brontë's comforter: bringing her the peace and harmony she desperately needs in this maddening world.

Brontë found in her imagination a friend who can help her overcome the troubles of life. She did not need solace from anyone apart from this friend. J. Hillis Miller argues, in relation to the story of Heathcliff and Catherine, that for Brontë 'a created being entirely self-contained would have no use or meaning'<sup>135</sup>. Yet Brontë was self-contained and self-sufficient. Her novel is perhaps an attempt to show the dangers of looking for comfort and solace outside the self, because this existence beyond the self is threatened by death and annihilation at any time. Brontë, with the loss of her mother and sisters, knew this well. Miller and Irene Tayler argue that Brontë's continuous sense of bereavement and longing is for her childhood. Miller believes that the realm of Brontë's imagination was the visions that 'encircled

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<sup>135</sup>Miller, p.173.

her...“from careless childhood’s sunny time””<sup>136</sup>. Tayler, on the other hand, builds her argument on the idea that ‘for Emily language was indeed constructed over a loss, and quite specifically the loss of her mother’<sup>137</sup>. Brontë in her poems is longing for a past child-like state, that time of innocence and simplicity, when she used to spend most of her time with her imagination, without knowing or worrying about the cares of the outer world. Her longing is not for a person but for a state of being, which she can only have glimpses of through imagination. She does not need a person to fulfil her being because this being is already fulfilled by her imagination.

However, she is aware that this is temporary and that the moment she gets back to the real world she will face its injustice once again. One should not, however, see imagination as Brontë’s escapism, but rather as a way of retreat. She only uses imagination to help her overcome the troubling questions inside her which neither God nor religion were able to answer. Because Brontë was self-sufficient, she shut out everyone; even her dear Anne was excluded from her world and not allowed to read her poems. She did not want anybody to share her world of imagination with her.

This self-sufficiency is very evident in ‘No Coward Soul is Mine’. Some read this poem as Brontë’s confession of faith in God. Thormählen believes that it is ‘Brontë’s best-known poem [which] rejects the very possibility of doubt’<sup>138</sup>. Indeed, this poem could be considered devotional if taken out of the context of Brontë’s other works; however, by understanding Brontë’s sceptical perception of God’s love and justice, the poem becomes more an expression of her philosophy in life. She starts the poem affirming her inner strength:

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<sup>136</sup> Miller, p.158.

<sup>137</sup> Tayler, p.25.

<sup>138</sup> Thormählen, p.73.

No coward soul is mine  
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere  
I see Heaven's glories shine  
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

Oh God within my breast  
Almighty ever-present Deity  
Life, that in me hast rest  
As I Undying Life, have power in thee

Vain are the thousand creeds  
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,  
Worthless as withered weeds  
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one  
Holding so fast by thy infinity  
So surely anchored on  
The steadfast rock of Immortality

With wide-embracing love  
Thy spirit animates eternal years  
Pervades and broods above,  
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though Earth and moon were gone  
And suns and universes ceased to be  
And thou wert left alone  
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void  
Since thou art Being and Breath  
And what thou art may never be destroyed<sup>139</sup>

This poem was first published after Brontë's death in 1850. However, the first published version of it contained Charlotte's revisions. The poem as originally written in the manuscript was not published until 1902 when Brontë's manuscripts were sold. According to Gezari, Charlotte's:

revisions to 'No coward soul is mine' are not incidental. They produce a declaration of faith of the sort that Charlotte believed was required to sustain any claim of Emily's goodness and greatness. For this reason, it was also useful to identify 'No coward soul is mine', composed in January of 1846, as the last poem Emily wrote, although Charlotte knew it was not. As in 1846, all the poems published in 1850...were taken from Emily's two transcript notebooks....Charlotte would have seen 'Why ask to know the date—the clime', which was composed in September of 1846 (eight months after 'No coward soul is mine') and partly revised in May of 1848.<sup>140</sup>

Gezari discusses in detail Charlotte's revisions and the effect they have on the poem. She explains that Brontë's original poem 'expresses her faith in an infinite, enduring life, pervading the universe and in the soul brave enough to claim its participation in that life. This enduring life vested in the self cannot diminish

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<sup>139</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.182.

<sup>140</sup> Gezari, p.128.

human suffering but gives us something to praise in the face of it'. Charlotte's revisions were mainly in the last two stanzas, changing them into:

Though earth and man were gone,  
And suns and universes ceased to be,  
And Thou wert left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou—THOU art Being and Breath,  
And what THOU art may never be destroyed.

The implications underlying these revisions, especially dropping 'since' and capitalizing 'thou', are very significant in understanding Brontë's distinction between references to God and her imagination. As Gezari suggests:

We don't comfortably now, and Emily and Charlotte wouldn't comfortably then, refer to a human as 'Thou' or 'THOU'. Charlotte's omission of the word 'Since' from the start of the line doesn't just make room for the emphatic repetition of 'THOU'. It also cuts this line and the following one off from the rest of the poem, and replaces the thoughtfulness of a subordinate clause with the conviction of a creed.<sup>141</sup>

Brontë's original poem was not addressing God; it was rather expressing faith in something human. Charlotte's conscious revisions of the poem expose her awareness of her sister's true implications. Her desire to obliterate them signifies her belief in their damaging effect on her late sister's reputation. Brontë was addressing

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<sup>141</sup> Gezari, p.134.

a force that dwells inside her, but that force was not the Divine since it revolved around human power and human ability. Gezari acknowledges that:

When she describes her vital principle, Brontë uses the vocabulary Coleridge had used to describe the secondary imagination, which (according to Coleridge) is identical to the primary imagination in kind but differs from it in degree and in the mode of its operation.

But the difference between the two is that:

Coleridge's secondary imagination is the poet's imagination, but Brontë's vital principle is more like his primary imagination in not requiring an exercise of the conscious will and in not striving 'to idealize and to unify'. Like breathing, its operations are involuntary.<sup>142</sup>

Based on this, Gezari explains the whole poem as an expression of the poet's primary imagination. Gezari's reading has stronger foundations than the other religious readings because it is based on Brontë's original manuscript. However, it does not analyse the poem or link it with the other imagination poems, which deprives the poem of its original context.

Brontë starts the poem with the confirmation that she is not a coward. She does not live in a fairy world; she is fully conscious of the world and all its agonies. In the first stanza she describes her faith shining equal to 'Heaven's glories', 'arming [her] from Fear'. Fear here could be of the 'world's storm troubled sphere'. However, it could also be understood that heaven itself is threatening the speaker and the only weapon she has to defend herself from this fearful heaven is her faith. Faith, hence, is set against heaven, and perhaps against the Divine; this is a further proof that Brontë's faith was not in God but in another different power. Although all critics

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<sup>142</sup> Gezari, p.131.



agree that Brontë's reference to the 'thousand creeds' is meant to be an attack on various Christian denominations, they do not seem to agree on which denominations Brontë is attacking. Understanding the faith the poem expresses as that in imagination rather than God makes the 'thousand creeds' refer to all religious denominations with no exception, which is the idea Charlotte tried to disguise. These creeds represent the 'frenzied' 'brotherhood of misery' who 'maddened' Brontë in 'My Comforter'. Moreover, her reference to the 'wide-embracing love' recalls her references to imagination as 'comrade' and 'solacer'.

This is indeed a poem of faith, but it is faith in the self and its imagination, not in God and the disappointing world. The last four lines are a clear indication of the self-sufficiency this 'god' offers to the poet. Her imagination, that god that resides inside her breast, constitutes her whole being.

#### God, Nature, and the Imagination:

So far this chapter has illustrated the poems that directly refer either to God or to imagination. Yet some of Brontë's poems have an indirect reference to God juxtaposed with reference to the imagination. Those poems are not in the form of a prayer like the ones discussed above, nor does the word 'god' appear in them. The reference to God in these poems could only be reached through the symbols Brontë uses. Rosalind Miles, in her essay 'A Baby God: The Creative Dynamism of Emily Brontë's Poetry' explains the special attention Brontë gave to the art of writing. She argues that Brontë's 'is the art that conceals art; the result, at its best, is truly that of "carefullest carelessness"'. She insists that 'any examination however cursory, of

Emily Brontë's poetry, will show how carefully she attended to the techniques of creation [of poetry], how painstakingly she sought the appropriate expression for her provocative vision'<sup>143</sup>. Brontë tried to use art to conceal some deeper meanings in her poetry, meanings which might have been frowned upon in her family.

One example of this is her poem 'Stars' which Brontë chose to publish in *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* in 1846. The poem seemingly discusses the speaker's impatience with the sun filling the room with its light, banishing the night stars:

Ah! why, because the dazzling sun  
Restored our Earth to joy,  
Have you departed, every one,  
And left a desert sky?

All through the night, your glorious eyes  
Were gazing down in mine,  
And with a full heart's thankful sighs,  
I blessed that watch divine.

I was at peace, and drank your beams  
As they were life to me;  
And revelled in my changeful dreams,  
Like petrel on the sea.

Thought followed thought, star followed star,

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<sup>143</sup> Rosalind Miles, 'A Baby God: The Creative Dynamism of Emily Brontë's Poetry', in Harold Bloom, ed., *The Brontës*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.76.

Through boundless regions, on;  
While one sweet influence, near and far,  
Thrilled through, and proved us one!

Why did the morning dawn to break  
So great, so pure, a spell;  
And scorch with fire, the tranquil cheek,  
Where your cool radiance fell?

Blood-red, he rose, and arrow-straight,  
His fierce beams struck my brow;  
The soul of nature, sprang elate,  
But *mine* sank sad and low!

My lids closed down, yet through their veil,  
I saw him, blazing, still,  
And steep in gold the misty dale,  
And flash upon the hill.

I turned me to the pillow, then,  
To call back night, and see  
Your worlds of solemn light, again,  
Throb with my heart, and me!

It would not do – the pillow glowed,

And glowed both roof and floor;  
And birds sang loudly in the wood,  
And fresh winds shook the door;

The curtains waved, the wakened flies  
Were murmuring round my room,  
Imprisoned there, till I should rise,  
And give them leave to roam.

Oh, stars, and dreams, and gentle night;  
Oh, night and stars return!  
And hide me from the hostile light,  
That does not warm, but burn;

That drains the blood of suffering men;  
Drinks tears, instead of dew;  
Let me sleep through his blinding reign,  
And only wake with you!<sup>144</sup>

This seemingly simple poem had attracted attention from many critics. Dorothy Mermin in *Godiva's Ride* uses this poem to illustrate the damaging effect such a 'violent penetration' from a masculine sun could have on the poet's creative and imaginative abilities; abilities that were essentially associated with the night and the stars. The speaker's 'visionary power vanishes under the gaze that objectifies and

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<sup>144</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.5.

transforms her as it transforms nature. Yielding to his power, she sees his visions, not her own<sup>145</sup>. Gezari makes a similar argument by acknowledging the ‘monstrously masculine’ nature of Brontë’s sun<sup>146</sup>. Gezari explains the reason behind the poet’s hostile attitude towards the sun:

During the night, the speaker rides the waves of her ‘changeable dreams’; during the day, she is unable to escape her fraught consciousness of human suffering. This consciousness, held at bay through an effort of the will despite the sun’s rising, surfaces in the poem’s last stanza.<sup>147</sup>

What is interesting in Gezari’s analysis, however, is her comparison of the sun in ‘Stars’ to ‘the patriarchal deity in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, who drains the life and savours the tears of suffering men’<sup>148</sup>. The sun’s overwhelming power and ‘reign’, and its hegemony over the natural world indirectly link it to a deity, and this deity in Brontë’s mind could be no other than God, or more specifically in this poem, Christ the Son.

Christ has been constantly described, not only as the light of the world, but also as the sun in Christian tradition. Some references to the sun in the Old Testament have been understood as foreshadowing the coming of Christ in the New Testament. An example of this is found in Malachi 4:2: ‘But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall’. Another example is in Psalm 84:11: ‘For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly’. In the New Testament Christ is also described as the sun. In Revelation 1:16 John of Patmos describes Christ’s

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<sup>145</sup> Mermin, pp.62-3.

<sup>146</sup> Gezari, p.30.

<sup>147</sup> Gezari, p.31.

<sup>148</sup> Gezari, p.31.

appearance: ‘And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength’.

In Christian literature, and up to nearly the first half of the nineteenth century, the sun was also used to symbolize Jesus Christ. When astronomical discoveries announced that the sun, contrary to what was previously thought, was actually trivial if compared to other stars, religious writers had to stop associating Christ with the sun. They needed to keep their literature up to date with scientific facts without compromising Christ’s divine status. Linda E. Marshall, for example, explains how Christina Rossetti’s *Seek and Find* tried to adapt this scientific fact to the Bible’s representation of Christ: ‘Though various writers “moved by the Holy Ghost” have figuratively designated Christ as sun, “or compared Him as with a similitude”, Christ did not call himself the sun, but rather “the bright and morning star”’<sup>149</sup>. Despite Rossetti’s and other writers’ attempts to obliterate such references, their existence in the Bible made it impossible for any reader of scriptures to ignore them. Brontë, even if she was not a follower of religion, was definitely aware of references to Christ as the sun. It is possible, therefore, that she might have used such references in her poetry.

By understanding the sun to mean Christ, Brontë’s poem assimilates a very anti-Christian meaning. The ‘morning dawn’ in this reading could be a reference to Christ, the Sun, and this description brings to mind Christ as the meek Lamb. However, dawn in the same stanza ‘scorch[es] with fire, the tranquil cheek’. Scorching fire immediately suggests the Apocalypse. Christ, whose appearance is described as the sun in Revelation, will scorch the ‘cheeks’ of those who did not

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<sup>149</sup> Linda E. Marshall, ‘Astronomy of the Invisible: Contexts for Christina Rossetti’s Heavenly Parables’, in Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, eds., *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p.200.

believe in him, who did not accept him into their hearts. Sun and Christ, hence, turn from givers of light and righteousness to punishing avengers. The following images of the sun as 'blood-red' and 'arrow-straight' enhance this apocalyptic setting of the poem. The messianic prophecies in Zechariah 9:14 refer to the Messiah punishing non-believers with his arrow: 'And the Lord shall be seen over them, and his arrow shall go forth as the lightning: and the Lord God shall blow the trumpet, and shall go with whirlwinds of the south'. It is this fierce apocalyptic representation of Christ that Brontë depicts in this poem: the scorching Sun of Righteousness rising with sword and arrow to punish the non-believers. This is the image of God that is predominant in her Gondal poems.

What is also interesting in this poem is that nature collaborates with God against the poet. The sun 'restored our earth to joy' making the birds sing and the 'fresh wind blow'. There is no correspondence between the speaker and the soul of nature. Thormählen argues that the Brontë sisters believed that God consoled his creatures not through Christ but through nature, a belief similar to that of Wordsworth and Coleridge<sup>150</sup>. Emily Brontë acknowledges the link between nature and the Divine, but she is frustrated, rather than consoled, by that link. In 'Stars' the speaker sounds impatient with the way nature testifies to its Creator's dominion, falling under his rule and obeying his laws. There is somehow a sense of disappointment and betrayal when the speaker realizes that nature does not share her rebellion against the Sun. The speaker's depiction of the ruthlessness of the sun and the way he thrives on people's miseries recalls the sufferings of the men and women in Gondal, and the way they are abandoned and banished from God's grace. The speaker is finally aware that she cannot escape this omnipresent God, despite all her

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<sup>150</sup> Thormählen, pp.66-7.

attempts to close her eyelids, for she could still see him 'blazing' through them. Acknowledging her defeat in fighting the sun and his influence, she appeals to the night and stars to return and 'hide [her] from the hostile light' of the cruel sun.

After establishing the possibility that the 'blazing' sun in this poem refers to Christ, one needs to understand to what, or to whom, the stars refer. It is obvious that they refer to a power that is much weaker than the sun, and that it is internal to the poet as these lines suggest:

Your worlds of solemn light, again,  
Throb with my heart, and me!

Stars and night do not represent nature because, as explained above, nature is part of the world of God and plays the role of his agent. The speaker, instead, keeps associating stars and night with dreams and the visionary world, which make them stand for imagination. The only activity the speaker connects with night-time is dreaming. She 'revell[s] in [her] changeful dreams', following her thoughts 'through boundless regions'. Her night world is magical, bound by a 'pure spell' that is, paradoxically, broken only by the Sun of righteousness. As Gezari and Mermin suggest, stars and night represent the speaker's imaginative world. However, it is not the male muse or any patriarchal power that is threatening this world, it is *the* ultimate patriarchal power, God, who is depriving her of her cherished world.

Brontë's 'God of visions' has more in common with the stars than with the sun in 'Stars', which further proves the idea that it is a symbol for her imagination. This poem is important because it suggests, indirectly, that Brontë in her poetry sets God and imagination as two opposing powers. There is an obvious conflict between these two powers, and the speaker is attracted to the world of the night and stars



rather than the world of God. One could argue that Christ was described, as Rossetti confirms, as the morning star. However, the characteristics Brontë gives to her sun are directly taken from the Bible to be references to Christ. Besides, her sun's 'monstrous masculinity', as opposed to the femininity of the stars, further links God to the sun.

'The Philosopher' is another poem in which God and the imagination are represented as two opposing powers. It depicts a conversation between a philosopher and a seer in a surreal setting. Tayler argues that the seer in this poem represents Brontë's belief that following rationalism leads to despair. Dreams and visions are essential for humans because they help them to see the best in life: 'Such vision-blind philosophers will never be able to see anything but evil in life and annihilation in death'<sup>151</sup>. Brontë believed in the importance of imagination as a means of survival in a cruel world, but perhaps the poem here is as much about religion as it is about imagination. Although it is a mistake to consider all of Brontë's works as carrying on an indirect debate about Christianity, it is as erroneous to try to analyze them all in reference to imagination alone.

The poem represents a discourse between a believer who was able to find God and a philosopher who is still looking for God. This reflects the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith: the seer is lucky because God chose to reveal himself to him, but the philosopher is still in agony. This quest is growing more and more painful and the agony of the philosopher is becoming unbearable that he is now seeking death. The poem begins with the seer almost reproaching the philosopher:

'Enough of thought, philosopher!

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<sup>151</sup> Tayler, p.54.

Too long hast thou been dreaming  
Unenlightened, in this chamber drear,  
While summer's sun is beaming!  
Space-sweeping soul, what sad refrain  
Concludes thy musings once again?'<sup>152</sup>

The seer is actually asking the philosopher to stop 'dreaming' and to go out and enjoy life and nature. This is quite the opposite of Tayler's argument of the seer as a visionary enjoying life through imagination. The seer here is asking the philosopher to stop both thinking and dreaming; in other words, he is asking him to stop being mentally active and to be a passive receiver of the joys of life. The seer then repeats the philosopher's words that express his agony:

"“Oh, for the time when I shall sleep  
Without identity,  
And never care how rain may steep,  
Or snow may cover me!  
No promised heaven, these wild desires,  
Could all, or half fulfil;  
No threatened hell, with quenchless fires,  
Subdue this quenchless will!”"

Gezari suggests that the philosopher's anguish represents Brontë's:

Towards the end of her poetic career, anguish is more fully adumbrated as a response to the irreducibly painful knowledge that so long as we exist as ourselves, we exist in time. Unlike the rest of the natural creation, we carry the knowledge of our mortality with us.

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<sup>152</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.7.

Brontë's eponymous philosopher, reprimanded for thinking too much, laments the burden of human consciousness, and turns the apprehension of death into the wish for it.<sup>153</sup>

This explains the philosopher's wish to lose his human identity. However, what makes the philosopher human is not only his consciousness of death, but also his will and his desire, as he explains. He places this 'human desire and will against whatever heaven and hell have on offer'<sup>154</sup>. The reference to heaven and hell here indicates that the philosopher's questions are of a theological nature. Desire and will were initially the reasons behind the Fall. When Adam and Eve set their will against the will of God and disobeyed his law, they became distinct from the rest of creation. They gained consciousness but they became vulnerable to death. In the four last lines the philosopher is expressing his pride in being human, despite the anguish this causes him. He is proud of the human mind and the human will which cannot be conquered even by God. It is a celebration of the human against the Divine.

The conversation between the seer and the philosopher proceeds. The philosopher's first direct speech is:

'So said I, and still say the same;  
Still, to my death, will say –  
Three gods, within this little frame,  
Are warring night and day;  
Heaven could not hold them all, and yet  
They all are held in me;  
And must be mine till I forget  
My present entity!

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<sup>153</sup> Gezari, p.18.

<sup>154</sup> Gezari, p.109.

Oh, for the time, when in my breast  
Their struggles will be o'er!  
Oh, for the day, when I shall rest,  
And never suffer more!'

'I saw a spirit, standing, man,  
Where thou doth stand – an hour ago,  
And round his feet three rivers ran,  
Of equal depth, and equal flow –  
A golden stream – and one like blood;  
And one like sapphire seemed to be;  
But, where they joined their triple flood  
It tumbled in an inky sea.  
The spirit sent his dazzling gaze  
Down through that ocean's gloomy night  
Then, kindling all, with sudden blaze,  
The glad deep sparkled wide and bright –  
White as the sun, far, far more fair  
Than its divided sources were!'

'And even for that spirit, seer,  
I've watched and sought my life-time long;  
Sought him in heaven, hell, earth, and air –  
An endless search, and always wrong!  
Had I but seen his glorious eye

Once light the clouds that wilder me,  
I ne'er had raised this coward cry  
To cease to think, and cease to be;  
I ne'er had called oblivion blest,  
Nor, stretching eager hands to death,  
Implored to change for senseless rest  
This sentient soul, this living breath –  
Oh, let me die – that power and will  
Their cruel strife may close;  
And conquered good, and conquering ill  
Be lost in one repose!'

The philosopher's other human sins are also his impatience and inquisitiveness. He is not satisfied with the answers given to him by the seer that God is omnipresent and that he can help those in need. The philosopher is looking for this God, trying to prove his existence, to no avail.

Isobel Armstrong in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, approaches this poem from a very different angle. She reads the poem as 'a monologue which includes a dialogue within itself, and this makes problematic the "identity" which the poem longs to lose'. She continues to explain that:

The Philosopher who speaks these lines is an aspect of the speaker's self, and the 'I' which resounds through the poem splits and fragments into separate experiences and definitions. The Philosopher describes a vision of a 'Spirit' in contradistinction to the listening 'man' or speaker, and the 'man' or speaker replies by addressing the Philosopher as 'Seer', assimilating him to spirit and juxtaposing the

two terms....‘Man’ appears to comprehend seer, philosopher and spirit just as philosopher comprehends seer, spirit and man.<sup>155</sup>

By reading the poem as a monologue, rather than a dialogue, Armstrong argues that the philosopher, the spirit, and the seer are referring to all humans. In this way, she makes no distinction between the experience of the seer and that of the philosopher. The poem’s dialogue form is very clear, although it is difficult sometimes to determine the speaker of each stanza. The philosopher and the seer are not one and the same; each one has a different approach to life in complete opposition with the other’s. This is strikingly clear in the way each represents God.

The number three immediately brings to mind the mystic concept of the Trinity. Tayler suggests that the image of the three warring gods offers ‘a kind of infernal, repudiating parody of the mystery of the Christian Trinity’<sup>156</sup>. The three gods inside the philosopher, however, do not represent the Trinity: firstly, because the Trinity signifies one God in three harmonious persons whereas the philosopher stresses that he has ‘three gods’ in conflict; secondly, because God exists in Brontë’s works as an external force residing outside the human body. The three warring gods inside the philosopher could represent the battle between the philosopher, his reason, and his imagination, in a manner similar to the conflict in ‘To Imagination’ and ‘Plead for Me’.

The Trinity is better represented by the seer’s vision of the three streams. The spirit the seer sees is God and the streams flowing from where he stands are his three manifestations: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Unlike the philosopher, the seer is lucky to see God in all three manifestations. At the end the streams are

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<sup>155</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p.335.

<sup>156</sup> Tayler, p.53.

combined to form one 'sea' which becomes brighter than the three original streams with the power of God. These are not three separate gods like those of the philosopher, they are one and the same, starting from one point, as one spirit, and ending combined as one. The colours of these three rivers can be thus explained: the golden stream represents the glory of the Father and His brightness, the red river represents the 'blood' of Jesus the Son and the 'sapphire' blue represents the Holy Spirit<sup>157</sup>. Armstrong's dismissal of the significance of these Biblical streams is problematic:

The specific symbolism of these rivers, reaching back to *Revelation*, matters less, perhaps than their triple nature, their capacity to include the third term. Gold, sapphire and blood could signify Father, Son and ungendered Holy Ghost, or spirit, matter and the human, or divine, satanic and human, or androgyne, male and female. What matters is that the violence of a universe constituted through rigid categories of difference, whether spiritual, moral or sexual, needs to be 'lost'.<sup>158</sup>

Here lies the danger of reading Brontë's poems only within the context of gender binary oppositions: the reader could dismiss or ignore some important symbols that might lead to completely different readings of a poem. Brontë would not have included the three colours if she did not want to refer specifically to the Trinity, especially after setting that Trinity against the warring gods within the philosopher. Although the number three occurs twice, it bears different meanings in each time. The three streams the seer sees are not at war, they are flowing peacefully, and when combined together they turn the 'inky sea' to a 'sudden blaze'. Their effect brings light and peace to the life of the believer who is lucky enough to see them.

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<sup>157</sup> 'Golden' standing for the glory of the Father is found in Ezekiel 1:4, 1:27-28, 8:2. Blue representing the Holy Spirit is found in the books of Matthew 3:11-16; John 4:13-14, 7:37-39; and Revelation 21:6, 22:17.

<sup>158</sup> Armstrong, p.336.

The seer sees his God outside, and this God brings light and harmony with the colour white; the philosopher, on the other hand, has the gods within himself fighting against each other, and against the philosopher, which causes him unbearable anguish. The philosopher looked for the seer's God/spirit for a very long time but he could not see him, so he returned to his 'god[s] within [his] breast.' Tayler argues that the philosopher did not find the spirit because he did not look within himself where this spirit lodges. Unlike Armstrong, she believes that 'There are two speakers, each representing an aspect of [Brontë] herself. One is the 'Philosopher', whom I take to be again Emily's reason, her rational self—inevitably a materialist. The other is the 'Seer', literally one who 'sees'; in this case what the Seer sees is a powerful spiritual vision'<sup>159</sup>. She also argues that 'the Spirit is within, in the creative imagination'<sup>160</sup>.

The seer found the spirit outside standing in the same place where the philosopher is standing. It is interesting how the seer tries to give an accurate physical account of the time and place where he saw the spirit. By doing this he locates his vision in the physical rather than the spiritual or imaginative world. The seer's vision belongs to the outside world rather than his inner world. What he experiences is similar to revelation because it is not the result of his inner imagination. The seer believes what he saw was not a dream, and that is why he asks the philosopher to stop dreaming. Brontë's visions were not religious; that is, they were not inspiration from the Divine but were the works of her imagination. She uses Biblical symbols when describing the seer's vision to emphasize that it has its origin in a revelation. God can turn darkness into light, and give peace and harmony to his

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<sup>159</sup>Tayler, pp.50-1.

<sup>160</sup>Tayler, p.54.



beholder, but it seems that not all humans are granted this privilege for the philosopher has been looking for this God in vain.

The question is: why God is being represented as cruel, leaving the philosopher in such an agony without showing himself? Miller explains how ‘in Emily Brontë’s writings, all men are worthy of damnation, and there is no way to *choose* salvation. If it is attained it will come as a free gift from God to sinful man’<sup>161</sup>. The seer was saved from damnation because he saw God’s grace, but the philosopher is doomed to eternal suffering because God does not reveal himself to him, despite his persisting struggle. The seer does not say how he was able to see the spirit, and he does not give the philosopher any advice. Only at the beginning he tells the philosopher to stop both thinking and dreaming, but he does not say whether by doing so the philosopher will be able to see God. Instead he is advising the philosopher to stop looking for God because if he is destined to see him then he will, all depending on God’s will. So the advice is to enjoy life because you will be saved if God wants to save you no matter what you do.

The poem describes different gods, the external God of the Bible, represented by the Trinity, and the internal god/s representing the philosopher with his imagination and reason. The philosopher is tired of the constant battle between reason and imagination over him. He decides to look no more for God and lives with his warring gods waiting for death to give him release. His final speech is very similar to Amedeus’ cry in prison, waiting for death to release him from his pain. Amedeus’ prison was physical whereas the philosopher’s prison is spiritual; nevertheless, both of them are asking God for freedom from their misery and God does not seem to listen.

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<sup>161</sup> Miller, p.185.

The idea of death as a saviour from imprisonment appears again in 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle'. This complex poem was first composed in 1845 and consisted of 152 lines. Brontë chose to publish a revised version of it entitled 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)' in 1846, using only sixty lines of the original poem with four lines added at the end. Charlotte Brontë revised the original poem again after her sister's death. She used the first twelve lines and added eight more lines of her own, and published it in 1850 under the title 'The Visionary'. The poem as originally composed by Brontë was not published till 1938. The multiple versions of this poem add to its complexity. The poem relates the story of two Gondal characters who were involved in a civil war between the Royalists and the Republicans. They were childhood friends but they ended up fighting on opposite sides. Julian, while inspecting the dungeons, finds his old friend Rochelle among the prisoners. The major difference between 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle' and 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)' lies in the ending. Rochelle dies at the end of 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)':

Her cheek, her gleaming eye, declared that man had given  
A sentence, unapproved, and overruled by Heaven.<sup>162</sup>

In 'Julian M, and A. G. Rochelle', Julian frees Rochelle from her prison and abstains from fighting to stay by her side until he wins her heart:

By never-doubting love, unswerving constancy,  
Rochelle, I earned at last an equal love from thee!<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.16.

<sup>163</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.181.

Both poems, however, feature the same lines Rochelle uses to describe her experience in prison:

A messenger of Hope comes every night to me  
And offers, for short life, eternal liberty.  
He comes with western winds, with evening's wandering airs,  
With that clear dusk of heaven that brings the thickest stars;  
Winds take a pensive tone, and stars a tender fire  
And visions rise and change which kill me with desire –

Desire for nothing known in my maturer years  
When joy grew mad with awe at counting future tears;  
When, if my spirit's sky was full of flashes warm,  
I knew not whence they came from sun or thunderstorm;

But first a hush of peace, a soundless calm descends;  
The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends;  
Mute music soothes my breast – unuttered harmony  
That I could never dream till earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible, the Unseen its truth reveals;  
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels –  
Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;  
Measuring the gulf it stoops and dares the final bound!

Oh, dreadful is the check – intense the agony

When the ear begins to hear and the eye begins to see;  
When the pulse begins to throb, the brain to think again,  
The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain!

Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less;  
The more that anguish racks the earlier it will bless;  
And robed in fires of Hell, or bright with heavenly shine,  
If it but herald Death, the vision is divine—<sup>164</sup>

Apart from differences in punctuation, the lines in both poems are identical. These are the centre of the controversy surrounding the poem. Critics who read Brontë's poetry as mystical base their assumptions on them. Mason believes that these lines refer to the speaker's enthusiastic experience which is inspired by Christ himself<sup>165</sup>, and Wang takes the 'messenger of Hope' to be the Holy Spirit who comforts Brontë<sup>166</sup>. Homans, however, is able to identify him as an expression of a Wordsworthian 'imaginative experience'<sup>167</sup>. Mason and Wang base their readings on 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)', while Homans argues her view using Brontë's original poem.

One difference between the two poems can hold the key to the true nature of Brontë's messenger. In 'The Prisoner (A Fragment)' the ending indicates heaven's moral role as a denouncer of injustice in its readiness to welcome Rochelle's soul. In 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle', Rochelle's eyes reveal her lack of desire to go to heaven:

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<sup>164</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.179.

<sup>165</sup> Mason, 'Emily Brontë's Religious Enthusiasm', p.272.

<sup>166</sup> Wang, 'The Use of Theological Discourse', p.92.

<sup>167</sup> Homans, p.118.

...the captive's drooping lid  
Beneath its shady lash a sudden lightning hid  
Earth's hope was not so dead heaven's home was not so dear  
I read it in that flash of longing quelled by fear.

Rochelle's experience was neither enthusiastic nor mystic, nor was it inspired by the Holy Spirit. Her longing for death was not due to her longing to be in an everlasting union with God, it was rather a wish for rest from the horrors of her dungeon. Death loses its appeal when the chance comes for her to escape prison; her interest in 'heaven's home' then fades. Being part of the Gondal saga, it is likely that the war Rochelle was involved in was secular and devoid of any religious goals. Rochelle's character does not have that religious dimension which makes it open to mystical experiences in the Christian sense. She was a fighter in a civil war, and then a prisoner who preferred freedom with Julian to heaven with God. Heaven does not appear to play any role in her life and in the poem as a whole. Brontë was aware of this; she probably changed the ending to make the poem acceptable to her sisters and her readers.

The 'messenger of Hope' has the same characteristics as the comforter and 'solacer' of Brontë's other poems. He is the messenger of the imagination who always comes to calm the speaker by bringing her visions of death and relief. The 'messenger of Hope' comes with the 'stars', with the 'evening's wandering air', which strongly links him with the world of the imagination. He could not be an external inspiring force because the prisoner then would not have been able to feel his power, since she loses all 'outward sense' when he is present. He is rather located within her 'essence' where he resides and where he operates. All these clues make

Homans' reading of the poem as an expression of imaginative experience more valid than other religious readings.

One idea recurs in all the poems discussed above: nature's inability to give the poet peace and solace. This idea is expressed indirectly in several poems; however, in 'A Day Dream' it becomes more explicit. Because nature was part of God's creation, and was his agent in the Romantic tradition, Brontë did not fully trust it, nor did she completely find herself at ease when surrounded by it. Critics like Homans, Mermin, and Tayler all explain nature's threatening power over Brontë, yet they all link this with the power of the masculine muse rather than with nature being the messenger of God. 'A Day Dream' makes this point clear. The speaker here decides to ignore the beauty of nature around her and retreats into her imagination, her 'world within':

On a sunny brae, alone I lay  
One summer afternoon;  
It was the marriage-time of May  
With her young lover, June.

.....

The trees did wave their plummy crests,  
The glad birds carolled clear;  
And I, of all the wedding guests,  
Was only sullen there!

There was not one, but wished to shun  
My aspect void of cheer;

The very grey rocks, looking on,  
Asked, 'What do you here?'

And I could utter no reply;  
In sooth, I did not know  
Why I had brought a clouded eye  
To greet the general glow

So, resting on a heathy bank,  
I took my heart to me;  
And we together sadly sank  
Into a reverie.<sup>168</sup>

What is interesting here is the sense of estrangement the poet feels in nature, a feeling unfamiliar among Romantic poets who tend to express affinity with the natural scenes around them.

Brontë always brings references to the world of the imagination in her poems, yet she does not always let the reader into the visions she sees in that world. In 'Day Dream', however, this is exactly what she does:

A thousand thousand gleaming fires  
Seemed kindling in the air;  
A thousand thousand silvery lyres  
Resounded far and near:

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<sup>168</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.17.

Methought, the very breath I breathed  
Was full of sparks divine,  
And all my heather-couch was wreathed  
By that celestial shine!

And, while the wide earth echoing rung  
To their strange minstrelsy,  
The little glittering spirits sung,  
Or seemed to sing, to me.

‘O mortal! mortal! let them die;  
Let time and tears destroy,  
That we may overflow the sky  
With universal joy!

‘Let grief distract the sufferer’s breast,  
And night obscure his way;  
They hasten him to endless rest,  
And everlasting day.

‘To thee the world is like a tomb,  
A desert’s naked shore;  
To us, in unimagined bloom,  
It brightens more and more!



‘And could we lift the veil, and give  
One brief glimpse to thine eye,  
Thou wouldst rejoice for those that live,  
*Because* they live to die.’

The music ceased; the noonday dream,  
Like dream of night, withdrew;  
But Fancy, still, will sometimes deem  
Her fond creation true.

The juxtaposition of God’s natural world and the poet’s world of imagination is visible. The speaker was filled with disappointment towards the natural scenes around her. Despite their beauty, the sense of their meaningless short existence kept burdening her thoughts. Piper explains how in the period between 1791 and 1797 ‘Coleridge and Wordsworth were both seeking contact with the Divine in Nature, and for them, at this time, the Imagination was essentially a power of direct knowledge and understanding’<sup>169</sup>. Brontë differs from Coleridge and Wordsworth’s early poetry in the way she uses imagination to escape the presence of the natural beings that keep reminding her of God. The moment she surrenders to the power of imagination she starts seeing the vision of gleaming fires and lyres. This vision is not inspired by nature; it is the speaker’s response to her uncomfortable status in nature. It comes only when she ignores the natural scene around her and sinks with her heart ‘into a reverie’.

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<sup>169</sup> Piper, p.83.

The messengers of the imagination deliver, as they always do, both truth and serenity to the poet. Although all she sees is mortal, happiness lies in this very mortality. The spirits are encouraging the speaker to see death not as an end but as a new beginning, a happier one. The spirits' gleaming positivity succeeds in distracting the poet from her feelings of desolation, creating feelings of wonder and awe instead. The poet ends the poem emphasizing the similarity between this dream and the dreams she has at night in an attempt to further disassociate it from nature and God, bringing it closer to the world of the imagination.

It has been recorded by all of her biographers that Brontë loved to take long walks on the moors. 'A Day Dream' gives the reader a glimpse of what Brontë used to do during these walks. They were short breaks from the parsonage and its daily chores, but they were also the times in which she could be alone with her heart and imagination.

Critics have routinely attempted to link Brontë with the Romantic poets. Some arguments are based on the similarity of her treatment of the imagination, as discussed above. Brontë's relationship with nature, however, was very complex. Her reaction varied from complete sympathy with nature, represented by earth, in 'I See around Me Tombstone Grey' to discomfort as in 'Stars' and 'A Day Dream'. Rosalind Miles explains how:

Wordsworth seems at first to have more than a passing connection with Emily Brontë, as the other great nature-lover and mystic of English poetry; and Emily Brontë displayed a continuous response to the ebb and flow of the seasons, to the action and interaction of the elements of wind, sun, night and stars, and to the very sounds of nature's working, which we associate with this type of mystic, the Wordsworthian. Yet at other times she shows an infinitely calm and objective recording of nature rather than a response to it.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Miles, p.84.

Margaret Homans, on the other hand, believes that Brontë reacted to nature with a mixture of fear and repulsion. This is caused by her anxiety of losing her language and her ability to convey her thoughts when using nature as a medium. Homans suggests that while for the Romantic poets nature was a source of poetic imagination, for the women poets who succeeded them it was a sign of their otherness and inferiority:

Where the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire. Although this tradition culminates in Romantic poetry, it originates in the Bible....To be for so long the other and the object made it difficult for nineteenth-century women to have their own subjectivity.<sup>171</sup>

She continues explaining:

William Wordsworth's feminization of nature is the most obvious example of sexual polarization in the literary tradition that would have shaped women poets' conception of poetry. When nature is Mother Nature for Wordsworth, she is valued because she is what the poet is not. She stands for a lost memory....As the object of the poet's love, Mother Nature is the necessary complement to his imaginative project, the grounding of an imagination so powerful that it risks abstraction without her.<sup>172</sup>

To the women poets, nature, according to Homans, becomes a threat to their ability to write and express themselves. Homans further illustrates how the temporariness of nature, which is reflected in 'A Day Dream', again increases the poet's anxiety towards it: 'Mother Nature is also traditionally associated with death as much as with life' because 'she has no consciousness, only materiality and an elusive presence; no centre, only diffuseness'<sup>173</sup>.

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<sup>171</sup> Homans, p.12.

<sup>172</sup> Homans, p.13.

<sup>173</sup> Homans, p.17.

The reason for all these different interpretations is Brontë's ambiguous attitude towards nature. Because of all its imperfections, Brontë does not give nature divine status. Contrary to what Thormählen argues, she does not see it as the manifestation of God<sup>174</sup>. Miles accurately grades Brontë as '*par excellence*, our poet of nature's less benign aspects. Few writers have so consistently celebrated, or at least incorporated, the action of relentless rain, dreary winds, storms, mist, and the sunless hours of a "heaven lorn"'<sup>175</sup>. This attitude stems from Brontë's perception of nature as just another creation of God, no more and no less. She gets sometimes frustrated with nature and its destructiveness and imperfections, as in her essay 'The Butterfly'.

Brontë's 'The Butterfly' was one of the French 'devoirs' or essays that she wrote in 1842 in Belgium. In it she tries to depict the ugliness of the world and the meaninglessness of its creation. The poem is similar to 'A Day Dream': the speaker enters the world of nature when, as she explains, 'the world of imagination suffers a winter that blights its vegetation'<sup>176</sup>. Here, again, the world of imagination is represented as a separate world from that of nature. Upon entering that world and contemplating its happy inhabitants, the speaker wonders immediately about the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world. She states:

Nature is an inexplicable problem; it exists on a principle of destruction. Every being must be the tireless instrument of death to others, or itself must cease to live, yet nonetheless we celebrate the day of our birth, and we praise God for having entered such a world.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Thormählen, pp.66-7.

<sup>175</sup> Miles, p.83.

<sup>176</sup> Emily Brontë, 'The Butterfly', *The Belgian Essays Brontë*, ed. Sue Lonoff (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p.176. Hereafter cited as 'The Butterfly'.

<sup>177</sup> 'The Butterfly', p.176.

J. Hillis Miller explains Brontë's perspective towards the world as seen in 'The Butterfly':

The darkest meaning of Emily Brontë's assertion that 'all creation is equally insane' is the fact that no man can understand why a good God should have chosen to create such a world at all. Each man's life, like that of any creature in nature, is merely a sequence of violent acts done or suffered, and it ends in death.<sup>178</sup>

As the speaker reaches the verge of despair, and just at the point when she is about to participate in the madness of the world by crushing a caterpillar, her imagination comes to her rescue. Out of the caterpillar: 'like a censoring angel sent from heaven, there came fluttering through the trees a butterfly with large wings of lustrous gold and purple'. The butterfly is a gleaming flying spirit, just like those in 'A Day-Dream', and its appearance brings to the poet a similar message as well: 'As the ugly caterpillar is the origin of the splendid butterfly, so this globe is the embryo of a new heaven and a new earth whose poorest beauty will infinitely exceed your mortal imagination'<sup>179</sup>. In other words, the message the poet receives is to ignore the death and grief of the world, for death is the gate to another more 'glorious' world, using Cathy's word in *Wuthering Heights*. She speaks here about a new heaven and a new earth. As discussed previously in relation to *Wuthering Heights* and the Gondal poems, according to Brontë the dead soul will not be dwelling in heaven next to its Maker, but will be haunting the earth and the sky. The imagination's inability to reach the wonders of the world that comes after death also echoes the spirits' inability to lift the 'veil' for the speaker to see the other world.

The message Brontë receives ends with a reproach: 'when you see the magnificent result of that which seems so base to you now, how will you scorn your

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<sup>178</sup> Miller, p.165.

<sup>179</sup> 'The Butterfly', p.178.

blind assumption, in accusing Omniscience for not having made nature perish in her infancy'. Despite this seemingly devout message, what Brontë is doing here is questioning the perfection of God's creation. The destructive imperfection of nature could be extended to include the sinful nature of man on which Evangelicalism and Methodism have focussed. Brontë is confessing her doubts in God's judgment when creating a defective or faulty creation, be it nature or humanity, and the spirits are not reproaching her for this. They seem to be upset only because she is 'blind' and cannot imagine what the other world would look like. Destroying the world at the moment of its creation would have deprived the speaker of the chance to see the glories of the other world. The wise spirits are not defending God's creation of a faulty world; they are only justifying his decision of not wanting to destroy that world.

The essay has what could be read as a Christian ending, emphasizing the love and goodness of God:

God is the god of justice and mercy; then surely, every grief that he inflicts on his creatures, be they human or animal, rational or irrational, every suffering of our unhappy nature is only a seed of that divine harvest which will be gathered when, Sin having spent its last drop of venom, Death having launched its final shaft, both will perish on the pyre of a universe in flames and leave their ancient victims to an eternal empire of happiness and glory.<sup>180</sup>

Her 'then surely' uncovers Brontë's usage of a conditional sentence. What she perhaps means is 'if God is the god of justice and mercy'. She wants to question the justness and mercy of God, but, being in a Catholic school and knowing that her essay will be marked and judged by the devout Catholic Monsieur Heger, she prefers to drop this 'if' and moves to a more affirmative sentence. The whole paragraph then becomes conditional, all depending on God being merciful and just. What she re-

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<sup>180</sup> 'The Butterfly', p.178.

emphasizes, however, is the grief and suffering of the world, to which she keeps referring in all her poems. In fact, even without the conditional ‘if’ Brontë still expresses hidden doubt whether the ‘eternal empire of happiness and glory’ is worth all this suffering, sin, and death. And what is interesting is that she is including all other creatures, ‘human or animal’ in this suffering and in the expectation of a happier afterlife, which again stresses her idea of seeing natural beings as only creatures rather than agents of God. Brontë in ‘The Butterfly’ portrays a world governed by a law of anarchy and indiscrimination between the just and the unjust. Through her Gondal characters she seems to have adopted the idea that humans are left alone in this world with no divine power responsible for their well being, and this idea is reinforced in the essay.

Brontë did not see nature as sacred but rather as one of God’s creatures. Her reaction, therefore, towards it can vary from hate to love. She felt uncomfortable in nature in ‘A Day Dream’ and ‘The Butterfly’. However, she represents earth as a loving compassionate mother who perseveres through all hardships for the sake of her human children in the poem ‘I See around Me Tombstones Grey’:

...Heaven itself – so pure and blest  
Could never give my spirit rest –  
Sweet land of light! thy children fair  
Know nought akin to our despair –  
Nor have they felt, nor can they tell  
What tenants haunt each mortal cell  
What gloomy guests we hold within –  
Torments and madness, tears and sin!

Well – may they live in ecstasy  
Their long eternity of joy;  
At least we would not bring them down  
With us to weep, with us to groan,  
No – Earth would wish no other sphere  
To taste her cup of sufferings drear;  
She turns from Heaven a careless eye  
And only mourn that *we* must die!  
Ah mother, what shall comfort thee  
In all this boundless misery?  
To cheer our eager eyes a while  
We see thee smile, how fondly smile!  
But who reads not through that tender glow  
Thy deep, unutterable woe?  
Indeed no dazzling land above  
Can cheat thee of thy children's love –  
We all in life's departing shine  
Our last dear longings blend with thine;  
And struggle still, and strive to trace  
With clouded gaze thy darling face  
We would not leave our native home  
For *any* world beyond the Tomb  
No – rather on thy kindly breast  
Let us be laid in lasting rest  
Or waken but to share with thee



This poem was composed in 1841, but was not published until 1902. It illustrates Brontë's view of earth and the Biblical heaven. Heaven is not a desirable place to be in, especially when compared to earth. The only form of resurrection the speaker would accept is that through nature. The two versions of heaven portrayed by the second Cathy and Linton are both represented here as more desirable alternatives to the Biblical resurrection and heaven. Although it was composed four years before 'The Philosopher'(1845), these two poems share many similar concepts: the philosopher's 'warring gods' are represented here as the 'tenants' and 'gloomy guests' driving their landlords to 'torments', 'madness', and 'sin', recalling his anguished celebration of being human. Just like the seer, on the other hand, the inhabitants of heaven are naive and child-like, smiling in tranquillity after finding God. However, the philosopher's despair at not finding God turns in the speaker of 'I See around me Tombstones Grey' to a total rejection of heaven. The speaker acknowledges the presence of God, but she loses interest in finding him and heaven, and so turns to mother earth for solace and joy.

In this affectionate poem earth, becomes a sufferer who tries to tolerate the injustices of heaven for the sake of her children. Stevie Davies explains how:

Tenderness for the natural world in all its weathers, seasons, lights and shades centred Emily Brontë's emotional and spiritual world: love of kin and love of earth were not distinct. This affinity with all that suffers takes the form of passionate endearment such as a very young child feels for her mother.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.131.

<sup>182</sup> Davies, p.172.

It is arguable that Brontë showed 'tenderness' and tolerance to all the different moods of nature, as discussed above; however, she still felt some sympathy for it as another sufferer in this 'mad' universe. Despite it being an agent giving God's message, nature in Brontë's works still suffered like all other creatures under God's will.

Earth and nature can sometimes be identical, yet earth here, despite its being part of nature, is depicted as the final resting place, hence the link to the mother's breast. The personification of earth here is not just for poetic purposes. Brontë gives earth both human and humane characteristics. She is not only the mother who gives her children joy and shelter, she is the mother who suffers for the sake of those children, smiling despite her woes to cheer them. Brontë's earth, just like a real mother, does not have to be beautiful and calm in order to be loved. Gezari explains that Brontë's treatment of earth as a mother diverges from that of the Romantics:

Earth isn't in Brontë's poem, as in Wordsworth's 'Intimations Ode', a foster mother whose aim is to compensate her charges for their lapse into mortality and help them to endure their progressive distance from the bright sun of a paternal everlasting life. She is instead the beloved birth mother whom we betray when we prefer some 'dazzling land above' to her sphere below.<sup>183</sup>

Nature/earth was the mother who sometimes disappointed Brontë, yet the poet always loved her. However, these human attributes were the reason that stopped nature from being Brontë's comforter.

The idea of earth as a preferred final resting place is reiterated in 'Faith and Despondency'. It depicts a conversation between a father and a daughter. The father is grieving over the loss of his loved ones:

... lone , among the mountains cold,

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<sup>183</sup> Gezari, p.118.

Lie those that I have loved of old.  
And my heart aches, in hopeless pain  
Exhausted with repinings vain,  
That I shall greet them ne'er again!<sup>184</sup>

The daughter tries to reassure her father by reminding him of his own previous belief  
in the afterlife:

Oh! not for them, should we despair,  
The grave is drear, but they are not there;  
Their dust is mingled with the sod,  
Their happy souls are gone to God!  
You told me this, and yet you sigh,  
And murmur that your friends must die.  
Ah! my dear father, tell me why?  
For, if your former words were true,  
How useless would such sorrow be;  
As wise, to mourn the seed which grew  
Unnoticed on its parent tree,  
Because it fell in fertile earth,  
And sprang up to a glorious birth –  
Struck deep its root, and lifted high  
Its green boughs, in the breezy sky.

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<sup>184</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.3.

The daughter, while reporting her father's words, seems to be suspecting the reliability of his belief in life after death, wondering if he actually believes in what he told her before about the happiness of the souls that were reunited with God after death. If the father thinks these souls are happy, why does he sigh for the death of his friends? The child describes in a very simple way her own understanding of death as a transition from one form of life into another, from a seed to a tree. Death, hence, transforms human bodies from 'dust mingled in the sod' to grass and flowers. She continues describing what death is to her:

But, I'll not fear, I will not weep  
For those whose bodies rest in sleep, –  
I know there is a blessed shore,  
Opening its ports for me, and mine;  
And, gazing Time's wide waters o'er,  
I weary for that land divine,  
Where we were born, where you and I  
Shall meet our Dearest, when we die;  
From suffering and corruption free,  
Restored into Deity.

The ending might seem quite Christian, the dead reunited with God and their loved ones in heaven. But also it could be a direct reference to earth, where the speaker was born and longs to return. The phrase 'glorious birth' supports this meaning because Brontë uses the same word 'glorious' to refer to Catherine's 'glorious world' and Cathy's representation of heaven as 'glorious jubilee'. The poem can also

assimilate this meaning when read in the light of 'I See around me Tombstone Grey', where the speaker prefers to sleep in the earth than to spend eternity in heaven.

There are subtle yet significant differences between the child's concept of death and the way her father represents it. The father's image of death makes the body perish, annihilate, while the spirit lives forever with its Maker. The child's understanding of death is completely different. She uses the metaphor of the seed returning to earth only to become a tree. Here, the physical is not annihilated but rather preserved and strengthened, changing from one form of being to another. The dust of the loved ones mingled with the sod is transformed to another form of life, but not annihilated. The father's version of death, which separates the soul from the body gives no real chance for the body to be alive again through nature, it deprives it of the soul forever. The child never refers to this separation between body and soul. She considers them as one entity that is resurrected into a new form of life, hence existing forever with its loved ones, rather than lost forever in the 'sod'.

The mingling of the dust recalls Heathcliff's wish for his dust to be mingled with Catherine's in *Wuthering Heights*. The novel ends with the two characters roaming the moors, despite Lockwood and Nelly's Christian conclusions. The daughter states that when dead she will be 'restored to Deity', not to God specifically, as her father said. This ending is open to multiple interpretations. One of them can mean that the daughter is referring to earth as the deity she will be restored to when dead, to a state of unconscious existence in nature, as in 'I See around Me Tombstones Grey'. Nature becomes loving and unthreatening only when associated with earth's final sleep.

Determining Emily Brontë's religious orientations is perhaps one of the most puzzling dilemmas facing her scholars. Her physical and literary seclusion makes this problem even more difficult. Critics have tried to locate her in all the different movements of her age, but her poetry resists all classifications. She is not a Romantic, nor a mystic, nor a pantheist, nor an atheist; yet her poetry expresses elements of them all. One should not attempt to read her poems as expressions of faith only, as Thormählen and Wang do; or as an expression of scepticism, as Davies does; or within the context of gender roles, as Homans, Tayler, and Mermin do: such readings threaten to exclude some of Brontë's genuine ideas and bring alien meanings to her works. The best way to approach her poetry, as this chapter attempted to do, is to try to locate all these elements in her works, and link them together to reach a system of beliefs that could be applicable to most of her works. Because her poetry expresses qualities of both belief and scepticism, the idea of examining in which contexts her faith and scepticism are manifested enables the reader to reach such a unifying system. This system of beliefs, as this chapter argues, is that of dichotomies and opposites. Brontë always refers in her poetry to two kinds of worlds, and uses the word 'god' to signify two meanings, one positive and the other negative. From analysing the poems that contain direct references to God, the reader could perceive Brontë's lack of faith in God's love and mercy. This does not indicate hostility to one doctrine or one Christian denomination, but rather to the whole concept of a loving and just God. By studying her poems 'To Imagination', 'Plead for me', and 'My Comforter', one could discover that the loving and calming qualities she applies to her 'God of visions' are those of imagination. This approach proves particularly valid when discussing the poems that involve the two forces together fighting over the speaker, as in 'Stars' and 'The Philosopher'. Yet its

importance lies in the way it clarifies Brontë's true feelings towards God. These feelings might not have mounted to absolute atheism, yet they were definitely not the emotions expected in a clergyman's daughter: another testament to her uniqueness and individuality.

## CHAPTER 2: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI THE SECULAR POET

### The Oxford Movement and the Pre-Raphaelites:

Christina Rossetti was born in 1830, when England was witnessing its industrial, religious, and artistic revolution. Her life in London placed her amid the religious, social, and intellectual debates that were raging at that time. In addition to making her more aware of the social problems existing in her society, this privileged position enabled her to assimilate those debates which were reflected, with all their controversies, in her writings.

Rossetti was born into a religiously diverse family. Her Italian maternal grandfather Gaetano Polidori was a non-practicing Catholic, whereas her English maternal grandmother Anna Maria Pierce was a devout member of the Anglican Church. Rossetti's mother Frances, and her aunts Margaret and Charlotte, followed their mother's faith, whereas the uncles were Catholics. Her father Gabriel Rossetti, being also an Italian exile, was a non-practising nominal Catholic. Jan Marsh in her *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* believes that Gabriel Rossetti was a member of the Carbonari group that was linked to freemasonry, and that he used to



exchange the Masonic handshake with some of his guests<sup>185</sup>. Christina and her sister Maria followed the faith of their mother, yet both her brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael stopped attending church from adolescence. Later, William Michael became agnostic while Dante Gabriel oscillated between belief and agnosticism.

During Rossetti's childhood and adolescence, religious debate was raging among Catholics, Anglican Evangelicals, and Dissenters. Elisabeth Jay in her book *The Evangelical and the Oxford Movements* portrays the religious atmosphere of that era:

The heady atmosphere of the Great Reform Bill era [1832] prompted a desire to sift all institutions. In religion, no less than in politics, men became polarized into liberal and anti-liberal, left and right wing, experimental and orthodox. The secession of a small number of Evangelical clergy between 1820 and 1835, some of whom proved hesitant in attaching themselves definitively to any new order or old sect, suggested unease about the spiritual welfare and apostolic purity of Evangelicalism in either its Anglican or Dissenting manifestations. Indeed, Evangelicalism's very success, it was felt, had rendered it popular, prosperous, and therefore, worldly.<sup>186</sup>

This chaos in the state of the Church of England had led some unsatisfied Oxford clergymen to form a new religious movement that originated from within Evangelicalism yet was considered far more revolutionary: The Oxford Movement. The members of this movement – mainly John Henry Newman, John Keble, William Palmer, Edward B. Pusey, Richard H. Froude, and Isaac Williams – published between 1833 and 1841 the famous *Tracts for the Times*, after which the movement was called Tractarianism. Elisabeth Jay in *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* explains the reason behind publishing these 90 tracts: ‘Drawn together by their

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<sup>185</sup> Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), pp.20, 25.

<sup>186</sup> Elisabeth Jay, ed., *The Evangelical and the Oxford Movements*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.6-7.

common desire to defend the Anglican Church as the true heir of the Universal Catholic Church...a group of Oxford men combined forces to produce a series of tracts alerting their brother clergy to the critical state of the Church of England’.

However, she maintains that:

The impetus behind the Oxford Movement had never been merely intellectual. For the Tractarian the defence of the faith was related to a way of believing and a way of living. Only a life of devotion, attained through the Church’s sanctioned modes of prayer and sacramental worship, leading to penitence and the pursuit of holiness, could enable the believer to attain glimpses of God’s mysterious presence in His universe.<sup>187</sup>

The movement was popular during the 1830s and 1840s. Yet Newman’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845, and later other Tractarians like Henry Manning and William Dodsworth in 1851, aroused scepticism towards the movement’s true motives and hence hostility towards its members.

Frances Rossetti was attracted to the Tractarian thoughts on salvation and redemption and in 1843, when Christina was only thirteen, her mother moved the whole family to Christ’s Church, Albany Street, which was according to Marsh, ‘a main London centre of the movement’<sup>188</sup>, and where Dodsworth preached from 1837 until his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Prior to that, the family used to attend the Evangelical St. Katherine’s Chapel in Regent’s Park. Being a Catholic, Rossetti’s father attended neither church.

Three of the main founders of Tractarianism: John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Isaac Williams, were poets. This makes the move to Tractarianism one of the most decisive events in Rossetti’s life as a poet. According to Jay, these poets

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<sup>187</sup> Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1986), pp.24-5.

<sup>188</sup> Marsh, p.55.

‘sought always to convey the spirit behind the literal word’<sup>189</sup>. George B. Tennyson in *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* explains how the Tractarian poets were ‘involved with the most ambitious religious movement in the nineteenth century and [were] the poets who developed the most extensive system of poetics’<sup>190</sup>. Hence, he believes that the term devotional poetry ‘is meaningful in the nineteenth century only as a consequence of the Tractarian experience’. He defines devotional poetry as:

Poetry that grows out of the act of worship, poetry that is frequently tied to established forms of worship and liturgical observance. This sort of poetry was what the Tractarians made accessible again to English literature after more than a century of dominance of religious poetry by hymns and sacred verse.<sup>191</sup>

All this probably made the movement more attractive to the young Rossetti. It satisfied her spiritual as well as her artistic needs. Henceforth, glimpses of Tractarian doctrines would be traced throughout her poetry. In fact in her later poetry, Tractarianism and the Scriptures became her main source of inspiration. Marsh explains how:

The influence of pietism on Christina’s own work was...evident. Derived originally from Evangelical hymns, this was then reinforced by Tractarian verse and seventeenth-century writers rediscovered by the High Anglicans. This tradition was important, since it gave moral legitimacy to poetry which otherwise, in the wake of the Romantics, was accused of sensuousness, freethought and immorality.<sup>192</sup>

In addition to Tractarianism, Rossetti was also associated with another, this time purely artistic movement. In the summer of 1848, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais, urged by their dislike for

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<sup>189</sup> Jay, *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, p.11.

<sup>190</sup> George B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.198.

<sup>191</sup> Tennyson, pp.199-200.

<sup>192</sup> Marsh, p.56.

contemporary art and the methods used in the Royal Academy of Arts, decided to establish a new artistic movement which they called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood<sup>193</sup>. The name of this movement signified its members' desire to bring back the medieval artistic methods and themes that were dismissed by Raphael; hence Marsh defines it as: 'a fraternity devoted in the first instance to rubbishing Raphael and his influence'<sup>194</sup>. Their aim, as was understood by their contemporaries, especially their patron John Ruskin, was 'rehabilitating contemporary art, restoring it to the heights of spirituality and truth that characterized painting during the late medieval period and the early Renaissance'<sup>195</sup>. More artists were recruited to the movement, like Thomas Woolner, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, and Frederick George Stephens, under the patronage of John Ruskin. Dante Gabriel wanted to bring Christina as a member into the brotherhood, but the other members objected, wanting to keep the movement male-exclusive<sup>196</sup>. Christina, nevertheless, was deemed the 'queen of the Pre-Raphaelites': she used to sit as a model for their paintings and she published a few poems in their short-lived periodical *The Germ*.

The influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on Rossetti has been discussed by many critics. Antony H. Harrison, for example, in his *Christina Rossetti in Context* believes that:

In addition to its careful attention to the details of nature, its highly sensory images used to accomplish noumenal effects, and its preoccupation with betrayed or disappointed love—her poetry's use of symbolism and typology, its medievalism, its employment of dream visions, and its preoccupation with suffering and with visionary idealities as a relief from suffering allow readers to perceive her poetry as simultaneously Pre-Raphaelite and Tractarian.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life*. (London: Constable and Company, 1981), p.46.

<sup>194</sup> Marsh, p.86.

<sup>195</sup> Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*. (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p.66.

<sup>196</sup> Battiscombe, p.46.

<sup>197</sup> Harrison, p.67.

Hence, and despite this strong Pre-Raphaelite influence, Tractarianism and religion generally are still considered to be the main influence on her works.

Due to Rossetti's well-documented family background, her surviving correspondence with her friends and family, and her numerous devotional works, her religious beliefs never appeared to be problematic to critics. Her deep faith in God and her adherence to the doctrines of Christianity as represented by the High Church are evident in all of her poetry. Despite this lack of ambiguity, critics still argue about the particular principles that shaped this belief. Most critics agree on the influence of Tractarianism. In his influential 1970 book *Faith and Revolt: Studies in the Literary Influence of the Oxford Movement*, Raymond Chapman links Rossetti to the Oxford Movement: 'For human reasons, which she herself would have thought inadequate as explanations of spiritual progress, Christina Rossetti was a natural recruit to Anglo-Catholicism'. He also believes that the tension the Tractarians felt between themselves and their society was clearly reflected in Rossetti's poetry: 'The men of that movement were trying to restore Catholic doctrine and practice to a society which was aggressively opposed to any savour of Popery. The alienation which they felt within their own age was the experience also of the best poet whom they directly inspired'<sup>198</sup>: Christina Rossetti. Tennyson agrees with Chapman's view, seeing Rossetti 'as directly and fully the product of the Oxford Movement...[she] is the true inheritor of the Tractarian devotional mode of poetry. Most of what the

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<sup>198</sup> Raymond Chapman, *Faith and Revolt: Studies in the Literary Influence of the Oxford Movement*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), p.170.

Tractarians advocated in theory and sought to put into practice came to fruition in the poetry of Christina Rossetti',<sup>199</sup>.

Critics, however, still differ in deciding exactly how pervasive the Tractarian influence was on Rossetti's life and poetry. Frederick S. Roden in his 1998 essay 'The Kiss of the Soul: the Mystical Theology of Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose', finds similarities between Rossetti's poetry and the works of the medieval mystics: 'As women speaking about religion, whether in the twelfth, fourteenth, or nineteenth century, theologians such as Hildegard, Julian [of Norwich], and Rossetti were forced to justify their acts of speech, often bringing their female bodies into their texts'<sup>200</sup>. He believes that this similarity lies in the way Rossetti represented Christ and the Eucharist: 'The Eucharist as Christ's body may be read as an eternal Presence, a replicating performance of the Incarnation. Receiving Him is hence a profoundly erotic act'<sup>201</sup>.

Emma Mason in her article 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve' focuses on Rossetti's belief in the Tractarian doctrine of Reserve, and the way this belief was reflected in her poetry: 'For Rossetti, the believer may only protect him or herself from the contamination of a decaying and increasingly sinful world through reserve, becoming spiritually immaculate and so suitably pure to enter heaven's gleaming environment'<sup>202</sup>. She goes so far as to assert that this doctrine is present in all of Rossetti's works, especially those that involve whiteness and snow:

Christ, through his whiteness, illustrates reserve, both colour and doctrine at once indicative of blankness and of substance: there is seemingly nothing there until one learns what to look for. While

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<sup>199</sup> Tennyson, p.198.

<sup>200</sup> Frederick S. Roden, 'The Kiss of the Soul: The Mystical Theology of Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose', in Julie Melnyk, ed., *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, (London: Garland Publishing, 1998), p.41.

<sup>201</sup> Roden, p.48.

<sup>202</sup> Emma Mason, 'Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve', *Journal of Victorian Culture* VII (Autumn, 2002), 210.

God's secrets are undeniably everywhere around the believer, but cannot be grasped or revealed until Judgement Day, so white is like a brightness that glares at the viewer but cannot be touched or uncovered in its shimmering invisibility.<sup>203</sup>

Harrison distinguishes Analogy and Reserve as the Tractarian traits present in some of Rossetti's devotional poems such as 'Consider the Lilies of the Field' and 'Thou Knowest...Thou Oughtest Therefore'. He argues that 'intense contemplation of images in nature often results in the religious epiphanies or analogical interpretations of the world that characterize many of Christina Rossetti's devotional poems'<sup>204</sup>. In this way, her works 'insist upon [their] own Reserve, imitating God's Reserve in veiling Himself behind the symbolic surfaces of nature'<sup>205</sup>. However, Lynda Palazzo, in *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology*, differs from those critics and argues that Rossetti did not endorse all Tractarian doctrines. An example of this is the doctrine of Renunciation. She argues that Pusey's extreme self-mortification, through which he follows the Tractarian doctrine of Renunciation, 'becomes a symptom of something different. There seems to be a hatred of nature itself and particularly of the power of the female body which shares nature's capacity for reproduction'<sup>206</sup>. This hatred towards the female body was represented in the maltreatment of the young women in the sisterhoods he established, who sometimes died of ill-nourishment and fatigue. Palazzo believes that:

Rossetti was aware of the controversies surrounding the sisterhoods, and she seemed well aware too of the gender implications of Pusey's version of the doctrine of renunciation. Her poetry of the time shows her understanding of the unspoken moral evaluation of male and female, where the woman's fertility and her role in procreation are

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<sup>203</sup> Mason, p.211.

<sup>204</sup> Harrison, p.73.

<sup>205</sup> Harrison, p.74.

<sup>206</sup> Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p.8.

identified with the 'lower' life of the body and allied with the sinful 'world'.<sup>207</sup>

In this respect, Palazzo also goes against the critics who perceive Rossetti as a big supporter of the Anglican sisterhoods that were becoming popular in the mid-nineteenth century, brought around by the Anglo-Catholic Tractarians. Fredrick S. Roden, in 'Sisterhood is Powerful: Christina Rossetti's *Maude*', believes that Rossetti recognized sisterhoods as methods of liberation and empowerment for women in patriarchal Victorian England. He discusses this idea in relation to Rossetti's early story *Maude*, which was written in 1850 and published posthumously in 1897:

*Maude* is concerned with the spiritual life of High Church women. The work raises the question of the new option made available to them by the re-institution of religious sisterhoods in the Church of England during the mid-nineteenth century. The sisterhoods' significance cannot be underestimated in terms of gender politics, issues of women and community, and the re-vision of the concept of the family which they helped to engender in nineteenth-century English culture. They truly paved the way for the *fin-de-siècle* 'liberated' New Woman. In all of Rossetti's writings, both poetry and prose, the single woman's spirituality is contrasted with a married or marrying 'sister's'. Much of the negative response that the religious sisterhoods elicited involved the threats such phenomena posed to the Victorian patriarchal family, undercutting the authority of a father, brother or husband in favour of the authority of a feminine equal, a 'sister'. The 'law of the father' became second to the authority of the Father in heaven, before whom all mortals stand equal regardless of gender.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Palazzo, p.8.

<sup>208</sup> Frederick S. Roden, 'Sisterhood is Powerful: Christina Rossetti's *Maude*', in Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock, eds., *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture: Reassessing the Angel in the House*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp.63-4.



Diane D'Amico, in *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender and Time*, agrees with Roden's reading of Rossetti's works, especially her convent poems<sup>209</sup>:

When we turn to Rossetti's convent poems...we can see that she is setting herself in opposition to those who would claim marriage to be the only noble choice for a woman....For Rossetti, to choose the consecrated religious life, even the contemplative life, was not foolish or unnatural, and certainly Rossetti did not imagine such a choice leading to 'disordered fancies'. Rather, becoming a nun represented a genuine choice a woman might make. Moreover, a woman who was called to such a vocation was to be revered, not pitied. Rossetti's convent poems indicate that while many of her contemporaries saw nuns as choosing life-in-death existence, she saw them as wise virgins choosing life.<sup>210</sup>

Another problematic issue that rises from Rossetti's attitude towards sisterhoods is her attitude towards women's position in Christianity in general. Palazzo tries to represent Rossetti's theology as feminist. She argues that Rossetti's:

aim was to transform doctrinal concepts within theology itself. She based her christology on the experience of women, articulating a theology that is valid and liberating for women, but that nevertheless remains within a Christian doctrinal framework. She also sought to establish an equal space for women within the historical unfolding of Christianity, and the authority to speak and practice theology as full members of the Church.<sup>211</sup>

Roden, on the other hand, admits that 'here on earth, Rossetti's theology is perhaps not as egalitarian as the modern feminist theologian might hope for in an ancestor. Rossetti's theological paradigm maintains the superiority of men over women in this world'. But he also explains that 'Rossetti compares Christ, in his humility and

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<sup>209</sup> The term 'convent poems' is used by Rossetti scholars to refer to her several poems that have nuns and the convent life as their major theme. The most famous of these are 'Three Nuns' (1849-50) and 'The Convent's Threshold' (1858).

<sup>210</sup> Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p.48.

<sup>211</sup> Palazzo, p.47.

humanity, with woman herself<sup>212</sup>, stressing hence that female humility and inferiority on earth are more valued in heaven because they make women closer to Christ.

However, Cynthia Scheinberg in *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* believes that in Rossetti's metaphorical marriage of Church and Christ 'maleness is always linked to the divine role, while femaleness is always linked to the non-divine human community'<sup>213</sup>. She also notices that by doing so Rossetti is trying to establish, at least metaphorically, gender equality. When the Church is treated as a female and God or Christ as male, the gender differences between actual men and women disappear so 'Rossetti can pass over the limitations placed on actual women, suggesting that symbolically at least, all Christians are positioned as figurative women'<sup>214</sup>. So in order to create equality, and instead of elevating women, Scheinberg suggests that Rossetti demoted men to equate them with women.

All the previous interpretations focus, in different degrees, on the dilemma facing Rossetti as both an intellectual and a Christian woman, and they all try to explain the ways in which Rossetti tried to solve this dilemma. Rossetti recognized the inferior position of women in the church. As a Christian she could not go against the word of God, yet her mind could not ignore the injustice inherent in such a position. To establish a state of equilibrium between her mind and her faith, she decided to present her own interpretation of the Bible. Perhaps one of the aims of Rossetti's later devotional prose was to accommodate her intellect to her religion. One of Rossetti's messages in *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year*,

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<sup>212</sup> Roden, 'Sisterhood is Powerful', p.67.

<sup>213</sup> Cynthia A. Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.112.

<sup>214</sup> Scheinberg, pp.112-3.

*Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture*, which was published in 1874, is to follow faith in the Divine rather than human intellect. She pleads repeatedly to God to save her from the doubts and the questions her mind asks, as for example in prayer number ninety-one:

Oh Lord Jesus Christ, Who spreadest out the heavens like a curtain, give us, I pray Thee, faithful wills and loving hearts that in Thy works we may ever discern Thee, and may never be misled by false science from holding fast those truths which Thou hast revealed. O Lord, I humbly bless Thee for what Thou givest, and for what Thou withholdest; for the knowledge Thou bestowest, and for the knowledge Thou keepest back. Amen.<sup>215</sup>

In *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite* in 1879, Rossetti repeats the same message, this time stressing God's wisdom for not allowing his creatures access to absolute knowledge: 'Let us thank God that we in our present frailty know not any more than His Wisdom reveals to us: not that man's safety resides in ignorance any more than in knowledge, but in conformity of the human to the Divine Will'<sup>216</sup>.

In *Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied*, she tries to explain God's wisdom by blending scientific facts with spiritual interpretations. One example is her explanation of the reasons for choosing the eagle as the holy symbol of St. John the Evangelist in Revelation 4: 6-8:

Of these four awful diverse living creatures the fourth has been assigned to St. John the Evangelist as his symbol. The four Gospels day and night praise without pause the great Name of God and His unutterable sanctity: yet while in this alike, they differ from each other under many aspects. Wherefore let us consider the natural eagle, if so we may ascribe glory unto Him Who formed the eagle, and by Whose inspiration each Evangelist wrote down his own proper notes of the divine melody in harmony. The eagle is endowed with beauty

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<sup>215</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture*. (London: James Parker and Company, 1874), prayer 91.

<sup>216</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), p.15.

and strength....His eye, sheltered by feathers, endures the blaze of the noontide sun. He is a bird of day, not of night; and delights to hunt a living prey, rather than to batten on carrion. His talons, not his beak, inflict death, clenching mechanically with a mighty pressure as he bends his legs: even so in matters spiritual bent knees are mighty towards overcoming the foe and acquiring all things. His beak, which slays not, expresses love: it calls to his mate, and in conjunction with her feeds the young hungry eaglets.<sup>217</sup>

Under the January 30 entry of her *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* in 1885, she comments on the Biblical verse 'I am Alpha, and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, saith the Lord' (Revelation I:8) alluding to Darwin's theory of evolution: 'This is the Beginning of all beginnings, this the Origin not of species only but of genera. The Beginning without beginning, the Beginning that endeth not'. She proceeds to confirm: 'For what is it perplexes and troubles us? an intellectual obscurity. And what is it we know not? somewhat which we need not know'<sup>218</sup>. Examples such as these are also abundant in *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* which was published in 1883; and finally *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, which was published only one year before her death in 1892.

These works indicate Rossetti's preoccupation with religion and theology in the second part of her life. Her focus on representing her own interpretation of the Scriptures is close to becoming compulsive. Harrison notes how the Pre-Raphaelites were haunted by the fear of the mutability and changeability of this world:

[One] characteristic of Pre-Raphaelitism...is its fundamentally elegiac quality. This is especially the case in poems by both Rossettis, Morris, and Swinburne, as critics have long emphasized. These poems concern themselves with emotional and psychological

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<sup>217</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1881), pp.85-6.

<sup>218</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1885), pp.23-4.

suffering, often caused by an obsession with mutability and death that results in a Romantic quest for permanence.<sup>219</sup>

The older Rossetti got, the more important it became for her to trust her faith. She started to lose her family members one after the other: first her father in 1854, her beloved sister Maria in 1876, her brother Dante Gabriel in 1882, her nephew Michael in 1883, and her mother in 1886. Her health started to deteriorate in 1871 as a result of Graves' disease, and pain made life less and less bearable. The expectance of a heavenly reward after such suffering was perhaps the only motivation she had for enduring all the pain and injustice on earth. For this reason, images and dreams of future heaven are plentiful in most of her later works, both prose and poetry. For Rossetti, religion was the only stable rock on which she could rely in a world that was becoming increasingly turbulent and mutable, which explains her efforts in trying to create harmony between her faith and her intellect.

When Rossetti found the gap between religion and intellect too large to fill, she chose to remain on the side of religion against what she called the 'pride of intellect', as she prays in *Annus Domini*:

O Lord Jesus Christ, the I Am, cast down, I beseech Thee, before the unapproachable Majesty of Thy Being, all man's haughtiness of will and pride of intellect. Make the wise and prudent of this world as babes, that they may desire the sincere milk of Thy Word: let them not wrest Thy good gifts to their own destruction; but with great abilities and great responsibilities bestow, O Lord our Wisdom, greater grace. Amen.<sup>220</sup>

It is interesting here how she sets intellect against wisdom, considering any intellectual idea that does not correspond with the Bible as 'unwise'. She decides to take from contemporary science only the parts that do not contradict the teachings of

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<sup>219</sup> Harrison, p.76.

<sup>220</sup> Rossetti, *Annus Domini*, prayer 7.

the Bible. An example is Linda E. Marshall's suggestion that Rossetti was aware of the latest astronomical discoveries of her time, and that she used them as parables to strengthen faith in the divine:

Her numerous and reasonably well-informed references to such matters as lunar thermal energy, solar physics, eclipses, celestial spectroscopy, planetary discovery, double stars, variable stars, nebulae, external galaxies, and theories about the structure of the universe, are all made parabolically and poetically to conduce to what for her was 'the true end of all contemplation', as she says at the conclusion of *Seek and Find*, 'to "see Jesus"'. Science provided Rossetti with parables....For [her], the new astronomy, like contemporary advances in science and technology generally, was an additional source of those parables and analogies that by means of the visible unearth the invisible and thus speak of a future world through terrestrial appreciations of it.<sup>221</sup>

Yet when science ventures to doubt the existence of God, by attacking the Biblical story of creation for example, Rossetti immediately becomes a fierce opponent of that sort of intellect that produces such a science.

Understandably, and as a devout Christian, Rossetti had to alert her fellow Christians to the dangers of 'false science', especially when Darwin's theory of evolution started to gain popularity, as Jan Marsh explains:

Doubt was on the ascendant. Geological science, archaeology and Darwin's evolutionary theories had already undermined biblical ideas of the creation. Now even theologians were beginning to question scriptural certainties. The historical accuracy of the gospel was challenged and the temporal origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition revealed.<sup>222</sup>

But Marsh also suggests that Rossetti herself was not always safe from such dangers:

In response, many believers redoubled their faith by invoking an unknowable mystery at the heart of the divine order, whereby contradictions and perplexities were signs of human limitations, not

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<sup>221</sup> Linda E. Marshall, 'Astronomy of the Invisible: Contexts for Christina Rossetti's Heavenly Parables', in Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, eds., *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p.195.

<sup>222</sup> Marsh, pp.316-7.

heavenly impotence. And on the surface, this was Christina's attitude; there is no hint, in her writing or others' recollections, that her belief in God's beneficent ordaining of the universe faltered. But frequently in her work belief seems impelled by will rather than faith, and it is at least plausible that like so many others she too was troubled by doubt, fearing that her scheme of belief had no basis outside herself.<sup>223</sup>

This was perhaps the real reason that made Rossetti start writing her devotional prose; she was trying to find answers to her doubts in a way that corresponded with her beliefs.

Some of Rossetti's early scholars have referred to the idea that her work moved more towards rigid religiosity as she grew older. Raymond Chapman suggests that:

It may be thought that Christina's later development shows a decline, both ethically and poetically. There was no diminution in deeds of kindness, but a lack of assurance, a distrust of self-will which could mean some inhibiting of activity. The poetry too has often a less certain control over shared experience. She distrusted more and more the attractions of the world. The images of hardness, sterility, sacrifice, become more frequent.<sup>224</sup>

This argument, however, is being ignored, or completely rejected, by later critics. Jerome J. McGann in his famous essay 'The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti' argues that 'almost all of [Rossetti's] best work is generated through a poetic grammar that is fundamentally religious in origin and character' and that 'if a large part of her work is not specifically *devotional*, it is virtually all "religious" in its orientation'<sup>225</sup>.

Recent critics focus mainly on Rossetti's theology, and the way she tried to adapt her Christianity to her feminism. Betty S. Flowers in her essay 'The Kingly

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<sup>223</sup> Marsh, p.317.

<sup>224</sup> R. Chapman, p.187.

<sup>225</sup> Jerome J. McGann, 'The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti', *Critical Inquiry* X (Sep. 1983). Reprinted in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.246 from which this and subsequent quotations are taken.

Self: Rossetti as Woman Artist' focuses on Rossetti's religious art. She goes against Chapman's early argument by stressing that:

Readings of Rossetti's poetry which ignore the implications of the biographical context tend to emphasize the secular poems, relegating the religious poems to a later, less interesting stage of Rossetti's career. When the religious poems are overlooked, however, Rossetti appears to be much more a Pre-Raphaelite than she really was. In spite of her close alliance with personalities in the movement and her honorary title as 'queen of the Pre-Raphaelites', the bulk of her work reflects Tractarian rather than Pre-Raphaelite concerns.<sup>226</sup>

A very similar argument is used by Dinah Roe in *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* when she, despite admitting the influence of Romanticism, Medievalism, and Pre-Raphaelitism on Rossetti's works, returns to Tractarianism as the main influence on Rossetti. She focuses her study, hence, mainly on religion in Rossetti's art: 'For Rossetti, art and religion are closely related because both seek to describe the ineffable'<sup>227</sup>.

Palazzo, D'Amico, Flowers, and Roe focus on feminist theological issues in Rossetti's early and late works. By doing this, they ignore the fact that the young Rossetti was an intelligent artist who used to read, in addition to the Bible, Gothic romances and Greek philosophy, and who had hopes and dreams like any other adolescent young woman. These scholars are attempting to detach her from the Victorian stereotype of passive female spirituality by offering her the more active role of a theologian. Yet they end up placing her more firmly in that frame when they concentrate only on the religious and spiritual, rather than secular, works. As Marsh explains, the idea of Rossetti having doubts about her faith is very plausible. That doubt could have been manifested in many of her early poems. These secular

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<sup>226</sup> Betty S. Flowers, 'The Kingly Self: Rossetti as Woman Artist', in David A. Kent, ed., *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p.160.

<sup>227</sup> Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.12.



poems of Rossetti could help to shed light on a different side of her personality, a side that so far many critics have neglected.

Georgina Battiscombe in her 1981 biography *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* identifies the presence of a conflict inside Rossetti:

The sadness characteristic of her poetry has causes deeper than these external troubles. Outwardly, Christina Rossetti's life was an uneventful one; inwardly, it was a continual conflict. A conflict between the two sides of our nature is the common experience of every human being. For Christina, however, the struggle was an unusually painful one, partly because being peculiarly gifted she was also peculiarly sensitive, partly because in her two cultural streams met and mingled without becoming a unity.<sup>228</sup>

This conflict was the reason behind Rossetti's pain and genius:

The tensions between two nationalities, two cultures, two ways of thought, meeting in one gifted personality can be very fruitful of results, though it will inevitably be the cause of much stress and suffering to the person concerned. From this tension genius can be born.<sup>229</sup>

Battiscombe identifies the conflict inside Rossetti as social, insisting that the poet never had a crisis of faith. She states that the Oxford Movement 'came to be, quite simply and without question, the most important thing in her life'<sup>230</sup>. She also argues that the reason why Rossetti ended her engagement with Charles Cayley in 1866 was because 'Unworldly Christina...was preoccupied with dreams of heaven' while Cayley was 'a perfect example of the abstracted scholar'<sup>231</sup>.

While Battiscombe offers details of Rossetti's social circle, and her feelings towards James Collinson (the Pre-Raphaelite artist to whom she was engaged between 1848 and 1850) and Charles Cayley, she takes Rossetti's religion for

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<sup>228</sup> Battiscombe, p.13.

<sup>229</sup> Battiscombe, p.14.

<sup>230</sup> Battiscombe, p.31.

<sup>231</sup> Battiscombe, p.92.

granted and does not question its varied intensity at different points in Rossetti's life. If one keeps in mind the idea of Rossetti's personal development, s/he will come to the conclusion that the young Rossetti was very different from the older more devout Rossetti. Hence, her early works include a mixture of secular and religious themes, whereas her later writings come as a testament to her full reconciliation to religion.

This chapter aims to represent Rossetti's fluctuation between doubt and belief, and between religious and artistic themes in her works. Instead of focussing on the religious aspects in her early poems, as recent critics have done, it will concentrate on the poems that represent mainly her doubts and her artistry. This will be an attempt to detach her from the rigid frame of religion and piety in which she has been imprisoned. The first section will study Rossetti's secular representation of dreams, ghosts, and death in her early poems, and the different influences behind these representations. The second section, however, will illustrate how these themes in her later works become more conventionally religious. This chapter is not suggesting that Rossetti's later works are less interesting, it is only trying to show that her early non-religious works *can* be as interesting as her more famous devotional ones.

#### Doubtfulness and Early Poetry:

##### Dreams:

Antony H. Harrison explains how dreams and visions have always been eminent in Pre-Raphaelite poetry. He writes: 'Christina Rossetti would certainly

never have perceived or deliberately represented *herself* as a resident of dreamland, although a number of her poetic personae are inhabitants'<sup>232</sup>. Dreams are present throughout Rossetti's works, whether devotional or secular. However, the themes of these dreams differ greatly between Rossetti's early poems and her later ones. Harrison's focus in his study is on what he calls Rossetti's 'paradisal' poems, where her visions of paradise closely resemble Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poetry; however, one should keep in mind that not all of Rossetti's dreams are about paradise, some of them contain very disturbing images.

W. David Shaw, in his essay 'Poet of Mystery: The Art of Christina Rossetti', classifies four different types of dreams that keep recurring in Rossetti's poetry:

Often the sense of mystery in Rossetti's verse comes from uncertainty about which of four dreams...the poet is describing. Is the poem a waking fantasy like *Goblin Market*, or a nightmare within the fallen world, or a dream that disturbs the poet's soul-sleep, or a vision of at-onement at the end of time? At the nightmarish depth of Rossetti's world we may locate a hell of scorn, hate, and rejection in love; at the upper reaches an undisplaced vision of Christ's Second Coming.<sup>233</sup>

Shaw also tries to explain the function of these various dreams in her poems:

Dreams may provide a measure of comfort by sublimating traumatic experiences, or even by displacing a terror of last judgments and final things. But dreams are also notoriously unstable and elusive. Apocalyptic visions of at-onement with Christ may revert without warning into some new vision of hell, in which Rossetti's mended heart is once more battered down and broken.<sup>234</sup>

Rossetti was aware of the function of dreams and their implications. She explains this in her novella 'Commonplace' which was first published in

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<sup>232</sup> Harrison, p.83.

<sup>233</sup> W. David Shaw, 'Poet of Mystery: The Art of Christina Rossetti', in David A. Kent, ed., *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p.23.

<sup>234</sup> Shaw, p.24.

*Commonplace, and Other Short Stories* in 1870: 'By night, when sleep paralysed self-restraint, then...dreams were haunted by distorted spectres of the past'<sup>235</sup>. She recognized that dreams could be the result of the suppressed past emotions and desires decades before Freud's publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900.

Although this characteristic of dreams could deem them unsettling, Rossetti's early poetry did not refrain from venturing into their dangerous zone. Perhaps to understand this, one needs to approach Rossetti's representation of night time in one of her early poems 'Twilight Calm', which was composed in 1850 and published for the first time in *The Dusseldorf Artist's Album* in 1854, and later in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. Here, Rossetti does not openly discuss dreams, she only juxtaposes night time with day time by portraying the twilight: the time that contains elements of both worlds. Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, explains Rossetti's love for the twilight: 'Twilight is...Rossetti's favourite time. It is the time of fantasy, a time which lies between the pleasure of the past and the judgment of the future, between delightful memory and ascetic goal, between regret and grace'<sup>236</sup>, between the self-indulgence of the past and the penance of the future. It is a suspended time that combines elements from different worlds, where Rossetti can be virtuous and rebellious, religious and doubtful, a Christian woman and a secular artist. Although it is serene and calm, it marks the beginning of another more exciting world, and dreams are perhaps a big part of this world. The poem starts with the speaker's admiration of the evening: 'Oh pleasant eventide!' despite it being the time when:

Clouds on the western side

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<sup>235</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Commonplace', *Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, eds. David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p.68.

<sup>236</sup> Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp.139-40.

Grow grey and greyer hiding the warm sun.<sup>237</sup>

It is the time when night predators begin their gloomy journey in their search for prey:

The gnats whirl in the air,  
The evening gnats; and there  
The owl opes broad his eyes and wings to sail  
For prey; the bat wakes; and the shell-less snail  
Comes forth, clammy and bare.

.....

The cock has ceased to crow, the hen to cluck:  
Only the fox is out, some heedless duck  
Or chicken to surprise.

Rossetti's 'pleasant' evening is associated with the less attractive creatures of the animal kingdom. The creatures she is referring to are far from being pleasant – gnats, owls, bats, shell-less snails – these creatures add more eeriness to the atmosphere of the night. Raymond Chapman explains how Rossetti's:

pleasure in queer, odd creatures was shared with such diverse fellow-Victorians as Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter – and her brother Dante Gabriel. In all of them perhaps there was a concealed protest against conformism and conventional notions of what was accepted as beautiful.<sup>238</sup>

The juxtaposition of night creatures and the innocent-like day creatures creates tension. This aggrandizes the reader's feelings of excitement and adventure that are

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<sup>237</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Betty S. Flowers, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.46. Hereafter cited as *Complete Poems*.

<sup>238</sup> R. Chapman, p.194.

brought by the twilight. Despite this gloom, her welcoming of the evening indicates that the speaker is not afraid to venture into that dangerous world.

Nocturnal animals are not the only beings that cause a threat to the daytime creatures in this poem; the moon can be as threatening as the fox and the owl. While Rossetti is describing how beautiful beings surrender to sleep in the evening, she mentions roses and lilies:

The bees and the birds, their happy labours done,  
Seek their close nests and bide.

Screened in the leafy wood  
The stock-doves sit and brood:  
The very squirrel leaps from bough to bough  
But lazily; pauses; and settles now  
Where once he stored his food.

One by one the flowers close,  
Lily and dewy rose  
Shutting their tender petals from the moon:  
The grasshoppers are still; but not so soon  
Are still the noisy crows.

Lilies and roses appear regularly in Rossetti's poetry. In 'Consider the Lilies of the Field', which was composed in 1853, only three years after 'Twilight Calm', lilies are used to deliver God's message:

Flowers preach to us if we will hear:—

The rose saith in the dewy morn:

I am most fair;

Yet all my loveliness is born

Upon a thorn.

.....

The lilies say: Behold how we

Preach without words of purity.<sup>239</sup>

Alison Chapman, in *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, believes that the lily metaphor in Rossetti's poems usually represents the Virgin. She argues that in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *The Annunciation*, in which Christina was sitting as a model for the Virgin in 1849-1850: 'The lily incorporates masculine and feminine significances and thus becomes the appropriate symbol of the Virgin who in the earlier *Girlhood [of Mary Virgin]* picture is shown embroidering the lily onto a stole, supervised by Saint Anne'<sup>240</sup>. So the lily, symbolizing the Virgin, represents virtuousness and piety. This lily, in 'Twilight Calm', is hiding herself from the moon. The speaker seems to have more affiliations with the night creatures than with the lily/Virgin Mary. She is excited about the little queer nocturnal animals more than the bees and the birds. She is not listening to the lilies' 'words of purity' which ask her to turn away from the evening as they are doing. Although she posed for the Virgin in the portrait around the same time she was writing this poem, Rossetti here is trying to detach herself from the Lily by celebrating nature's other 'odd creatures'.

The poem ends with the evening turning to night. The way Rossetti describes this passage from daytime to night is very significant:

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<sup>239</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.70.

<sup>240</sup> Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), p.92.

Remote, each single star  
Comes out, till there they are  
All shining brightly: how the dews fall damp!  
While close at hand the glow-worm lights her lamp  
Or twinkles from afar.

But evening now is done  
As much as if the sun  
Day-giving had arisen in the East:  
For night has come; and the great calm has ceased,  
The quiet sands have run.

While portraying the appearance of the stars she suddenly moves to exclaim about the damp dews, as if she has just noticed them. But the lines that follow are even more interesting. She is likening the day to the night; it seems that night is full of excitement and noise just like daytime. The last line echoes Shakespeare's lines in *Pericles* (V, ii, 1-2) where he also links the sands to silence:

Now our sands are almost run;  
More a little, and then dumb.

The difference is that after the 'sands are...run' here there will be silence and reconciliation. In Rossetti's poem 'the quiet sands have run' indicates the end of silence and the beginning of adventure.

The lines in *Pericles* occur after a dream vision in which Pericles is visited by Diana the Roman goddess of wild animals and the hunt, demanding a sacrifice. After



these lines Pericles is united with his wife and order is finally restored. Rossetti is using Shakespeare's metaphor to describe exactly the opposite process. In her poem the order that was supposed to be brought by the end of the day is disrupted when 'the quiet sands have run', announcing the arrival of the night, and with it turbulence, disorder, and probably dreams. This poem shows the divergence of Rossetti's personality from expected Victorian standards. The night is not the time when a respectable lady should be active, it is the time when she is supposed to be at rest. Rossetti's night time is full of adventures and excitement, as turbulent as day time.

Rossetti in 'Twilight Calm' considers night time to be full of activities, but one wonders to what sort of activities she is referring. Perhaps dreaming was what made her nights exciting and sometimes restless. One famous poem that clearly represents one of Rossetti's uncanny dreams is her 'My Dream', composed in 1855 and published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. Here Rossetti is relating to her readers a supposed dream:

Hear now a curious dream I dreamed last night,  
Each word whereof is weighed and sifted truth.

I stood beside Euphrates while it swelled  
Like overflowing Jordan in its youth:  
It waxed and coloured sensibly to sight,  
Till out of myriad pregnant waves there welled  
Young crocodiles, a gaunt blunt-featured crew,  
Fresh-hatched perhaps and daubed with birthday dew.  
The rest if I should tell, I fear my friend,

My closest friend would deem the facts untrue;  
And therefore it were wisely left untold;  
Yet if you will, why, hear it to the end.

Each crocodile was girt with massive gold  
And polished stones that with their wearers grew:  
But one there was who waxed beyond the rest,  
Wore kinglier girdle and a kingly crown,  
Whilst crowns and orbs and sceptres starred his breast.  
All gleamed compact and green with scale on scale,  
But special burnishment adorned his mail  
And special terror weighed upon his frown;  
His punier brethren quaked before his tail,  
Broad as a rafter, potent as a flail.  
So he grew lord and master of his kin:  
But who shall tell the tale of all their woes?  
An execrable appetite arose,  
He battened on them, crunched, and sucked them in.  
He knew no law, he feared no biding law,  
But ground them with inexorable jaw:  
The luscious fat distilled upon his chin,  
Exuded from his nostrils and his eyes,  
While still like hungry death he fed his maw;  
Till every minor crocodile being dead  
And buried too, himself gorged to the full,

He slept with breath oppressed and unstrung claw.<sup>241</sup>

William Michael Rossetti comments in his notes on the 1904 edition of *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti* that:

If anything were needed to show the exceptional turn of mind of Christina Rossetti—the odd freakishness which flecked the extreme and almost excessive seriousness of her thought—the present poem might serve for the purpose. It looks like the narration of a true dream; and nothing seems as if it could account for so eccentric a train of notions, except that she in fact dreamed them. And yet she did not; for, in a copy of her collected edition of 1875, I find that she has marked the piece ‘not a real dream’. As it was not a real dream, and she chose nevertheless to give it verbal form, one seeks for a meaning in it, and I for one cannot find any that bears development. She certainly liked the poem, and in this I and others quite agreed with her.<sup>242</sup>

William Michael is not the only one puzzled with this curious poem. Most Rossetti scholars try to investigate the reasons behind her freakish images in the poem. Raymond Chapman links Rossetti’s ‘erotic crocodile’ to her fondness for bizarre queer animals, as well as to a ‘Coleridgean sense of the mystic union of all creatures, a belief that love must manifest itself not in human relations alone’<sup>243</sup>. However, the attitude of the crocodile in this poem does not represent love as much as violence and cruelty. Marsh believes the middle-eastern atmosphere of this poem is related to an incident in 1855 when Rossetti attended a party dressed in a Syrian costume brought by one of her friends<sup>244</sup>. She refers to ‘Bacon’s essay on self-love...[where] crocodiles illustrate the dark side of nature – an apt image for Christina, with her sense of a divided self’, and to Thomas De Quincey’s

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<sup>241</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.33.

<sup>242</sup> William Michael Rossetti, ed., *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), p.479.

<sup>243</sup> R. Chapman, p.194.

<sup>244</sup> Marsh, p.164.

*Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) as possible sources for Rossetti's representation of the 'cannibal crocodile'<sup>245</sup>, which is perhaps a more plausible explanation than that of Chapman's. Battiscombe, however, finds an additional source behind Rossetti's eerie dream: 'Apart from De Quincey, the nearest literary parallel is to be found in the Bible, in the Old Testament prophets and in particular the Book of Daniel...and in the New Testament Apocalypse or Book of Revelation'.

She argues that Rossetti:

had a remarkably vivid visual imagination and plenty of time for day-dreaming. Some of these day-dreams may have taken the form of quasi-visions akin to the biblical visions which were so much in her mind. So Christina may have 'seen' her crocodile fantasy.<sup>246</sup>

Perhaps in this poem Rossetti is just being playful, trying to bewilder her readers with an odd dream. Still, that does not explain the violent, apocalyptic images in it. She starts by teasing her readers and arousing their curiosity about what happens next. This poem, like the previous one, uncovers the side of Rossetti that pushes her into doing things she herself confesses as 'wisely left untold', the side that some critics, especially her contemporaries, failed to see. Kathleen Jones, in her introduction to *Learning not to Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti*, comments on the way Rossetti's friends and relatives burned many of her letters after her death:

They did this...to protect the saintly image that had been constructed in the public mind. Dante Gabriel's portrayal of her as the meek virgin in his painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, MacKenzie Bell's careful hagiography<sup>247</sup>, Katharine Tynan Hinkson's *Santa Christina*<sup>248</sup> and William Rossetti's own respectful memoir, all foster the image of Christina as a dutiful daughter, sister and friend, unbelievably patient and repulsively pious. Christina would have been

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<sup>245</sup> Marsh, p.167.

<sup>246</sup> Battiscombe, p.111.

<sup>247</sup> Henry Thomas MacKenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study*. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1898).

<sup>248</sup> Katharine Tynan Hinkson, 'Santa Christina', *The Bookman* LXLI (Jan. 1912).

appalled. She once wrote to her brother Gabriel that she did not want to be seen as 'too dreamily sweet'.<sup>249</sup>

Whenever Rossetti tried to break the 'saintly' mould, she produced curious poems that filled readers with bewilderment, amazement and even fear of their hidden, perhaps ominous, meanings. Rossetti's 'My Dream' illustrates her wish not to be perceived as 'too sweet': the qualities of the dream and the attitude of the crocodile are the product of a mind far from being that.

The dream that starts as a fairy tale with the crocodiles dressed in gold and jewellery develops into a massacre when the master crocodile starts cannibalizing his smaller brothers. Yet, the dream continues describing an even more perplexing event:

Oh marvel passing strange which next I saw:  
In sleep he dwindled to the common size,  
And all the empire faded from his coat.  
Then from far off a wingèd vessel came,  
Swift as a swallow, subtle as a flame:  
I know not what it bore of freight or host,  
But white it was as an avenging ghost.  
It levelled strong Euphrates in its course;  
Supreme yet weightless as an idle mote  
It seemed to tame the waters without force  
Till not a murmur swelled or billow beat:  
Lo, as the purple shadow swept the sands,  
The prudent crocodile rose on his feet

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<sup>249</sup> Kathleen Jones, *Learning not to Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.xii.

And shed appropriate tears and wrung his hands.

What can it mean? you ask. I answer not

For meaning, but myself must echo, What?

And tell it as I saw it on the spot.

After his horrific act, the time of punishment arrives. But the avenging ship comes only after the crocodile returns to his original size. Rossetti makes it too obvious that the white ship is an 'avenging ghost' demanding divine justice from the now 'prudent crocodile'. With Rossetti, apparent simplicity usually hides deeper meanings, and Battiscombe is right when she links this poem to the Apocalypse. At the very beginning of the poem the River Euphrates is likened to the River Jordan, and the implications of this lie in the later parts of the poem. The white vessel could be no one other than Christ who walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee, through which the River Jordan flowed. The 'wingèd' vessel moves on the water rather than through it, in a manner very similar to Christ's walk on water. Furthermore, it is 'white' like a 'ghost'. It is 'weightless' yet it 'levelled strong Euphrates' and 'tame[d] the waters without force'. All these make the vessel stand for God incarnated as Christ or the Holy Spirit. So after a restful sleep, the crocodile has to face God and his verdict. But the reader is not told whether the crocodile will be forgiven or not.

Despite the fairy atmosphere of the poem, and despite Rossetti's apparent teasing, one can still read a deeper more serious meaning between the lines. Rossetti was not able to be a successful female poet and express her ideas freely at the same time. She had to follow the standards of her society. One of these standards was, as

Alison Chapman notes: 'the sentimental tradition which prescribed female creativity to be limited to the private sphere of experience and emotion'<sup>250</sup>. Rossetti claims this poem to be real experience in order to satisfy that tradition. However, she uses these techniques in order to disguise her true intentions for the poem. For this reason the beginning and the ending of the poem are quite amusing, a perfect example of Rossetti's playfulness, but the middle part carries violent and brutal scenes.

The last part of the poem reveals some hints of cynicism or knowingness, like 'prudent crocodile' and 'appropriate tears'. After being reduced in size and thus humiliated, the crocodile appears regretful before his God and he acts in the 'appropriate' manner by 'shed[ding]...tears and wr[inging] his hands'. The scene of the crocodile's regret brings to mind the Evangelical representation of Conversion as the only way to gain salvation. According to this doctrine: 'Sin was not, as those with an optimistic view of humanity were claiming, a matter of voluntary transgression, but, since the Fall, endemic to man's nature, marring every part, and preventing even the Christian from obeying God's law'<sup>251</sup>. Yet sinners can still reach absolution, regardless of their past horrific crimes, through the Holy Spirit:

The direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit was necessary to effect the 'great change' when a man acknowledged his own helplessness and relied wholly upon Christ's sacrifice upon the Cross to pay his debt. Conversion, whether long-drawn-out or sudden, was an intense and central experience, leading to Assurance, the certain consciousness of personal salvation. Good works might be the evidence of a man's desire to be like Christ, but they played no part in the scheme of salvation that proclaimed him 'justified' (made righteous before God) only by faith in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>252</sup>

Rossetti in this poem is parodying this progress. Her real motive, perhaps, behind portraying such a gruesome scene is satire. She is criticizing this belief and

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<sup>250</sup> A. Chapman, p.41.

<sup>251</sup> Jay, *The Evangelical and the Oxford Movements*, p.3.

<sup>252</sup> Jay, *The Evangelical and the Oxford Movements*, pp.3-4.

questioning its validity and justness. Rossetti does not reveal the fate of the crocodile, whether he was saved or not; she instead leaves the end open for the reader's own judgment.

The last three lines of the poem are a typical example of Rossetti's reserve. Although the speaker knows the interpretation of her dream, she chooses to keep that interpretation a secret, leaving her readers the freedom to extract whatever meaning they choose. Angela Leighton explains how 'secrets, for Rossetti, are a figure for that game of reference which...is both a haunting loss and a teasing strategy of "fun"' and that 'the two come together in that motif which Rossetti...made distinctively her own: death'<sup>253</sup>. The poem no doubt contains some amusing elements, like that of the crocodile wringing his hands, but it combines this humour with disturbing images.

The ending is playful because Rossetti's secret is too serious to be unveiled. Jerome J. McGann in 'Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation' argues that Rossetti's 'work employs the symbol of the personal secret as a sign of the presence of individuality'<sup>254</sup>, but her secret here is not related to her sense of individualism. This secret indicates the presence of doubt, and the anguish it causes. Since it is too serious to be revealed, she chooses to hide it behind jests and fairy tales. Secrets like these can explain her restless dream poems, as Marsh notes:

In poem after poem she castigated herself for failing to respond to Christ, and the spiritual distress of a soul who felt unworthy of divine love was surely comparable to that of one who could no longer believe in that divinity. Though her poetry is usually read as unproblematically devotional, its spiritual anguish suggests a darker night of the soul, struggling against despair as well as sin. When she prayed, Christ did not often answer, and when he spoke, she could not always respond.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Leighton, p.158.

<sup>254</sup> Jerome J. McGann, 'Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation', *Victorian Studies* XXIII (Winter, 1980). Reprinted in *The Beauty of Inflections*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.220 from which this and subsequent quotations are taken.

<sup>255</sup> Marsh, p.317.



Hence, this restlessness is perhaps caused by the doubts she successfully tried to hide and only came out in her dream poems.

In the poem 'Mirage', which was composed in 1860 and first published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), Rossetti deals with the theme of dreams from a different perspective. Unlike 'My Dream', the reason behind her restlessness is not the doubts manifested in the dreams, but the dreams themselves. Here, Rossetti's dreams signify her past hopes which are now proving to be only delusions. Rossetti is admitting the hopelessness of these dreams:

The hope I dreamed of was a dream,  
Was but a dream; and now I wake  
Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,  
For a dream's sake.

I hang my harp upon a tree,  
A weeping willow in a lake;  
I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and snapt  
For a dream's sake.

Lie still, lie still, my breaking heart;  
My silent heart, lie still and break:  
Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed  
For a dream's sake.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.49.

Hope turns out to be just an illusion, a dream that was never realized, a deceptive 'mirage'. The imminent result of that failure is silence, as she refers to her 'silenced harp' and 'silent heart'. Rossetti, who uses dreams to express her inner thoughts and doubts, is using the same metaphor here to express her disappointment and failure. Although it could be tempting to read this poem as religious, with the mirage being the temporal earthly joy, this poem could have another non-religious interpretation.

The atmosphere of this poem is very similar to that in her later poem 'In the Willow Shade', which was published in *The Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881. Its date of composition is unknown, so, despite its later publication, this poem could have been written at the same time as 'Mirage' and perhaps about the same theme. In 'In the Willow Shade' the speaker sits under a willow tree contemplating her life:

I sat beneath a willow tree,  
Where water falls and calls;  
While fancies upon fancies solaced me,  
Some true, and some were false.

Who set their heart upon a hope  
That never comes to pass,  
Droop in the end like fading heliotrope  
The sun's wan looking-glass.

.....

A singing lark rose toward the sky,  
Circling he sang amain;  
He sang, a speck scarce visible sky-high,

And then he sank again.

A second like a sunlit spark

Flashed singing up his track;

But never overtook that foremost lark,

And songless fluttered back.<sup>257</sup>

As with 'Mirage', this poem is about illusive fancies and failed dreams. However, the imagery of the two larks here is quite intriguing. Angela Leighton believes these two larks to represent Christina's relation to her brother Dante Gabriel: "In the Willow Shade" hints at a relation of kinship and rivalry between the two larks, who once flew in each other's tracks, but now are separated. The first, specifically male bird soared and sang, but the second could not compete and fell back "songless"<sup>258</sup>. This reveals Rossetti's anxiety about not being as good a poet as her elder brother. The silent female lark is the speaker in 'Mirage', and the failed dream is that of becoming a distinguished poet, surpassing her brother.

In January 1861 John Ruskin wrote a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti commenting on Christina's style in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* before its publication in 1862:

I sate [*sic*] up late last night reading poems. They are full of beauty and power. But, no publisher—I am deeply grieved to know this—would take them, so full are they of quaintnesses and offences. Irregular measure...is the calamity of modern poetry....Your sister should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like. Then if she puts in her observation

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<sup>257</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.314.

<sup>258</sup> Leighton, p.152.

and passion all will become precious. But she must have the Form first.<sup>259</sup>

‘Mirage’ was one of the poems Ruskin read in *Goblin Market*. Christina Rossetti had probably been aware of Ruskin’s view even before he read the poems, and she knew it was shared by many of her contemporaries. The frustration she had from such views is reflected in the two poems, by the silent lark, the ‘silenced harp’, and the ‘silent heart’. Being left with a ‘silent heart’ could be fatal for the speaker since it means her metaphorical death as a poet. She could no longer write from her heart, using her own themes and styles. Instead, in order to be a poet, she has to imprison herself within the Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite tradition and write against her heart (using Leighton’s metaphor). When her heart is silenced, she is able to conform to these standards and write in the ‘proper’ manner.

The Maturin Poems:

Rossetti felt the pressure of having to comply with rules and conventions at a very young age. In 1845, at the age of fifteen, she began exhibiting the symptoms of a nervous breakdown: moodiness, violent outbursts, and tantrums<sup>260</sup>. Physical ill-health accompanied these symptoms and lasted until 1848. The reasons behind this breakdown are still disputed; yet Rossetti’s character was permanently altered and the stubborn high-spirited bad-tempered girl was transformed into a reclusive quiet and shy young woman. The timing of her breakdown is very significant since it corresponded with the biological changes that accompanied the onset of adolescence.

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<sup>259</sup> John Ruskin, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism: Papers 1854 to 1862*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: George Allen, 1899), pp.258-9.

<sup>260</sup> Marsh, pp.48-50.

Marsh discusses the remote possibility that Christina might have been subjected to a 'parental abuse of some kind'<sup>261</sup> at this age, and she hints that this abuse might have been sexual. However, many critics attribute her breakdown to overwhelming piety, as Jones explains in her biography:

It is difficult to discover exactly what happened. A friend of her biographer MacKenzie Bell reported that it had been 'religious mania bordering on insanity'. That she 'fell in love with Christ' as many young people do at this age seems very likely, but there seems to be little evidence of excessive religious zeal. Her poetic output is less religious at this period of her life than at any other.<sup>262</sup>

To make this point clearer, it is necessary to explain that at that period of her life, some of Rossetti's favourite books were the novels of Charles Robert Maturin (1782-1824), especially *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). The Maturin novels were popular reads among Rossetti's elder siblings, especially Dante Gabriel<sup>263</sup>, which may account for Christina having read them in the first place. Marsh notes that Rossetti wrote in 1847 'no fewer than five poems based on his characters', and she assigns this attraction to the way his novels 'blended with the strong thread of heartache and hidden pain, silenced or stony emotion disguising inner terror, that seems to reflect the continuing impact of [Rossetti's] breakdown, and was prominent in the new poems'<sup>264</sup>.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Rossetti admired *Melmoth the Wanderer* was its direct attack on Catholicism, represented in the novel by the Spanish Inquisition, and by the oppression to which a young boy was subjected in a Catholic monastery. Maturin himself was an Irish protestant clergyman living at the time when the battle to give Catholics their full civil rights was raging. During Rossetti's adolescence,

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<sup>261</sup> Marsh, p.259.

<sup>262</sup> Jones, p.18.

<sup>263</sup> Marsh, p.30.

<sup>264</sup> Marsh, pp.76-7.

and despite the Roman Catholic Relief Act in 1829, hostility towards the Roman Catholic Church was still strong, especially with the conversion of the famous Tractarian preachers to Catholicism, the thing that created more hostility towards it.

Different aspects of this novel could also be traced in some of Rossetti's prose works. Her comic fairytale 'Nick', which was written in 1852 and first published in 1857 in the *National Magazine*, and later in 1870 in *Commonplace, and Other Short Stories*, can be an example of that. It relates the story of a poor mischievous farmer who wishes to be a very rich man like the old miser of the village, only to find that the servants of that man are plotting to kill him and steal his money<sup>265</sup>. The old miser of Rossetti's story greatly resembles the old Melmoth: both of them are rich, cruel, and lonely men. *Melmoth the Wanderer*, however, is mainly about the monstrous Melmoth, an ancestor of the miser Melmoth, who sealed a pact with the devil and now is looking for someone to substitute in his place so that he can escape damnation. He tries to lure many people during his numerous journeys, and one of them is innocent Immalee.

Immalee lives alone on an isolated island. She meets Melmoth there and falls in love with him. He is aware that by marrying him she will lose her innocence and fall from God's grace. Thus, his love for her prevents him in the beginning from marrying her on the island. Later, the reader discovers that Immalee is Isidora, the long-lost daughter of a Spanish grandee. When she is brought back to Spain she meets Melmoth again and marries him without her parents' knowledge. At the end, Immalee dies with her infant in the dungeons of the Inquisition after rejecting Melmoth's promise of eternity in exchange for her soul. Although the novel has a religious aspect, with its emphasis on the righteousness of Protestantism as opposed

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<sup>265</sup> Christina Rossetti, 'Nick', *Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, eds. David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp.107-12.

to the cruelty of Catholicism, Immalee/Isidora's fatal infatuation with Melmoth was perhaps the most attractive theme to young Rossetti, especially since the two Melmoth poems she wrote only portray the influence of Melmoth's love on Isidora. Even Rossetti's representation of Melmoth focuses on his being a dangerous lover rather than a demon.

Rossetti's poem 'Immalee', which was composed in 1847 and first published posthumously in 1896, portrays the life of Isidora on the island before meeting Melmoth. Romanticism's influence on Rossetti is manifested in this poem. Immalee, the speaker of the poem, is represented as an innocent daughter of nature who knows nothing about the evil and corruption of the world:

I gather thyme upon the sunny hills,  
And its pure fragrance ever gladdens me,  
And in my mind having tranquillity  
I smile to see how my green basket fills.  
And by clear streams I gather daffodils;  
And in dim woods find out the cherry-tree,  
And take its fruit and the wild strawberry,  
And nuts, and honey; and live free from ills.  
I dwell on the green earth, 'neath the blue sky,  
Birds are my friends, and leaves my rustling roof;  
The deer are not afraid of me, and I  
Hear the wild goat, and hail its hastening hoof;  
The squirrels sit perked as I pass them by,

And even the watchful hare stands not aloof.<sup>266</sup>

The animals she describes here – birds, deer, squirrels – are the innocent day-time animals of ‘Twilight Calm’, and Immalee is equally innocent. She is not very different from Wordsworth’s Lucy.

The second Melmoth poem is ‘Isidora’, which was written in the same year as ‘Immalee’ and also published posthumously. This poem reveals the change in Isidora’s character after being brought back to Spain and introduced to Catholicism. It is not only the name that changed, it is her whole character. After living in the civilized world and marrying Melmoth, Isidora is no longer a girl whose ‘mind having tranquillity’, she is now part of the corrupt world of Melmoth:

Love, whom I have loved too well,  
Turn thy face away from me;  
For I heed nor Heaven nor Hell  
While mine eyes can look on thee.  
Do not answer, do not speak,  
For thy voice can make me weak.

I must choose ’twixt God and man,  
And I dare not hesitate:  
Oh how little is life’s span,  
And Eternity how great!  
Go out from me; for I fear  
Mine own strength while thou art here.

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<sup>266</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.672.



Husband, leave me; but know this:

I would gladly give my soul

So that thine might dwell in bliss

Free from the accursed control,

So that thou mightest go hence

In a hopeful penitence.<sup>267</sup>

She asks Melmoth to go because she fears his effect on her might prevent her from seeking forgiveness and salvation. She moves then to describe the irony lying in her death and his damnation:

It were vain that I should die;

That we thus should perish both;

Thou would'st gain no peace thereby;

And in truth I should be loath

By the loss of my salvation

To increase thy condemnation.

Isidora's infant is in her arms, and she envies him for his peaceful sleep: '...thou knowest nought of strife, / The heart's death for the soul's life'. She then repeats her pleas for Melmoth to leave her in her dungeon:

Husband, go. I dare not hearken

To thy words, or look upon

Those despairing eyes that darken

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<sup>267</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.669.

Down on me—but he is gone.  
Nay, come back; and be my fate  
As thou wilt—it is too late.

I have conquered; it is done;  
Yea, the death-struggle is o'er,  
And the hopeless quiet won!—  
I shall see his face no more!—  
And mine eyes are waxing dim  
Now they cannot look on him.

And my heart-pulses are growing  
Very weak; and thro' my whole  
Life-blood a slow chill is going:—  
Blessed Saviour, take my soul  
To Thy Paradise and care;—  
Paradise, will he be there?

Isidora does not exchange places with Melmoth out of fear of God, but because there is no guarantee Melmoth would be saved by doing so. Even her final prayer is tainted by her desire to meet him in Paradise. The scene this poem portrays is not fully related in the novel. The reader is only told that Melmoth visits his dying wife asking her to join him in his eternal damnation. The last line of the poem is the only one taken from the novel. William Michael Rossetti describes it as 'truly a fine

stroke of pathos and of effect'<sup>268</sup>. Although it is originally Maturin's and not Rossetti's, her retaining it suggests her understanding of the reasons behind Isidora's utterance. This poem reveals Rossetti's real thoughts and feelings at that stage in her life. It portrays an inner struggle between desire and duty, earthly love and eternal bliss. Her portrayal of Isidora's last moments uncovers her understanding of the fatality of such love.

In the original novel the main reason behind Immalee's misery is her return to civilized Catholic Spain. She tells Melmoth: 'They seized on me—they dragged me here—they made me a Christian. They told me all was for my salvation, for my happiness here and hereafter— and I trust it will, for I have been so miserable ever since, that I ought to be happy somewhere'<sup>269</sup>. Rossetti ignores one of the most important themes in the novel, which is the attack on Catholicism, and concentrates only on the relationship between Immalee and Melmoth. This suggests that Rossetti at that stage of her life was not only influenced by religion, and her writings were not only devotional. Like any young woman, she had a space in her life for Gothic romances and she used them as inspiration for her poetry.

'Immalee' could be regarded as an example of the poetry of a female adolescent, but 'Isidora' contains very dark images of an overwhelming, cursed love. The two poems, although they have the same speaker, are completely different. Immalee's corruption starts first when she is introduced to Melmoth, but it is complete when she is brought to Spain. The dilemma Isidora faces appears later in Rossetti's 'The Convent's Threshold', where a girl has to choose between a doomed love and a life of chastity. The Immalee/Isidora dichotomy, however, reflects

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<sup>268</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, p.467.

<sup>269</sup> Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. (London: The New English Library, 1966), p.339.

Rossetti's inner struggle at that stage between what she was and what the society wanted her to be. Immalee is the uncorrupted girl who instinctively recognized God in nature and worshipped him. Isidora is the woman who used to leave her parents' home every night to meet her lover; who accepted the sacrifice of her family and almost her religion for the sake of her passionate love. She is the night adventurer Rossetti wished to be.

This juxtaposition between the naive girl and the passionate almost fiendish woman is represented in poems influenced by another novel written by Maturin and published in 1818: *Women; or, Pour et Contre; a Tale*. In this novel the hero, Charles De Courcy, falls in love with Zara the actress, leaving for her his fiancée the pious Calvinist Eva. However, he later returns to Eva who is dying of a broken heart. After Eva's death Zara discovers that Eva was her long-lost daughter, which adds more to her feelings of guilt and loss.

Rossetti wrote five poems based on *Women; or, Pour et Contre. A Tale*. 'Eva' was composed and published in 1847; 'Look on this picture and on this' was written in 1856 and published posthumously in 1896; 'Now the pain beginneth and the word is spoken' was first published in 1847, and was probably composed around this time; 'The pale sad face of her I wronged' was composed in 1848, and 'I dreamed that loving me he would love on' in 1855. The last three poems are all called 'Zara', and they portray Zara's lamentations after losing her lover and her daughter. What is interesting, however, is that the last two poems do not appear in William Michael Rossetti's 1904 edition of his sister's poems. Possibly because these two poems reveal Rossetti's sympathy for Zara and her ordeal, a sympathy that contradicts the image of the 'saintly' Christina her brother wanted to promote.

‘Eva’ and ‘Now the pain beginneth and the word is spoken’ are the earliest ‘*Women*’ poems written. ‘Eva’ is the only one that portrays Eva’s feelings after her lover’s abandonment. Rossetti presents Eva as pious and passive. She turns to religion but her love prevents her from concentrating on God instead of the man she loves. The way Eva perceives herself as a proud sinner echoes the ‘vanity of vanities’ theme which is present in many of Rossetti’s poems:

Yes, I loved him all too well,  
And my punishment is just,  
But its greatness who can tell?  
Still I have a steadfast trust  
That the sorrow shall not last,  
And the trial shall be past,  
And my faith shall anchor fast.

Lord, Thou knowest, I have said,  
All is good that comes from Thee;  
Unto Thee I bow my head.  
I have not repented me.  
Still, oh! still ’tis better ill;  
Still I have a stubborn will,  
And my heart is haughty still:

.....

Hast thou too much time, in sooth,  
For the work of penitence,  
That thou wastest tears and youth

Mourning one who is gone hence?

For thyself cry out and weep

Ere that thou lie down and sleep,

And for ever silence keep.

.....

And in prayer think thou of him

Who hath left thee sad and lone.

Pray that earth's light may grow dim,

So to him Heaven's light be shown.

Pray that, all thy sins forgiven,

Pray that, from his errors shriven,

Ye may meet at length in Heaven.<sup>270</sup>

This poem represents some of Rossetti's recurring themes like the broken heart and the vanity of human life and desires. However, the emphasis here is not on these themes but on Eva's feelings which fluctuate between faith and despair: faith that she will be able to survive her ordeal and despair because she cannot forget her lover despite all her attempts. Eva's response to the faithlessness of her lover is silence, along with prayers to guide her lover to the road to heaven where they can meet again. This poem is typical of Rossetti. Love, betrayal, religion, and death were an attractive combination for a seventeen-year-old sensitive poet.

'Now the pain beginneth and the word is spoken', however, deals with the novel from a different perspective. The speaker here is Zara, the worldly actress who caused Eva's heart to be broken. Zara is lamenting her bad luck because her lover

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<sup>270</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.610.

left her for the dying Eva. Although she was the transgressor in the beginning, and although she does not turn to religion for solace, Rossetti craftily makes the reader sympathize with this erring woman. By exhibiting similar behavior to Eva's noble forgiveness of her lover's treason Zara gains the reader's compassion. However, this is not the only technique Rossetti uses to obtain the reader's sympathy. She portrays Zara as a dignified and sincere woman who is aware of her error and who accepts her punishment. Rossetti adopts a compassionate stance for the two rival women in two different poems, which shows her understanding of the flaws of human nature. Not only did she understand Zara's motives, she wrote three poems in her defense, 'Now the pain beginneth' is the first of them:

Now the pain beginneth and the word is spoken;—

Hark unto the tolling of the churchyard chime!—

Once my heart was gladsome, now my heart is broken,—

Once my love was noble, now it is a crime.

.....

Yea, the fear is over, the strong fear and trembling;

I can doubt no longer, he is gone indeed.

Rend thy hair, lost woman, weep without dissembling;

The heart torn forth from it, shall the breast not bleed?

.....

He shall leave thee also, he who now hath left me,

With a weary spirit and an aching heart;

Thou shalt be bereaved by him who hath bereft me;

Thou hast sucked the honey,—feel the stinging's smart.

Let the cold gaze on him, let the heartless hear him,  
For he shall not hurt them, they are safe in sooth:  
But let loving women shun that man and fear him,  
Full of cruel kindness and devoid of ruth.

.....

Hath the Heaven no thunder wherewith to denounce him?  
Hath the Heaven no lightning wherewith to chastise?  
O my heart and spirit, O my soul, renounce him  
Who hath called for vengeance from the distant skies.

Vengeance which pursues thee, vengeance which shall find thee,  
Crushing thy false spirit, scathing thy fair limb:—  
O ye thunders deafen, O ye lightnings blind me,  
Winds and storms from heaven, strike me but spare him.

I forgive thee, dearest, cruel, I forgive thee;—  
May thy cup of sorrow be poured out for me;  
Though the dregs be bitter yet they shall not grieve me,  
Knowing that I drink them, O my love, for thee.<sup>271</sup>

Zara's lamentations turn to a warning to all women against men similar to her lover, who is portrayed again as a demon with supernatural powers. Rossetti contrasts Eva and Zara by emphasizing Eva's piety and passiveness as opposed to Zara's intense summoning of the powers of heaven and earth to punish her instead of

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<sup>271</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.643.



her wrongdoer. When Zara starts cursing her lover the reader realizes the difference between her character and the serene character of Eva, who prays for her lover's salvation despite his ill-treatment. However, Zara and Eva have one thing in common: they are both loving women who fell victim to a man's inconstancy. At the end of the poem, Zara proves herself to be as noble as Eva when she declares her forgiveness of her lover. D'Amico notes that 'Zara's cup of sacrificial love from which she is willing to drink recalls Christ's suffering in the garden of Gethsemane'<sup>272</sup>, and it is interesting that Rossetti is likening the sinner Zara, through her suffering, to Christ. Her words echo Isidora's similar assimilation of a Christ-figure when she asks Melmoth: 'Shall thy palm grow from my cross?'. They also echo her willingness, in an act similar to atonement, to suffer damnation for the sake of her husband's salvation. This uncanny representation of a Christ-figure illustrates Rossetti's unconventional understanding of sin at that age. Through her suffering, the sinner becomes a saviour. Both women are in love with dangerous men who cause them physical and spiritual agony, yet, unlike Eva, both of them welcome eternal suffering for their lovers' eternal bliss.

In the same manner, Eva resembles Immalee. When Melmoth asks Immalee to marry him on the island during a rampaging storm, she instinctively feels the danger of his proposal and tears herself from him:

The eyes of the stranger flashed on Immalee the brightest rays of mingled fondness and ferocity. He pointed to the darkness,—'WED ME BY THIS LIGHT!' he exclaimed, '*and you shall be mine for ever and ever!*' Immalee, shuddering at the grasp in which he held her, and trying in vain to watch the expression of his countenance, yet felt enough of her danger to tear herself from him. 'Farewell for ever!' exclaimed the stranger, as he rushed from her. Immalee, exhausted by emotion and terror, had fallen senseless on the sands that filled the path to the ruined pagoda.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> D'Amico, p.23.

<sup>273</sup> Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, p.320.

Both Immalee and Eva are naive girls who do not know the dangers of love. They turn to God for solace, and faint/die when their pain becomes unbearable. Zara and Isidora, on the other hand, are stronger worldly women who sacrifice even their salvation for the sake of their lovers. Although young, Rossetti was aware of that type of sacrilegious love and she did not condemn it. Her understanding of the passions and desires which feed such love is remarkable for a young woman with her strict religious upbringing and background.

The similarities between Zara and Isidora become clearer in 'Look on this picture and on this', the last poem Rossetti wrote that dealt with the 'Women' theme. William Michael was so troubled by the poem that he omitted half of the original in his edition of Rossetti's poems:

In my sister's MS. this poem is a rather long one, forty-six triplets; I have reduced it to twenty-three—omitting those passages which appear to me to be either in themselves inferior, or adapted rather for spinning out the theme than intensifying it. Longer or shorter, the poem is perhaps hardly up to the writer's mark; but there is a degree of peculiarity about it which disinclines me to drop it out. Were it not for the name 'Eva', I should be embarrassed to guess what could have directed my sister's pen to so singular a subject and treatment; but that name satisfies me that she was here recurring to a favourite romancist of her girlhood, Maturin.<sup>274</sup>

This poem portrays Charles De Courcy's guilty conscience while watching Eva dying in his arms. Rossetti's work with the fallen women at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, where she volunteered in 1859, indicates her sympathies with fallen women and her understanding of the complex causes of their predicament. However, this poem shows that Rossetti in 1856 was aware of the temptation on men as well. De Courcy faces the same dilemma of Zara and Isidora.

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<sup>274</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, p.480.

His emotions vacillate between loving Eva and cursing her. Maturin very early in the novel portrays the main flaws in the character of De Courcy. His tutor describes him as:

Affectionate, brave, with sensibility that every thing touches, genius that every thing inspires, cheerfulness that every thing can animate, simplicity that any thing can impose on. Such is the picture, but all pictures must have a reverse;—credulous, fluctuating, and irresolute, ever led by the last speaker;—ever obeying the fresh impulse,—false shame always suffered to act in the place of true,—the heart always consulted in disdain of the understanding,—the censure of the world dreaded less than its laugh,—and the reproaches of the heart coming too late for anything but to increase his suffering;—such is De Courcy.—Such *is* he!<sup>275</sup>

On another occasion, an ‘old hag’ prophesizes his and Eva’s future while clasping his hand: ‘It is as soft as a woman’s, and yet it can deal a heavy blow—the blow that kills what it never touched—the blow that breaks the heart. Others are deadly to them they hate, but you will be deadly to them you love!’<sup>276</sup>. Rossetti, in just one poem, does not only portray all these deficiencies in De Courcy’s character; she gives him the chance to explain the reasons behind his errors and faults.

In the poem, Rossetti portrays how temptation operates and how it can confuse the mind of the most sincere person. She does not adopt a religious one-dimensional approach to the story: Zara is not a damned sinner and Eva is not a saint. The five *Women* poems are an attempt to portray the situation from all three angles, in order to demonstrate how in the matters of love and seduction there is no right and wrong. Neither Zara nor her lover are to blame for Eva’s death, it is the frailty of human nature that caused this tragedy. Betty S. Flowers believes the title of

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<sup>275</sup> Charles Robert Maturin, *Women; or Pour et Contre. A Tale*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1818), I, 5.

<sup>276</sup> Maturin, *Women*, I, 24.

the poem echoes the scene in *Hamlet* (III, iv, 53-4) where Hamlet, while reproaching his mother, compares the picture of his father and that of his uncle:

Look here, upon this picture, and on this,  
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.

Flowers suggests that ‘in Maturin’s novel, a similar comparison might be made between the worldly Zaira [sic] and the saintly Eva’<sup>277</sup>. Dolores Rosenblum in *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, however, believes that a deeper meaning could be extracted from the title: ‘In the novel an incestuous configuration underlies the rivalry; hence the significance of the title, which otherwise seems to have only the superficial meaning that the two women are as incompatible as Claudius and the elder Hamlet’<sup>278</sup>. Indeed, knowing that Eva is the daughter of Zara does make the poem, and the comparison drawn between the two women, more intense:

I wish we once were wedded,—then I must be true;  
You should hold my will in yours to do or to undo:  
But now I hate myself Eva when I look at you.

You have seen her hazel eyes, her warm dark skin,  
Dark hair—but oh those hazel eyes a devil is dancing in:—  
You my saint lead up to heaven she lures down to sin.

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<sup>277</sup> Flowers, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, p.1134.

<sup>278</sup> Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p.155.

Listen Eva I repent, indeed I do my love:

How should I choose a peacock and leave and grieve a dove?—

If I could turn my back on her and follow you above.

No it's not her beauty bloomed like an autumn peach,

Not her pomp of beauty too high for me to reach;

It's her eyes, her witching manner—ah the lore they teach

You are winning, well I know it, who should know it but I?

You constrain me, I must yield or else must hasten by:—

But she, she fascinates me, I can neither fight nor fly.

She's so redundant, stately;—in truth now have you seen

Ever anywhere such beauty, such a stature, such a mien?

She may be queen of devils but she's every inch a queen.

.....

Can I bear to think upon you strong to break not bend,

Pale with inner intense passion silent to the end,

Bear to leave you, bear to grieve you, O my dove my friend?

.....

Nay, you answer coldly yet with a quivering voice:

That is over, doubt and struggle, we have sealed our choice;

Leave me to my contentment vivid with fresh hopes and joys.

.....

I would that one of us were dead, were gone no more to meet,

Or she and I were dead together stretched here at your feet,  
That she and I were strained together in one windingsheet:

Hidden away from all the world upon this bitter morn;  
Hidden from all the scornful world, from all your keener scorn;  
Secure and secret in the dark as blessed babe unborn.

A pitiless fiend is in your eyes to tempt me and to taunt:  
If you were dead I verily believe that you would haunt  
The home you loved, the man you loved, you said you loved—  
avaunt.

Why do you face me with those eyes so calm they drive me mad,  
Too proud to droop before me and own that you are sad?  
Why have you a lofty angel made me mean and cursed and bad?

How have you the heart to face me with that passion in your stare  
Deathly silent? weep before me, rave at me in your despair—  
If you keep patience wings will spring and a halo from your hair.

.....

Have I wronged you? nay not I nor she in deed or will:  
You it is alone that mingle the venomous cup and fill;  
Why are you so little lovely that I cannot love you still?—

One pulse, one tone, one ringlet of her's [*sic*] outweighs the whole

Of you, your puny graces puny body puny soul:  
You but a taste of sweetness, she an overrunning bowl.

.....

Did I love you? never from the first cold day to this;  
You are not sufficient for my aim in life, my bliss;  
You are not sufficient, but I found the one that is.

.....

Never?—yes I loved you then; I loved: the word still charms:—  
For the first time last time lie here in my heart my arms,  
For the first last time as if I shielded you from harms.

I trampled you, poor dove, to death; you clung to me, I spurned;  
I taunted you, I tortured you, while you sat still and yearned:—  
Oh lesson taught in anguish but in double anguish learned.

For after all I loved you, loved you then, I love you yet.  
Listen love I love you: see, the seal of truth is set  
On my face in tears—you cannot see? then feel them wet.

.....

The tearless tender eyes are closed, the tender lips are dumb:  
I shall not see or hear them more until that day shall come:  
Then they must speak, what will they say—what then will be the  
sum?—

Shall we stand upon the left and she upon the right—

We smirched with endless death and shame, she glorified in white:

Will she sound our accusation in intolerable light?

Be open-armed to us in love—type of another Love—

As she forgave us once below will she forgive above,

Enthroned to all eternity our sister friend and dove?—<sup>279</sup>

The speaker ends the poem in the same manner with which he starts: asserting his love and asking for forgiveness. Yet the reader cannot help but suspect the motives of the lover's pleas. He calls Eva a 'pitiless fiend' and then a 'poor dove', admitting first his dislike and then his love. Rossetti's allusion to Hamlet's speech to his mother is interesting. Hamlet violently rebukes his mother for marrying Claudius after his father's death. Gertrude is represented as an incestuous sinner<sup>280</sup> and Hamlet as a tormented victim. In the poem, however, it is not clear to whom the order in the title is addressed. Is Rossetti ordering her readers to look at Zara and Eva, or is she ordering the lover? Or is it the lover ordering Eva to see the differences between herself and Zara? Judging from the lover's speech to Eva and the way he juxtaposes her with Zara, he is probably the speaker of the title line. And he is reproaching Eva for her misjudgment in not seeing the difference between herself and Zara.

The speaker's emotions towards Eva are confused, which makes him unreliable as a judge of the real events that made him fall in love with Zara and caused Eva's death. He portrays Zara as the demon lover who lured him away from heavenly Eva, and the speaker is acting like an enchanted man who cannot break the

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<sup>279</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.786.

<sup>280</sup> She married. O, most wicked speed, to post  
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I, ii, 160-1)



spell of this witch. The reader cannot determine whether he is asking for forgiveness at the end out of real love for Eva or just out of guilt. However, the one thing the speaker is not confused about is the feelings he has for Zara. The violent sexual attraction is very clear in the poem, which makes it different from the other four 'Women' poems. The fact that a twenty-six-year-old woman could write such an intense poem, full of sexual images, is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is the idea that 'Santa Christina' knew and understood such intense feelings and emotions. No wonder her brother felt uneasy about publishing this poem. Leighton confirms that in this poem 'Rossetti conveys pure, untranscended sexual appetite, in language which, lacking the tidy dress of correct metre, seems to approach the naked reality of unpoeticised feeling'<sup>281</sup>. Both Zara and Eva are fiends and doves, both are innocent and guilty. This poem was perhaps meant to be Rossetti's conclusion to the story. At her relatively young age she realized that a woman could be a sinner and a saint at the same time, and that in the matters of love and desire there was no black and white.

#### Ghost Poems and Soul Sleep:

Rossetti used supernatural themes to express her doubts and anxieties, and her ghost poems, just like the ones about dreams, reflect that. Despite their significance, very little attention has been given to Rossetti's ghosts. Ghosts were one of the popular themes in the Victorian period, especially by women writers: the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell exemplify that. Vanessa D. Dickerson, in *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers*

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<sup>281</sup> Leighton, p.132.

*and the Supernatural*, studies in detail the employment of the ghost theme by these writers. She explains how ‘the act of writing a ghost story was for the popular woman writer the creation of a public discourse for voicing feminine concerns’<sup>282</sup>. These concerns were related to Victorian women’s ‘own spirituality and their ambiguous status as the “other” living in a state of in-betweenness: between the walls of the house, between animal and man, between angel and demon’ which directly corresponded with the ‘in-betweenness’ state of the ghost itself<sup>283</sup>. Perhaps Maturin’s *Melmoth* inspired the gothic atmosphere in some of Rossetti’s ghost poems. Although the novel does not contain any ghosts, the hero of the novel, Melmoth, who is considered by Jan Marsh as ‘a version of the demon lover’<sup>284</sup>, is in a state of ‘in-betweenness’, not alive and not dead, like ghosts.

As an adolescent, Rossetti was conscious of the demands her society forced upon her as a woman and the way in which she was compelled to control her temper, stop her wild tantrums, and act against her passionate nature. She wanted to be a Zara while her society expected her to be an Eva, and this resulted in her nervous breakdown. Rossetti emerged from her breakdown as a Victorian lady. Nevertheless, despite the repression to which she subjected herself, her passionate self emerged, intentionally or unintentionally, in some of her poems, most of which deal with the dark realm of the supernatural. The supernatural is the domain of the unconscious, the playground of dreams and ghosts stories, of repressed fears and anxieties. Rossetti used ghosts in many poems; however, her representation of them in three certain poems is particularly interesting. These poems are ‘The Hour and the Ghost’, which was composed in 1856 and published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in

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<sup>282</sup>Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*. (London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p.6.

<sup>283</sup> Dickerson, p.8.

<sup>284</sup> Marsh, p.45.

1862; 'The Poor Ghost', which was composed in 1863; and 'The Ghost's Petition' in 1864. The last two poems were both published in *The Pilgrim's Progress and Other Poems* in 1866.

Rossetti's ghosts can be of either gender. It did not matter to her whether the ghost was of a dead man or a woman: after death they all became genderless. This is another aspect of the ghost's state of in-betweenness which resembles that of Victorian woman. Rossetti's focus in these three poems is on the encounter between the ghosts and their living lovers, whether they are male or female. All three poems involve the ghost of a lover coming back from the land of the dead with a message for the living. 'The Hour and the Ghost' is very similar to a scene from a medieval tragedy. The poem involves three characters: a bride, a bridegroom, and a ghost of the bride's previous lover. The ghost asks the bride to fulfil her promise and accompany him to the land of the dead. 'The Ghost's Petition' presents exactly the opposite situation. The ghost of the dead husband returns to ask his wife to stop waiting and weeping for him. He cannot rest in the other life knowing she is suffering because of his absence. The wife here seems willing to accompany her husband but changes her mind at the end and decides to live. 'The Poor Ghost' is different from the other two because the ghost is a female reminding her lover of his promises, but the lover refuses to join her in death.

Of course, one prominent aspect of these ghost poems could be traced throughout Rossetti's works, especially during that period. It is the temporariness of love and the forgetfulness of the human heart. Two of these three poems portray a dead and forgotten lover. The third is about a wife waiting for a husband who she thinks is still alive; yet, despite her affirmation of love she refuses to follow him to his resting place and decides to dry her tears and end her grief. Perhaps the ghost

poems, in this respect, could be linked to 'Love Ephemeral', for example, which was composed during or immediately after Rossetti's breakdown in 1848. It explains Rossetti's view of the temporariness of love in the clearest yet most effective manner:

Love is sweet, and so are flowers  
Blooming in bright summer bowers;  
So are waters, clear and pure,  
In some hidden fountain's store;  
So is the soft southern breeze  
Sighing low among the trees;  
So is the bright queen of heaven,  
Reigning in the quiet even:  
Yet the pallid moon may breed  
Madness in man's feeble seed;  
And the wind's soft influence  
Often breathes the pestilence;  
And the waves may sullied be  
As they hurry to the sea;  
Flowers soon must fade away –  
Love endures but for a day.<sup>285</sup>

Human love can be as temporary, illusive, and vain as flowers' bloom, but its danger does not lie in its temporariness as much as its treachery. It deludes the heart and confuses the mind till their owner reaches fatal destruction. This poem was written at

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<sup>285</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.612.

the time when Rossetti was having her nervous breakdown, so her puritanical feelings in it are not surprising. However, the theme of the temporariness of love persists through most of her later poetry. Some of Rossetti's most celebrated poems like 'Cousin Kate' and 'Noble Sisters', which were composed in 1859; 'Maude Clare' (1857)<sup>286</sup>, and 'Zara [I dreamed that loving me he would love me on]' (1855), are mainly devoted to this theme. Interestingly, 'Love Ephemeral' also discusses the illusiveness of beauty, especially nature's beauty. This theme changed in some of the poetry she wrote in the 1850s and 1860s. For only five years after 'Love Ephemeral' she wrote 'Twilight Calm' in which she celebrated nature's beauty, especially, as discussed above, the odd side of that beauty. Hence, this poem is the result of her adolescent depression rather than genuine feelings of apprehension towards nature and love.

In her ghost poems, however, her feelings are mature. Instead of lamenting, Rossetti represents the temporariness of love as a fact of life. Not only can the living lover forget about the dead beloved, but even the dead can stop recognizing their living lovers and become indifferent to their pain. She accepts forgetfulness as part of human nature, and she takes a neutral stance towards her lovers and her ghosts in the poems by representing the same ghost narrative from different perspectives. She is not accusing men of forgetfulness and bemoaning women's unfortunate fate. Both men and women can be forgetful, both can be abandoned, it is a fact of life.

The importance of Rossetti's ghost poems is not due to their representation of this theme. These poems portray another important aspect of Rossetti's ideology: Soul Sleep. Soul Sleep, which is also known as psychopannychism, is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as: 'The doctrine that the soul sleeps between death and

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<sup>286</sup> All three poems were first published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862.

the Day of Judgment'<sup>287</sup>. It was considered blasphemous by most Christian Churches (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy), yet it appears in many of Rossetti's poems. McGann was the first to recognize its presence in her poetry. He believes that this doctrine 'means to deal with the problem of the so-called "waiting time", i.e. the period between a person's death and the Great Advent (or Second Coming)'<sup>288</sup>. Alison Chapman, on the other hand, connects it to Rossetti's attempts to defend her poetry against her brother's revising hand:

Christina Rossetti's collusion with her brother's attempt to re-define the feminine in her early publications was however far from submission. The linguistic operation of the poetry works to position the feminine subject as less than an object, a displacement beyond the text into the amorphous realm of the sleeping soul, itself an anticipation of the Second Coming. This doubleness – the speaker's desire for Soul Sleep and the Sleeper's desire for the Resurrection – eludes the revisions that would re-inscribe Rossetti's text within Pre-Raphaelite feminine aesthetics and obscure her parodic mimicry of that discourse.<sup>289</sup>

Both critics refer to Resurrection and Judgment Day, yet Rossetti's representation of the afterlife changes in her ghost poems from one poem to the next. In 'The Hour and the Ghost' the lover is restless, he perhaps had sinned during his lifetime and now he is paying for his sins while dead. However, in 'The Poor Ghost' and 'The Ghost's Petition', the ghosts are 'sleeping' and are only awakened from their sleep by the tears of their loved ones.

In 'The Hour and the Ghost' the ghost offers the bride an unpleasant picture of the afterlife. It seems that this poem represents the worst punishment the dead can get: watching their loved ones enjoying their lives without them:

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<sup>287</sup> [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50293415?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=psychopannychism&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50293415?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=psychopannychism&first=1&max_to_show=10)

<sup>288</sup> McGann, 'The Religious Poetry', p.243.

<sup>289</sup> A. Chapman, p.81.

O fair frail sin,  
O poor harvest gathered in!  
Thou shalt visit him again  
To watch his heart grow cold;  
To know the gnawing pain  
I knew 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.<sup>290</sup>

There is no rest for the bride and the ghost in the afterlife. But their restlessness is not due to their sins in the physical world as much as because they want to rejoin their living lovers. They are rebelling against death and the sleep it brings, thereby bringing on themselves restlessness and agony.

The ghosts in 'The Ghost's Petition' and 'The Poor Ghost' are awakened by the tears of their living lovers. The world of the dead here seems different from that represented in 'The Hour and the Ghost'. Here the dead are not restless, on the contrary they are asleep. The ghost of 'The Poor Ghost' reproaches her lover for waking her from her sleep:

But why did your tears soak thro' the clay,  
And why did your sobs wake me where I lay?

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<sup>290</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.36.

I was away, far enough away:

Let me sleep now till the Judgement Day.<sup>291</sup>

Still, despite mentioning Judgement Day, there is no clear reference to paradise or the pleasures of afterlife. The lover in this poem explains why he does not want to follow the ghost:

Oh not tomorrow into the dark, I pray;

Oh not tomorrow, too soon to go away:

Here I feel warm and well-content and gay:

Give me another year, another day.

The ghost does not try to convince him by describing the beauty of the afterlife. Instead, she laments how death changes people's feelings, which suggests that the ghost expects the lover to follow her out of love and loyalty, no matter how dismal the destination is. In fact, the ghost confirms that the changes death has inflicted upon her are the reason behind her lover's disloyalty. These changes are not pleasant:

Am I so changed in a day and a night

That mine own only love shrinks from me with fright,

Is fain to turn away to left or right

And cover up his eyes from the sight?

At the end the reader is left wondering if this ghost is 'poor' because her lover betrays her or because she is awakened to witness his betrayal.

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<sup>291</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.115.



In 'The Ghost's Petition' the ghost is also asleep. The tears of his wife wake him up:

I could rest if you would not moan  
Hour after hour; I have no power  
To shut my ears where I lie alone.

I could rest if you would not cry;  
But there's no sleeping while you sit weeping—  
Watching, weeping so bitterly.—<sup>292</sup>

Here Rossetti combines seriousness with humour. She is representing a stereotypical situation between a husband and his wife. The wife wakes her husband up with her constant moaning and nagging. She is extremely curious to find her husband's whereabouts, but he refuses to answer her:

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

Tender hand hath made our nest;  
Our fear is ended, our hope is blended  
With present pleasure, and we have rest.—

Only in this poem, which was the last of the three written, the ghost speaks of life after death as enjoyable. Still, he cannot tell how that life is, but it seems that its

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<sup>292</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.140.

main attraction is rest. Because the other life is described as pleasant, the living wife seems willing to follow her husband, which makes this poem again different from the other two:

Oh but Robin, I'm fain to come,  
If your present days are so pleasant;  
For my days are so wearisome.

Yet I'll dry my tears for your sake:  
Why should I tease you, who cannot please you  
Any more with the pains I take?

The wife's curiosity makes her willing to follow her husband in the typical manner of Victorian wives. Rossetti here is not describing a situation between two lovers but rather between a husband and a wife. Hence, she is humorously portraying the stereotypical attitude of the nagging wife who is willing to follow her husband everywhere, even to the afterlife.

Despite her curiosity, however, the wife decides to stop crying for her husband, perhaps because the idea of following her husband to the afterlife seems too extreme even for her. The themes of the temporariness of love and Soul Sleep are both present in this poem, but they are represented in a satirical framework, with the wife hastily drying her tears without even waiting for her husband's reply. Rossetti is being playful again, craftily drawing a smile on the reader's lips despite the seriousness and gloominess of the subject matter.

In all three poems, the living are reluctant to leave earth to join the dead lover in the distant land. And in two of these poems the dead do not appear to enjoy that

land either. Only in 'The Ghost's Petition' the ghost describes the afterlife as 'pleasant'; however, its pleasantness seems to lie only in its restfulness. At this stage, Rossetti did not perceive the afterlife as merely reunion with God, and she did not always consider it as pleasant and cheerful as life. However, the afterlife offers a very powerful attraction: rest. For Rossetti's then restless soul, that attraction grew stronger and stronger and this was manifested in her poems at that stage.

Death as rest appears in many of Rossetti's early poems, especially those that coincide with her breakdown and later her recovery. Three examples are: 'Dream-Land', 'Sound Sleep', and 'Rest'. The three poems were written in the same year, 1849, and were all published for the first time in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862, which signifies that up to the 1860s the idea of death as rest was still lingering in her mind. In 'Dream-Land' death is described as:

Rest, rest, for evermore  
Upon a mossy shore;  
Rest, rest at the heart's core  
Till time shall cease:  
Sleep that no pain shall wake;  
Night that no morn shall break,  
Till joy shall overtake  
Her perfect peace.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.21.

The desired reward of 'joy' does not sound that appealing since it will 'overtake' and terminate what is considered to be 'perfect': Rest here is more desirable than paradise.

'Sound Sleep' could be regarded as a perfect example of Rossetti's craftsmanship. Written in iambic tetrameter, with an almost perfect rhyme scheme, the poem describes a dead girl 'sleeping' in her grave, listening to the sounds of the church bells in her dreams:

Some are laughing, some are weeping;  
She is sleeping, only sleeping.  
Round her rest wild flowers are creeping;  
There the wind is heaping, heaping  
Sweetest sweets of Summer's keeping,  
By the corn fields ripe for reaping.

There are lilies, and there blushes  
The deep rose, and there the thrushes  
Sing till latest sunlight flushes  
In the west; a fresh wind brushes  
Thro' the leaves while evening hushes.

There by day the lark is singing  
And the grass and weeds are springing;  
There by night the bat is winging;  
There for ever winds are bringing  
Far-off chimes of church-bells ringing.

Night and morning, noon and even,  
Their sound fills her dreams with Heaven:  
The long strife at length is striven:  
Till her grave-bands shall be riven,  
Such is the good portion given  
To her soul at rest and shriven.<sup>294</sup>

The sounds of the church bells allow the dead to imagine heaven where she will receive her reward. McGann explains how the concept of Soul Sleep offers Rossetti the means through which she can validate her dreams of heaven: ‘The logic of Rossetti’s verse only allows her access to that world [of heaven] through the dream-visions that are themselves only enabled by the concept (and the resultant poetic reality) of Soul Sleep’<sup>295</sup>. Yet no images of heaven are offered here despite the dead girl’s Soul Sleep. On the contrary, the reader encounters the beautiful images of the life the dead can no longer enjoy. In fact, the whole poem seems to be preoccupied with the beauty of life above the grave: the corn is ripening, the birds are singing, the flowers are blooming. The reader cannot help but pity the dead girl who is missing the chance of participating in all the excitement of the living world. Life here is not portrayed as sorrowful or heart-breaking, rather it is cheerful and vivacious.

The only excitement the girl can have is by watching, from her grave, nature in its utmost glory, and accepting to be part of that nature. Yet, by ‘sleeping, only sleeping’ in her grave, she is not aware of that beauty surrounding her. She can only hear the sounds of the church bells, and she hears them in her dreams, while

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<sup>294</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.51.

<sup>295</sup> McGann, ‘The Religious Poetry’, p.244.

sleeping, so they are not part of the natural scene surrounding her. She is even excluded from people's laughter and cries. This poem diverges from the 'vanity of vanities' theme that haunts many of Rossetti's later poems, for there is no reference to the illusiveness or temporariness of natural beauty. The last three lines describe the girl's peaceful soul now 'at rest and shriven'. The 'good portion' and reward given to her is 'rest'. Again this 'rest' will last 'till her grave-bands shall be riven' which suggests violence. On Judgement Day, her grave will be shattered and she will be violently awakened from her restful sleep.

The third poem 'Rest' is also about a dead girl enjoying restful death. The atmosphere of this poem, however, is different from that in the previous one. Life here is not cheerful nor exciting, even laughter in it becomes 'harsh'. Still, just like the previous poem, there is no representation of paradise but only sleep, which seems to be Rossetti's main interest in the afterlife at this stage:

O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes;  
Seal her sweet eyes weary of watching, Earth;  
Lie close around her; leave no room for mirth  
With its harsh laughter, nor for sound of sighs.  
She hath no questions, she hath no replies,  
Hushed in and curtained with a blessed dearth  
Of all that irked her from the hour of birth;  
With stillness that is almost Paradise.  
Darkness more clear than noon-day holdeth her,  
Silence more musical than any song;  
Even her very heart has ceased to stir:  
Until the morning of Eternity

Her rest shall not begin nor end, but be;

And when she wakes she will not think it long.<sup>296</sup>

The girl suffered while alive. Death seems to deliver her from the pain that began at birth. Death here becomes escapism. It is not her devotion to God that is making death attractive, it is her weariness of life. Her dead life, if one can call it so, is very neutral: neither happy nor sad. This makes it more attractive because the dead are completely at rest even from 'harsh laughter'. This suspended state is considered to be like paradise by both the speaker and the dead. In the previous two poems the reference is to heaven, but this poem portrays the speaker's personal understanding of paradise: perfect 'stillness'.

Just like the other two poems this one ends with 'until', which marks the end of suspension. The last line is peculiar; it does not rhyme with the rest of the poem. It gives the feeling of an abrupt ending. The reader cannot understand what exactly 'it' indicates. Rossetti writes thirteen lines describing the soul's restful sleep, and she brings a new idea to the reader at the very end of the poem: What is this 'it' of which the speaker will not be thinking? McGann links Rossetti's awkward usage of 'it' in her poem 'May' with her favourite theme 'vanity of vanities':

In grammars like these, 'it' stands for an entire conceptual field, but nothing in particular (not even a defined conceptual field itself), so that 'it' finally comes to stand as a sign of total conceptual and experiential possibility. From a Christian point of view, the poem thereby develops the meaning that the world is an illusion, a field of betrayal, an entire vanity; from a more secular point of view, it suggests that understanding the meaning of human events in such a world will always be impossible.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.54.

<sup>297</sup> McGann, 'Christina Rossetti's Poems', p.216.

This explanation of 'it' could be applied in 'Rest'. When the girl wakes up from her restful sleep, she will not have to think of the vanity of the world and the temporariness of love anymore. Because the dead girl in 'Rest' suffered when alive, life is represented as incomprehensible and vain.

Rossetti did, however, portray paradise in other poems that do not involve Soul Sleep. The poem 'Paradise' is an example. This poem was composed in 1854 and was added to the 1875 edition of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. The image of paradise here does not come during Soul Sleep as McGann believes; it comes in the form of a dream the writer has while asleep. The beginning of this poem is similar to that of 'My Dream' in the way the speaker confirms to the reader that what she is about to relate has happened in a dream;

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.<sup>298</sup>

Like 'My Dream', the speaker here knows that what she is going to describes is too fantastic to be believed. She wants to tell the reader that these images are not merely the products of her imagination, and that she actually had them in a dream. However, the reader can rightfully suspect that Rossetti's claim is false and that this poem,

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<sup>298</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.215.



again just like 'My Dream', is 'not a real dream'. What supports this suspicion is the richness of artistic images (scents, music, colours) that reveals the artist's high craftsmanship:

I heard the songs of Paradise:  
Each bird sat singing in his place;  
A tender song so full of grace  
It soared like incense to the skies.  
Each bird sat singing to his mate  
Soft cooing notes among the trees:  
The nightingale herself were cold  
To such as these.

I saw the fourfold River flow,  
And deep it was, with golden sand;  
It flowed between a mossy land  
With murmured music grave and low.  
It hath refreshment for all thirst,  
For fainting spirits strength and rest;  
Earth holds not such a draught as this  
From east to west.

The Tree of Life stood budding there,  
Abundant with its twelvefold fruits;  
Eternal sap sustains its roots,  
Its shadowing branches fill the air.

Its leaves are healing for the world,  
Its fruit the hungry world can feed,  
Sweeter than honey to the taste  
And balm indeed.

The mood of the writer in this poem is different from that in the previous one describing the dead girl's state of Soul Sleep. There is no reference to the hardships of life and the desire for death. Rossetti, when writing this poem, was no longer a girl of nineteen. She was in her mid-twenties and her poetic talent had matured along with her. Hence, she intended this poem to be a piece of art, not just an expression of dream of paradise. She had recovered from her nervous breakdown and she was not as reluctant as her character Maude, in the story of the same name, to express her poetic talent.

In this poem Rossetti is demonstrating her literary abilities rather than describing the dreams of paradise the dead have while waiting for the Second Coming. Hence, the ending of the poem lacks the passion one can feel in the previous ones, the passion stemming from genuine suffering and agony. Instead, the ending sounds as mundane as the words of a child reciting what she learned in Sunday school:

I hope to see these things again,  
But not as once in dreams by night;  
To see them with my very sight,  
And touch and handle and attain:  
To have all Heaven beneath my feet  
For narrow way that once they trod;

To have my part with all the saints,  
And with my God.

Perhaps the lack of passion in these lines is intentional on Rossetti's part. She wants to stress that paradise here appears in a dream, not during Soul Sleep. It is paradise as imagined by the living, not paradise as seen by the dead. Hence the images appear artificial. The speaker's assertion at the beginning that this poem is the product of a real dream is in accordance with the feminine tradition of writing to which Chapman refers. This is a further example of the artistry of this poem. Rossetti meant to follow the aesthetics of her age; she wanted the poem to be an evidence of her craftsmanship.

*Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress*:

*Goblin Market* is Rossetti's most famous and controversial work. It was composed in 1859 and published in 1862. This supposedly children's poem tells the story of two young sisters Laura and Lizzie who face the temptation of the goblins and their magic fruits. Despite her sister's warnings:

Their efforts should not charm us,  
Their evil gifts would harm us.<sup>299</sup>

Laura listens to the cries of the goblins: 'Come buy, come buy'. She succumbs to their temptation and eats their fruits, after giving them one of her golden locks:

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more

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<sup>299</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.6.

Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;  
She sucked until her lips were sore;  
Then flung the emptied rinds away  
But gathered up one kernel-stone,  
And knew not was it night or day  
As she turned home alone.<sup>300</sup>

After eating the fruits, Laura begins to wither away. She craves the fruits but she cannot hear or see the goblins and eat their merchandise again. Lizzie, however, could still see them and hear their cries. To save her sister, Lizzie tricks the goblins and subjects herself to an act very similar to rape in order to have the pulp and juice of their fruits on her body:

White and golden Lizzie stood,  
Like a lily in a flood,—  
.....  
Tho' the goblins 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 uttered not a word;  
Would not open lip from lip  
Lest they should cram a mouthful in:

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<sup>300</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.8.

But laughed in heart to feel the drip  
Of juice that syrudded all her face,  
And lodged in dimples of her chin,  
And streaked her neck which quaked like curd.<sup>301</sup>

When the goblins give up, Lizzie returns to her sister crying:

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,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
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.<sup>302</sup>

Thus Laura is cured by the love and sacrifice of her sister. When the sisters grow to be wives and mothers, they relate their story to their children:

Days, weeks, months, years  
Afterwards, when both were wives  
With children of their own;  
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,  
Their lives bound up in tender lives;

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<sup>301</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.16.

<sup>302</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.17.

Laura would call the little ones  
 And tell them of her early prime,  
 .....  
 Then joining hands to little hands  
 Would bid them cling together,  
 'For there is no friend like a sister  
 In calm or stormy weather;  
 To cheer one on the tedious way,  
 To fetch one if one goes astray,  
 To lift one if one totters down,  
 To strengthen whilst one stands'.<sup>303</sup>

William Michael Rossetti notes how his sister 'did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale—it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail'; yet he admits that 'the incidents are such as to be at any rate suggestive, and different minds may be likely to read different messages into them'<sup>304</sup>. Indeed, this poem has attracted diverse interpretations: religious, social, psychological, sexual, and artistic. The symbols Rossetti uses, especially of the forbidden fruit and the Eucharist, make it difficult to resist using religion to solve Rossetti's riddles. Many critics suggest that Lizzie's sacrifice makes her Christ-like. D'Amico dismisses all non-religious interpretations of *Goblin Market*, considering the poem 'so clearly about body and soul'<sup>305</sup>. Palazzo also believes *Goblin Market* to be: 'a statement of female spiritual strength and empowerment, the spiritual power of female domestic

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<sup>303</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.19.

<sup>304</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, p.459.

<sup>305</sup> D'Amico, p.69.

ritual subverting the power of the Church, and the portrayal of a female Christ demolishing the gender exclusivity of the sacred'<sup>306</sup>. This interpretation, however, ignores the artistry of the poem and its clear sexual connotations. Rossetti not only depicts seductive luscious fruits, she seems to be indulging herself in this depiction, which makes the poem far from being only about female spirituality. Religion alone does not suffice in reaching a holistic understanding of the poem; matters of its artistic value should also be addressed along with the religious symbols.

Dorothy Mermin in 'Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*' identifies the poem's emphasis on female art and the way it reflects Rossetti's resistance of the Pre-Raphaelites' artistic tradition: 'The fruit seems to [Laura] to offer access to a paradise of art; she herself, moreover, is described in terms that suggest that she belongs in a Pre-Raphaelite picture'<sup>307</sup>. However, Mermin sees the sisters at the end living 'in a world in which men serve only the purpose of impregnation'<sup>308</sup>, thus having only sexual function. She also stresses the importance of the religious symbols in understanding Rossetti's poem:

Much of Rossetti's poetry presents frustrated, unhappy women yearning for love. *Goblin Market*, in contrast, shows women testing the allurements of male sexuality and exploring the imaginative world that male eroticism has created. By entering but finally rejecting that world, they discover that a woman can be strong, bold, and clever, Christ-like in active self-sacrifice as well as in silent endurance, and that sisters and daughters can live happy lives together.<sup>309</sup>

Nothing in the poem suggests that the sisters sing their song only to their daughters. Laura and Lizzie's 'children' can be of both sexes. The sisters, although singing about sisterly love, can still be including their male offspring in their song.

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<sup>306</sup> Palazzo, p.25.

<sup>307</sup> Dorothy Mermin, 'Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*', *Victorian Poetry* XXI (Summer, 1983). Reprinted in Tess Cosslett, ed., *Victorian Women Poets*, (London: Longman, 1996), p.147 from which this and subsequent quotations are taken.

<sup>308</sup> Mermin, p.151.

<sup>309</sup> Mermin, p.155.

Angela Leighton's interpretation of *Goblin Market* succeeds in shifting the emphasis from the religious symbols to art:

*Goblin Market*, in the end, gives women money, fruit, pleasure, children and, above all, a laughter at the heart which defies all the morally punitive connections between them. It gives them the aesthetic playfulness, the freedom of art for art's sake, which had seemed to be reserved for men. Against all the religious logic of her poem, Rossetti has found...an imaginative scepticism which refuses to obey the laws of sin and punishment, woman-like faith and man-like doubt. Instead of reproducing the true religion of woman's sincere, faithful suffering, Rossetti laughs, daringly, from within, and thus asserts the priority of her art over even her own punishing conscience.<sup>310</sup>

Both Mermin and Leighton go against Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's interpretation of the poem in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). For Gilbert and Gubar, *Goblin Market*'s main theme is the renunciation of art, with the goblin fruits standing for 'works of art'. They believe that 'the haunted glen...represents a chasm in the mind' and the goblin men with their 'masculine assertiveness, arise to offer...Laura, Lizzie and Rossetti herself the unnatural but honey-sweet fruit of art, fruit that is analogous to (or identical with) the luscious fruit of self-gratifying sensual pleasure'<sup>311</sup>. The glen and its queer inhabitants are part of an imaginary yet dangerous world. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Rossetti's aim is to warn her female readers from the dangers of such a world: 'Jeanie became a witch or madwoman, yielding herself entirely to an "unnatural" or at least unfeminine life of dream and inspiration'<sup>312</sup>.

Catherine Maxwell, in her essay 'Tasting the "Fruit Forbidden": Gender, Intertextuality, and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*' tries to build on both Gilbert

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<sup>310</sup> Leighton, p.140.

<sup>311</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'The Aesthetics of Renunciation', *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edition, (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p.570.

<sup>312</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p.569.



and Gubar's and Leighton's arguments. She accurately identifies the goblin fruits as 'men's poems' because the poem's 'allegory associates the goblin fruits with the literary imagination'<sup>313</sup>. Maxwell tries in her study to illustrate that, contrary to Leighton's and Mermin's interpretation, Rossetti was not after an exclusively female tradition. She was rather trying to assimilate the masculine tradition into a female one, uncovering hence the influences of both male and female poetic predecessors on Rossetti. She believes, however, that the only way a female writer can assimilate the male tradition is by stealing, rather than 'consuming' it:

Rossetti, allured by the visions of her male predecessors, is an intruder in the Hesperean garden of English poetry. Her goblin men and goblin fruits are her way of indicating a tradition of male-authored poems that use fruit, fruit-juice, and honey-dew as motifs for imaginative inspiration and poetic influence, and her poem shows how women poets can claim their place in this tradition by appropriating this 'sciential sap' for themselves through theft.<sup>314</sup>

Maxwell's interpretation is appealing; however it ignores one idea: the harmfulness of the goblin fruits have been established from the very beginning of the poem. Lizzie warns her sister of their destructive effect. The story of Jeanie, the girl who died after eating the fruits, is used to further emphasize their danger. Maxwell also believes that the goblin fruits become an antidote only through the mediation of the sister Lizzie. However, nothing in the poem suggests that re-eating the fruits through the goblins' mediation does not have the same effect. Laura's problem lay in not being able to see or hear the goblins again; perhaps she would have also been cured if she had been able to get the fruits from the goblins themselves. That is why Lizzie goes to see the goblins with the intention of buying the fruit, with her 'silver penny

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<sup>313</sup> Catherine Maxwell, 'Tasting the "Fruit Forbidden": Gender, Intertextuality, and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', in Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, eds., *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p.80.

<sup>314</sup> Maxwell, p.83.

in her purse'<sup>315</sup>. She uses her body as mediator only after she fails to get the fruits in a peaceful manner.

In *Goblin Market* Rossetti is not turning away from art in general, as Gilbert and Gubar believe, for she continues to write poetry and prose until her death. Leighton's interpretation of the poem is very perceptive; however, Rossetti here is not after art for art's sake as Leighton believes. She is instead using female art to represent a community of both males and females. Art can be illusive, like dreams, but Rossetti is not afraid of it. The only type of art Rossetti tries to avoid at this point is the art dictated by masculine traditions, or in other words, the 'feminine' way of writing as perceived by the Pre-Raphaelites. The goblin fruit is a symbol for the masculine literary tradition. Rossetti is emphasizing the danger of this tradition on women writers. However, she is not advocating an all-female community with exclusively female art. She is rather emphasizing the role female art can play in society in addition to male art. The sister's song at the end is used to warn readers of both sexes from the threats of masculine traditions on women's poetry. The emphasis in 'there is no friend like a sister' is on the value of the female art, not only for sisters, but for brothers as well. This may be her underlying message to her brother Dante Gabriel: that she can still sing her own female songs and be considered a true artist, and a part of society. Perhaps this is why Ruskin did not find the poem appealing. Rossetti is trying to convey the message that women do not need the artistic traditions supplied by their masculine contemporaries. They can create their own standards, their own female tradition.

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<sup>315</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.13.

In *The Prince's Progress*, which was composed in 1861 and published in 1866, Rossetti describes the fate of the women who imprison themselves within masculine artistic conventions, women who are not like Lizzie or Laura. The poem relates the story of a prince who keeps delaying his mission of saving the princess until she dies. The poem could be read as a parody of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678); however, concentrating only on such a reading could lead to ignoring the fairy tale context of the poem. The princess's death at the end of what is supposed to be a fairy tale is ironic. After waiting for more than ten years in her enchanted castle for her prince to come and save her, the princess dies of a starving heart:

The enchanted princess in her tower  
Slept, died, behind the grate;  
Her heart was starving all this while  
You made it wait.<sup>316</sup>

The princess dies of disappointment after living for the sake of a dream, the dream of happiness with her prince, a 'Mirage'. The princess was waiting to fulfil her destiny, not only as the bride of the prince, but as the female subject of a fairy tale that is supposed to have a happy ending. Because she was imprisoned as a subject by this tradition, and as a princess by the other social mould of piety and virtue, the princess withers away and dies.

Rossetti, as Mermin, Leighton and Maxwell suggest, was aware of the threat of the masculine poetic tradition on her poetry, and she was worried she might be imprisoned within this tradition. However, despite her attempts to divorce herself

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<sup>316</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.102.

from it, she failed. The pressure from people around her, especially her brothers<sup>317</sup>, was too great. She had in the end to accept their views of art. She realized that she had only two choices: either following her own style, hence being deemed inartistic according to some of her contemporaries' standards, or following society's standards and becoming a respected artist. Although many critics argue that she did not desire fame and that she considered it inappropriate, the fact remains that she would not have published any of her poems if she had not been trying to satisfy the artist in her.

#### Reconciliation and Later Poetry:

Rossetti's themes changed as she grew older. During her twenties and thirties, and before her illness, her poetry was more light-hearted, full of riddles and humour. In 1871 her health started to deteriorate due to a thyroid disorder (Grave's Disease), and she spent the following year and a half in bed fighting death. Although her health finally improved in the autumn of 1872, her illness had left her with a permanent deformity. Jan Marsh recounts how 'henceforth, [Rossetti's] looks were permanently altered, and her natural shyness was exacerbated, for strangers tended to stare, not knowing the cause, seeing her as a grotesque and prematurely aged woman'<sup>318</sup>. However, illness had a deeper influence on her intellect, as Marsh explains:

Christina's illness marked a turning point in her life, for at its worst moments she had fully expected to die. She regarded her recovery as

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<sup>317</sup> Alison Chapman in *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (2000) fully studies the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his revisions on Christina Rossetti's poetry.

<sup>318</sup> Marsh, p.398.

a deliverance....Not surprisingly her religious faith deepened. So did her sense of literary responsibility.<sup>319</sup>

This literary and moral responsibility made her conform more to Christianity and to Tractarianism, henceforth writing serious poetry with moral messages. Even her nursery rhymes, which were full of riddles, were only meant to teach youngsters right and wrong, and the facts of life. One could argue that she wrote serious devotional works before her illness: 'Hymn / To the God Who Reigns on High' in 1843, 'Resurrection Eve' in 1847, 'A Bruised Reed Shall He Not Break' in 1852 and many more. However, along with these she also wrote 'Eleanor', 'Isidora', 'Zara', 'The Lotus Eaters – Ulysses to Penelope' in 1847, 'My Dream' in 1855, *Goblin Market* in 1859, and *The Prince's Progress* in 1861. Some critics consider the last three poems to be religious, yet the light-hearted images and teasing techniques in these poems almost completely disappear in her later poetry, especially after 1882. These later poems can only be read as devotional. At that later stage in her life Rossetti depended on religion for inspiration. Her themes and her symbols, henceforth, became mainly biblical. This does not mean that this stage of her life is less interesting than her early years. It is the period, however, on which critics mostly depend when considering Rossetti as primarily a devotional writer.

In 1874 Rossetti published her children's book *Speaking Likeness*. Its narrator is an aunt relating to her five nieces three different fairy tales. The book's disturbing images made it difficult even for adults to understand Rossetti's meanings. It was not received well by contemporary reviewers who were not able to grasp fully the underlying meaning of it, as one reviewer wrote in *The Academy* (December 5, 1874): 'We have an uncomfortable feeling that a great deal more is

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<sup>319</sup> Marsh, p.406.

meant than appears on the surface, and that every part of it ought to mean something if we only knew what it was'<sup>320</sup>. Julia Briggs in her essay '*Speaking Likeness: Hearing the Lesson*' believes that 'hunger, rebellion and rage' are the precise 'qualities that critics have recognized in *Speaking Likeness*'. Rossetti in this work 'criticizes the middle-class child, encouraged to play in the walled rose garden and protected from any knowledge of the poverty and deprivation beyond'<sup>321</sup>. Rossetti herself, apart from a few trips to her grandparents' house in the countryside, grew up in a 'walled' environment. She was, nevertheless, aware of the problems existing in her society. She was conscious of poverty, social injustice, and prostitution, as her works prove. In this book, Rossetti's aim is to teach her young readers a moral lesson, but it is not the one Briggs is suggesting.

Each of the three stories narrated by the aunt starts with the heroine spending a normal day with her family. Yet at a certain point in this day, when she leaves the safety of her family and ventures outside, she finds herself alone in a troubling situation, faced by a group of magical beings. The first story is about Flora who unintentionally finds herself in the company of some abusive children and their self-centred queen. The violence inflicted on Flora is very similar to the Goblins' abuse of Lizzie in *Goblin Market*:

The Pincushion was poor little Flora. How she strained and ducked and swerved to this side or that, in the vain effort to escape her tormentors! Quills with every quill erect tilted against her, and needed not a pin: but Angles whose corners almost cut her, Hooks who caught and slit her frock, slime [*sic*] who slid against and passed her, Sticky who rubbed off on her neck and plump bare arms, the scowling Queen, and the whole laughing scolding pushing troop, all wielded longest sharpest pins, and all by turns overtook her. Finally the Queen caught her, swung her violently round, let go suddenly,—and Flora

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<sup>320</sup> Quoted in *Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, eds. David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p.117.

<sup>321</sup> Julia Briggs, '*Speaking Likeness: Hearing the Lesson*', in Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Loraine Janzen Kooistra, eds., *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p.212.

losing her balance dropped upon the floor. But at least that game was over.<sup>322</sup>

No wonder some reviewers were perplexed: a violent passage like this could not be considered suitable for Victorian middle-class young girls. The goblins and their animal-like features are replaced here by Quills, Angles, Hooks, and Sticky. Although the reader is faced by a group of children playing the usual children's game, instead of maidens and merchant men, the abuse to which Flora is subjected is still quasi-sexual like that of Lizzie's. The only difference here is that the abuse is approved by their queen, who enjoys seeing Flora's pain. The 'There is no friend like a sister' slogan of *Goblin Market*, which feminists have used and celebrated for decades, is completely discarded here: boys, girls, and their queen are all abusing Flora.

Flora has alienated herself from her family and friends, and as a result she is made to suffer. At the end she manages to escape her persecutors, after more terror and suffering, by waking up. She wakes up to the sound of her older brother looking for her, so she is saved from her horrifying experience not by a sister but by a brother. Rossetti's character shifts from rebellion to submission, and her loyalties now are shifted from loyalties to herself to loyalties to her society. Flora's story is the only one among the three in which Rossetti represents a supernatural dangerous experience as part of a dream from which the heroine happily wakes to the love and warmth of her family. In the other two stories, the heroines simply pass the test and return to their homes. The faculty of dreaming is no more as amusing for the poet as

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<sup>322</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Speaking Likeness, Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, eds. David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), p.131. Hereafter cited as *Speaking Likeness*.

it was in 'My Dream'. Knowing now what dreams are able to produce, she considers them highly threatening to Victorian virtue, hence little girls should avoid them.

The second and the third stories are simpler and less disturbing than the first one. In the second story the heroine, Edith, is trying to start a gipsy fire to boil the kettle, and animals from the forest gather around to help her. Only the frog notices that the kettle is empty, but no one pays attention to him. After many attempts they decide to quit and leave her alone. Her nurse finally comes and takes her back to her family. Lonely and abandoned, Edith realizes her helplessness without her family. She considered the animals her friends but they left her alone when she needed them, only her nurse came to her rescue.

The third story's main character is Maggie who lives with her grandmother Dame Margaret and helps her in her store. The quest of the third heroine is to deliver a shopping basket to the doctor's distant house on a very cold night. During her journey she encounters danger as well as temptation personified first in a group of magical children who ask her to play with them; second in a gluttonous mouth-boy who asks her to give him her basket; and third in a group of slumbering people who tempt her to sleep with them, which would have meant her death as the children are told by their aunt. Nevertheless, she completes her mission and returns to her grandmother after saving the lives of a dove she found in the place of the sleepy people, a cat where the mouth-boy was standing, and a dog where the children were playing. Briggs correctly suggests that 'the dove...corresponds to the child's need for spiritual sustenance, the kitten to her need for food and physical nurture, and the puppy to her need for companionship and play'<sup>323</sup>. Maggie's journey to the doctor's house symbolizes, perhaps, Rossetti's life almost until the time of her writing this

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<sup>323</sup> Briggs, p.218.



story, when her priorities were playfulness, physical sustenance, and then spirituality. Maggie's return journey, however, signifies Rossetti's new order of priorities: spirituality first and playfulness and games last.

In *Speaking Likeness* the journey of each of the girls is described as a dream only in the first story. In the second and third stories the reader is left bewildered as to whether these strange incidents were also parts of dreams, especially since the marvellous events of the third story happen only after Maggie falls down 'giving the back of her head a sounding thump'<sup>324</sup>. The distinction between the dream world and the fairy world is blurred: the reader cannot tell if Flora is actually sleeping in the first story as her brother claims, or whether Edith's and Maggie's adventures in the second and the third stories are actually parts of their dreams. Whether it is a dream or the work of imagination, the world portrayed here is always disappointing, if not dangerous, to the three girls. These girls are put in danger the moment they leave their families, and are only rescued by their families. What Rossetti stresses here is the importance of domesticity for girls, any world beyond their home and their close family is deemed hazardous. Although *Speaking Likeness* is a fiction, it exhibits similar characteristics to all of Rossetti's later works: conformation to traditions and conventions, which makes it completely different from *Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress*.

Rossetti stopped producing the art that appealed to the senses rather than to the heart and the spirit. From the early 1880s onwards, lush vivid images almost completely disappear from both her poetry and her prose. In 1876 she started writing Valentine poems to her mother, and she continued doing this until her mother's

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<sup>324</sup> *Speaking Likeness*, p.145.

death in 1886. Rossetti writes in her manuscript the reason for composing these ‘Valentines’: ‘These *Valentines* had their origin from my dearest Mother’s remarking that she had never received one. I, her CGR, ever after supplied one on the day...it was a *surprise* every time, she having forgotten all about it in the interim’<sup>325</sup>.

It is interesting to notice Rossetti’s change of style in every year: the cheerfulness and merriness in the early poems give way to a more serious and contemplative mood. Her second Valentine poem of 1877 is playful, with short lines that make it similar to her earlier nursery rhymes:

Own Mother dear,  
We all rejoicing here  
Wait for each other,  
Daughter for Mother,  
Sister for Brother,  
Till each dear face appear  
Transfigured by Love’s flame  
Yet still the same,—  
The same yet new,—  
My face to you,  
Your face to me,  
Made lovelier by Love’s flame  
But still the same;  
Most dear to see  
In halo of Love’s flame,

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<sup>325</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.1156.

Because the same.<sup>326</sup>

Rossetti's playfulness is demonstrated by her simple childlike style. The way she cannot decide whether the faces of her family are the same or changed is quite endearing. She sounds like a child who either cannot make up her mind or cannot express her thoughts properly. Her poem in 1882, however, replaces this playfulness with an idealization of her mother:

My blessed mother dozing in her chair  
On Christmas Day seemed an embodied Love,  
A comfortable Love with soft brown hair  
Softened and silvered to a tint of dove,  
A better sort of Venus with an air  
Angelical from thoughts that dwell above,  
A wiser Pallas in whose body fair  
Enshrined a blessed soul looks out thereof.  
Winter brought Holly then; now Spring has brought  
Paler and frailer Snowdrops shivering;  
And I have brought a simple humble thought  
—I her devoted duteous Valentine—,  
A lifelong thought which thrills this song I sing,  
A lifelong love to this dear Saint of mine.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.846.

<sup>327</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.849.

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, and is very close to the Shakespearean sonnet format. Indeed, it resembles to a great extent Elizabethan courtly love sonnets, especially with the idealization of the lover, describing her as a ‘dove’, ‘Venus’, ‘Pallas’ and lastly ‘Saint’. Despite her age, fifty-one, Rossetti still wanted to write romantic poems. Knowing it would be deemed inappropriate for a fifty-year-old unmarried lady to write in such a style, she dedicated the song to her mother, playing the role of the devoted daughter. What is interesting in this sonnet, however, is the way Rossetti describes her mother using a typical masculine perspective. Her mother, in this poem, does not belong to the female society portrayed in *Goblin Market*. She is saintly, incapable of erring or sinning. She is perfect. Rossetti here is assimilating the masculine tradition in idealizing the female beloved in love sonnets.

Her later Valentine poems, however, are far from romantic. The last two sonnets, written in 1885 and 1886, represent not just her love for her mother but her gratitude to God for having her mother alive. Obviously, the idea of her mother dying was becoming more fearful and more imminent. At this point, she wanted to write sincere poems dedicated genuinely to her mother, showing exactly how much her mother meant to her, without any other artistic intention. She writes in ‘1886: St. Valentine’s Day’, her last Valentine poem:

Winter’s latest snowflake is the snowdrop flower,  
Yellow crocus kindles the first flame of the Spring,  
At that time appointed, at that day and hour  
When life reawakens and hope in everything.  
Such a tender snowflake in the wintry weather,  
Such a feeble flamelet for chilled St. Valentine,—

But blest be any weather which finds us still together,  
My pleasure and my treasure O blessed Mother mine.<sup>328</sup>

Rossetti's hopes of happiness do not depend on spring or winter, on life's joys or hardships. She is happy so long as her mother is beside her.

'Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets' reveals the transition of Rossetti's poetry from secular to purely religious. This sonnet sequence was published in 1881 in *A Pageant and other Poems*, Rossetti's last volume of secular poetry. Rossetti wanted to stop writing secular poetry and she used this poem to summarise this progress. In her introduction to the sequence, she explains the reasons behind its composition:

In that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenses, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour. Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets', an inimitable 'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.<sup>329</sup>

The title of the sequence is translated as 'Unnamed Lady' and Rossetti claimed to have composed these sonnets in an attempt to give voice to those silent women who reached us only through the words of their lovers. Hence, these sonnets are full of images of love and loss, waiting and lamenting. However, this cannot be the only

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<sup>328</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.850.

<sup>329</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.294.

reason behind their composition. As William Michael explains in his notes to the sequence:

To any one to whom it was granted to be behind the scenes of Christina Rossetti's life—and to how few was this granted—it is not merely probable but certain that this 'sonnet of sonnets' was a personal utterance—an intensely personal one. The introductory prose-note...is a blind—not an untruthful blind, for it alleges nothing that is not reasonable; and on the surface correct, but still a blind interposed to draw off attention from the writer in her proper person.<sup>330</sup>

The sequence begins with a typical love sonnet that portrays the speaker's anguish and longing for her departed lover:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—  
Or come not yet, for it is over then,  
And long it is before you come again,  
So far between my pleasures are and few.  
While, when you come not, what I do I do  
Thinking 'Now when he comes', my sweetest 'when':  
For one man is my world of all the men  
This wide world holds; O love, my world is you.  
Howbeit, to meet you grows almost a pang  
Because the pang of parting comes so soon;  
My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon  
Between the heavenly days on which we meet:  
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang  
When life was sweet because you called them sweet?<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, p.462.

<sup>331</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.294.

This sonnet can represent Rossetti's adolescence and her fondness for romances and Gothic novels. It recalls the themes that recurred in her early poetry. In fact, one finds in these sonnets echoes of earlier poems like 'Remember' in 1849 and 'Echo' in 1854. The 'song' the speaker has lost could also be linked to the 'silenced harp' and the 'silent heart' of her early poems 'Mirage' and 'In the Willow Shade'.

In the third sonnet of the sequence, Rossetti links dreams and peaceful death again in a way that reflects her earlier representation of dreams and Soul Sleep:

I dream of you to wake: would that I might  
Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;  
Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone,  
As Summer ended Summer birds take flight.  
In happy dreams I hold you full in sight,  
I blush again who waking look so wan;  
Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone,  
In happy dreams your smile makes day of night.  
Thus only in a dream we are at one,  
Thus only in a dream we give and take  
The faith that maketh rich who take or give;  
If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake,  
To die were surely sweeter than to live,  
Tho' there be nothing new beneath the sun.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.295.

However, as the sequence develops, so does the attitude of the speaker towards her lover. Sonnet number eight is centred on the Biblical story of Esther, and it marks the change in Rossetti's attitude towards art and poetry:

'I, if I perish, perish'—Esther spake:  
And bride of life or death she made her fair  
In all the lustre of her perfumed hair  
And smiles that kindle longing but to slake.  
She put on pomp of loveliness, to take  
Her husband thro' his eyes at unaware;  
She spread abroad her beauty for a snare,  
Harmless as doves and subtle as a snake.  
She trapped him with one mesh of silken hair,  
She vanquished him by wisdom of her wit,  
And built her people's house that it should stand:—  
If I might take my life so in my hand,  
And for my love to Love put up my prayer,  
And for love's sake by Love be granted it!<sup>333</sup>

Cynthia Scheinberg uses this sonnet to explain Rossetti's belief that a woman cannot be wise, independent and a Christian at the same time. Christianity deprives women of the freedom of speech Judaism offers:

What the Esther sonnet reveals is that to gain a unified, theologically sanctioned gendered identity, Rossetti's Christian speaker would have to be a Jewish woman, a woman who does not subscribe to constraints of Christian individuality, honor, and chaste love, and likewise a woman – like Esther – who is given an active and public role of leadership in her people's religious fate....Choosing Esther as

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<sup>333</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.298.



the potential model for her poetic speaker, Rossetti has intentionally chosen a woman who has power through the word – both her own historical words and the Biblical words about her – as well as her body.<sup>334</sup>

The speaker knows that she could not be a match to Esther's intelligence, strength, and beauty: 'When the speaker of this sonnet attempts to identify with Esther, therefore, what becomes evident is not the similarity in their respective positions, but rather their radical difference'<sup>335</sup>. However, she wonders whether she can be her match in her love for God. The lover of the earlier sonnets becomes God. Here, he is the 'Love' to whom she prays, to whom she is ready to sacrifice her life and say 'I, if I perish, perish' like Esther did.

In sonnet number six the speaker unites her feelings for her lover with her love for God:

I cannot love you if I love not Him,  
I cannot love Him if I love not you.<sup>336</sup>

Yet starting from the Esther sonnet onwards, the sequence becomes a protestation of Rossetti's love and devotion to God, choosing him over any other earthly lover.

Scheinberg believes that sonnet number nine:

initiates the closure of the sequence; from this moment in the sequence, the poet speaker renounces the possibility of 'happiness' (sexual gratification) in an attempt at true Christian devotion to God. She also renounces the very act of poetry by the end of the sequence in her emphasis on 'silence'.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Scheinberg, p.141.

<sup>335</sup> Scheinberg, p.142.

<sup>336</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.297.

<sup>337</sup> Scheinberg, p.143.

Rossetti, however, cannot be considered as passively resigned to her fate as a Christian woman. Instead, she is actively embracing her belief by writing more devotional works and getting rid of all the doubts and uncertainties that once disturbed her mind. She asserts in sonnet thirteen:

If I could trust mine own self with your fate,  
Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?  
Without Whose Will one lily doth not stand,  
Nor sparrow fall at his appointed date;  
Who numbereth the innumerable sand,  
Who weighs the wind and water with a weight,  
To Whom the world is neither small nor great,  
Whose knowledge foreknew every plan we planned.  
Searching my heart for all that touches you,  
I find there only love and love's goodwill  
Helpless to help and impotent to do,  
Of understanding dull, of sight most dim;  
And therefore I commend you back to Him  
Whose love your love's capacity can fill.<sup>338</sup>

The ending of the sequence announces her abstention from writing secular love poems, dedicating herself to devotional poetry and prose, and this is what 'silence' in the last sonnet signifies. She will abandon her female tradition, the female song of *Goblin Market*, for the sake of devotional works:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there

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<sup>338</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.300.

Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;  
Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?  
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,  
To shame a cheek at best but little fair,—  
Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,—  
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,  
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.  
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?  
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,  
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;  
The silence of a heart which sang its songs  
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,  
Silence of love that cannot sing again.<sup>339</sup>

The sequence ends with the same reference to the silent song with which it began. However, the silence here is voluntary rather than compulsory. In the first sonnet the speaker lost her song and is eager to find it again. Here the speaker makes the decision of keeping silence out of her belief that she has no more artistic female songs to sing. The subject of her works, henceforth, can only be God, and her only inspiration is her faith in him.

The theme of the last sonnet of 'Monna Innominata' can be traced throughout *A Pageant and Other Poems*. The opening poem of this volume, significantly

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<sup>339</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.301.

entitled 'The Key-Note', expresses the same idea of Rossetti's abstention from following her older manner in writing poetry:

Where are the songs I used to know,  
Where are the notes I used to sing?  
I have forgotten everything  
I used to know so long ago;  
Summer has followed after Spring;  
Now Autumn is so shrunk and sere,  
I scarcely think a sadder thing  
Can be the Winter of my year.

Yet Robin sings thro' Winter's rest,  
When bushes put their berries on;  
While they their ruddy jewels don,  
He sings out of a ruddy breast;  
The hips and haws and ruddy breast  
Make one spot warm where snowflakes lie,  
They break and cheer the unlovely rest  
Of Winter's pause—and why not I?<sup>340</sup>

Although her abstention sounds involuntary, as the word 'forgotten' indicates, yet the ending of the poem expresses her hope of being able to sing again throughout the winter of her life. She can no longer be the young beautiful poet she used to be, but she can still sing new songs like robins do in winter.

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<sup>340</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.267.

‘Till Tomorrow’ is another poem of farewell to Rossetti’s older self. She is departing from her older dreams and desires, which were the sources behind her early poetry. The hope at the end, however, lies in God and the afterlife. She is leaving her illusive dreams for the sake of God and eternity:

Long have I longed, till I am tired  
Of longing and desire;  
Farewell my points in vain desired,  
My dying fire;  
Farewell all things that die and fail and tire.  
.....  
Farewell all shows that fade in showing:  
My wish and joy stand over  
Until tomorrow; Heaven is glowing  
Thro’ cloudy cover,  
Beyond all clouds loves me my Heavenly Lover.<sup>341</sup>

What is interesting about *A Pageant and Other Poems* is that the devotional poems are intertwined with the secular ones, unlike her earlier books in which devotional poems were separated from the non-religious ones. This supports the idea that *A Pageant and Other Poems* could be read, like ‘Monna Innominata’, as a symbol of Rossetti’s movement from secular to devotional writings. The final two poems in *A Pageant* are exclusively about death and the hope of meeting Christ in the afterlife. Rossetti’s attitude towards death here is radically changed. She no longer seeks death to escape from her misery and to ‘sleep’. Instead, death now

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<sup>341</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.309.

means union with Christ, and she longs for death like a lover longing for the time of union with the beloved. In ‘Why?’ she exclaims:

Lord, if I love Thee and Thou lovest me,  
Why need I any more these toilsome days;  
Why should I not run singing up Thy ways  
Straight into heaven, to rest myself with Thee?<sup>342</sup>

The idea of death as union with God appears in Rossetti’s early poetry, like ‘Sweet Death’ which was published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1861. However, at that stage this idea appears mainly in the devotional poetry section of her books. She separates it from the secular poems in which she frequently uses the theme of Soul Sleep. In Rossetti’s later poems there is no reference to Soul Sleep, and death becomes mainly a gateway to union with Christ.

The last poem in her last secular collection of poetry reflects this idea. The speaker in “‘Love is Strong as Death’” admits to not seeking God and consequently not finding him until the time of her death:

‘I have not sought Thee, I have not found Thee,  
I have not thirsted for Thee:  
And now cold billows of death surround me,  
Buffeting billows of death astound me,—  
Wilt Thou look upon, wilt Thou see  
Thy perishing me?’

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<sup>342</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.371.

‘Yea, I have sought thee, yea, I have found thee,  
Yea I have thirsted for thee,  
Yea, long ago with love’s bands I bound thee:  
Now the Everlasting Arms surround thee,—  
Thro’ death’s darkness I look and see  
And clasp thee to Me’.<sup>343</sup>

In this dialogue between God and a human being, the human speaker resembles Rossetti’s younger self. Her unspoken doubts prevented her from seeking God, until she grew old and ill. However, she is almost certain now that God will receive her into his Kingdom again. Rossetti chooses to end her book with a death-scene poem that describes the moment of her union with God, hoping that it will represent her actual final moments on earth.

In Rossetti’s 1870 unpublished sonnet sequence ‘By Way of Remembrance’, the speaker wonders about resurrection and life after death. She does not refer to Soul Sleep as she used to do in her early poems, instead she starts posing *logical* questions about the details of resurrection:

In resurrection is it awfuller  
That rising of the All or of the Each:  
Of all kins of all nations of all speech,  
Or one by one of him and him and her?  
When dust reanimate begins to stir  
Here, there, beyond, beyond, reach beyond reach;  
While every wave disgorges on its beach

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<sup>343</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.372.

Alive or dead-in-life some seafarer.  
In resurrection, on the day of days,  
That day of mourning throughout all the earth,  
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.<sup>344</sup>

Rossetti's questions sound bizarre yet simple. She is interested in the physical details of the resurrection rather than the restful sleep that precedes it, as in her early poems, or the spiritual salvation that might follow it as in her later poems. The ending does not describe union with God as much as reunion with her loved ones, when they will all praise the Lord.

From *A Pageant and Other Poems* onwards, the concept of union with Christ appears prominently in Rossetti's poetry. Most of her later poems that deal with the theme of death describe it as a means of meeting Christ. There are no more doubts about what lies beyond the grave; she no longer wonders whether she will have restful sleep in the other world. She became in fact so absorbed by the idea of meeting Christ that any other image of death except that union seemed to disappear. She writes in "As the Sparks Fly Upwards", which was published in *Verses* in 1893, shortly before her death:

It is not death, O Christ, to die for Thee:  
Nor is that silence of a silent land

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<sup>344</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.845.



Which speaks Thy praise so all may understand:  
Darkness of death makes Thy dear lovers see  
Thyself Who Wast and Art and Art to Be;  
Thyself, more lovely than the lovely band  
Of saints who worship Thee on either hand,  
Loving and loved thro' all eternity.<sup>345</sup>

Paradise appears in Rossetti's later devotional works as the place where the faithful will be living with God. In this way, death becomes a necessity because it paves the way to heaven. Her 'The Holy City, New Jerusalem', which was published in *Verses* in 1893, is a celebration of that future life. There are no more restless ghosts, and joy does not only lie in rest. She writes:

Jerusalem is built of gold,  
Of crystal, pearl, and gem:  
Oh fair thy lustres manifold,  
Thou fair Jerusalem!  
Thy citizens who walk in white  
Have nought to do with day or night,  
And drink the river of delight.  
.....  
Jerusalem, where song nor gem  
Nor fruit nor waters cease,  
God brings us to Jerusalem,  
God bring us home in peace.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.392.

In this poem Rossetti is bringing back some of her old artistic images, but instead of using them to describe the beautiful natural scene, as she did in 'Sound Sleep', she is utilizing them to portray the divine beauty of paradise. From looking at death as a restful sleep, to glorifying it as the only way to paradise; from wanting peace and quietness, to pursuing the songs, laughter, and drinks in heaven, Rossetti's character changed and with it her poetry. The suffering she had gone through, in addition to the pressure of her family and society, played a big role in that change. She had suffered from pain and death and now it is her time to enjoy the rewards of God in his heaven.

Rossetti the poet was very different from the image of 'Santa Christina' which her contemporaries tried to portray for her. She was devout for most of her life, but her piety did not stop her from exploring different secular themes and topos. She sometimes had doubts about the traditions and the Christian doctrines her family followed, and she tried to rebel against them when young. However, as she grew older she had to conform to these doctrines and values. Considering only the later part of her life and work, and focussing only on her 'feminist theology', threatens to stereotype her in a frame of extreme religiosity. She, on the other hand, was far from being extreme or rigid.

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<sup>346</sup> *Complete Poems*, p.488.

## CHAPTER 3: CONSTANCE NADEN AND THE SOLACE OF SCIENCE

### Introduction to Constance Naden's Life and Works:

In the middle of the nineteenth-century an intellectual revolution took place. It shook Victorian society from its roots with what was, and still is, considered to be one of the most controversial theories the human mind has ever proposed: evolution. Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) not only rejected the Biblical story of creation, it also rejected human beings' central position in the world. According to evolutionary theory humans were no longer the masters of all other creatures as Genesis stated, but rather just another species who shared existence with all others. This book, therefore, came to support the ideas of earlier scientists, like the French Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), and confirmed the doubts that many Victorians had already had about God and religion. Some Victorians, on the other hand, were understandably alarmed by this theory and launched an intellectual war against the evolutionists. Christina Rossetti's notes in her *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885) is characteristic of that debate. In numerous entries in this diary she tried to attest the validity and truthfulness of the

Biblical story of creation, as well as to attack the falseness of the science that did not serve to prove God's omniscience and omnipotence<sup>347</sup>. During those turbulent times, when the debate between science and religion was reaching its peak, Constance Caroline Woodhill Naden was born in Edgbaston, Birmingham, in 1858. She would later become one of the prominent figures that participated in and greatly enriched this debate.

Only two weeks after her birth, Naden's mother Caroline Anne died, leaving the task of bringing up the infant to her parents Josiah and Caroline Woodhill. In *Constance Naden: A Memoir* William Hughes offered a detailed account of her life and her family<sup>348</sup>. Her grandparents were devout Baptists, and as a child Naden had to attend several Baptist churches in Birmingham: the Wycliffe Baptist Church on Bristol Road near Edgbaston, Mount Zion on Graham Street, and the Church of the Redeemer on Hagley Road. Her grandmother taught her how to read, and from the age of eight until seventeen she attended a day school run by two Unitarian sisters, the Misses Martin, where her interest in botany was instigated by the attention given there to flower painting. After leaving school, Naden took on the task of learning European languages, and she was able to master French, German, Latin, and Greek in turn. Italian, however, had to wait until her trip to Italy in 1883 after which she was able to translate Dante.

Despite her religious upbringing, Naden's main interests were science and philosophy. In 1879 she began to study botany at the Birmingham and Midland Institute. After completing her studies there, she entered Mason College in 1881, and in 1884 she became a member of its Sociological Section which was formed in the

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<sup>347</sup> See also Chapter Two, pp.126-9.

<sup>348</sup> William R. Hughes, *Constance Naden: A Memoir*. (London: Bickers and Son, 1890), pp.7- 19.

spring of 1883. A friend, a Mrs. Houghton, commented on the influence of Mason College:

Not only did it open out to her immeasurably wider fields of knowledge, but it brought the hitherto solitary student into the midst of a bright, active little intellectual world, and gave her those companionships and interests which were a positive need of her essentially genial and sociable mind. In this congenial atmosphere Miss Naden developed....It was at Mason College...that Miss Naden first became conscious of the full extent of her powers, and assumed that leadership which was her birthright.<sup>349</sup>

At Mason College, Naden's genius was evident to all her tutors and fellow students. Hughes, who was also the president of the Sociological Section from its formation, expressed his, as well as his colleagues' admiration of Naden's remarkable intellect:

Of the many diligent and enthusiastic students of the doctrine of evolution who have assisted at our meetings in discussions, and by readings, criticisms, and expositions, from learned professors and local scientists down to tyros who were just beginning to understand and appreciate Herbert Spencer, not one was so highly valued as Miss Naden.<sup>350</sup>

It was there where she won the Heslop Memorial Medal in 1887 for her essay 'Induction and Deduction'.

Naden left Birmingham in 1887 to travel around Europe, the Middle East, and India with her friend Mrs. Daniell. While in India she caught a fever and had to return to England in July 1888. She moved to London where she became a member of the Working Ladies Guild and was increasingly involved in women's rights campaigns:

Progress, emancipation, and social reforms naturally had a large share of Miss Naden's active energies. She was a Liberal in politics....She was a member of the Denison Club, principally composed of

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<sup>349</sup> Hughes, pp.18-9.

<sup>350</sup> Hughes, p.21.

members of the Charity Organization Society....She was also a member of the Somerville Club (only for women), and of the National Indian Association, in which she took much interest after her Indian tour, and attended several of its meetings and conversaziones. She was also a member of the Norwood Ladies' Debating Society....Miss Naden was in favour of the extension of the suffrage to women, and, under the auspices of the Women's Liberal Association, gave a lecture at Deptford, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1889, on the subject.<sup>351</sup>

In London, she also resumed her philosophic research which continued until her death on Christmas 1889. She died undergoing an operation to remove an ovarian cancer and was buried in Birmingham.

Despite her short life, Naden left behind her a large legacy of both prose and poetry. Her poetical works constitute two main volumes. *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime* was composed before she entered Mason College and published in 1881. *A Modern Apostle, The Elixir of Life, The Story of Clarice and other Poems* was first rejected by publishers, despite her offering to pay for its printing<sup>352</sup>, but was published later in 1887. Both were combined in one volume and republished in 1894 after her death— as *The Complete Poetical Works of Constance Naden*, by her friend Robert Lewins.

Naden dedicated the last decade of her life to researching various different fields of science and philosophy. She published several articles between 1881 and 1890 mainly in *Knowledge*, *The Journal of Science*, and the *Mason College Magazine*. Hughes brings the readers' attention to the fact that Naden used to publish these articles under different names. She used her real name, Constance C. W. Naden, in only three major articles: 'Paracelsus', which describes the life and works of Paracelsus, in the *Journal of Science* in 1883; 'The Evolution of the Sense of

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<sup>351</sup> Hughes, p.51.

<sup>352</sup> Hughes, p.31.

Beauty’ and ‘The Weak Point of Darwinism’ in *Knowledge* in 1885. All the other articles he cites were published either under her initials C. N., or under the name Constance Arden<sup>353</sup>. The articles published under C.N. or Constance Arden either defended ‘Hylo-Idealism’, the theory Naden and her friend and mentor Robert Lewins formulated, or attacked religion. Marion Thain, in her thesis ‘Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics’, tries to explain Naden’s decision to use her initials, or the name ‘Constance Arden’ when publishing. She believes this implies Naden’s desire not to let her loved ones, namely her grandparents, know about her deviation from their religious creed:

When she wrote for the Mason College magazine she sometimes published under her initials, which she invariably gave as C.C.W.N.. Her Hylo-Idealistic alter-ego, however, was concealed behind the pseudonym Constance Arden (the conjunction of similarity to her real name, and reference to Shakespeare being factors for this choice no doubt), which also appeared as C. Arden or C.A..<sup>354</sup>

Most of these essays were collected and published in two volumes after her death: *Induction and Deduction: A Historical and Critical Sketch of Successive Philosophical Conceptions Respecting the Relations between Inductive and Deductive Thought, and other Essays*<sup>355</sup> in 1890, which was edited by Robert Lewins; and *Constance Naden: Further Reliques: Being Essays and Tracts for our Times*<sup>356</sup> in 1891 which was edited by George M. McCrie and annotated by Robert Lewins.

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<sup>353</sup> Hughes, pp.28-30.

<sup>354</sup> Marion Thain, ‘Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics’, M.Phil. thesis, (University of Birmingham, 1995), p.19.

<sup>355</sup> Constance C. W. Naden, *Induction and Deduction: A Historical and Critical Sketch of Successive Philosophical Conceptions Respecting the Relations between Inductive and Deductive Thought, and other Essays*, ed. Robert Lewins (London: Bickers and Son, 1890).

<sup>356</sup> Constance Naden, *Further Reliques of Constance Naden: Being Essays and Tracts for our Times*, ed. George M. McCrie (London: Bickers and Son, 1891).

Robert Lewins's name has always been linked to Constance Naden; he was both her mentor and a close friend. Moreover, most of Naden's writings reached the modern reader through his mediation. In addition to the three works mentioned above, he annotated *Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism: A Critical Study* which was written in 1891 by E. Cobham Brewer, a friend of Lewins<sup>357</sup>. He also wrote Chapter Four and the Appendix of Hughes's *Constance Naden: A Memoir*. Even when he was not writing or editing, Lewins was consulted on most books and articles that were published about Naden. These, however, are not the only reasons why special attention should be paid to him. Lewins helped Naden in the formation of Hylo-Idealism, the theory to which Naden had dedicated the last decade of her life, a key reason why any Naden scholar should be well acquainted with his life and works.

James R. Moore, in his essay 'The Erotics of Evolution: Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism', gives an account of Lewins's life and his influence over Naden and her works. Lewins was a retired army officer who spent his life promoting his theory of Hylo-zoism. He was born in Scotland in 1817, studied medicine in Germany and practiced in both Paris and Edinburgh. He joined the army in 1842 where he was first an assistant surgeon, a staff surgeon, and then a surgeon-major. He retired in 1868 and returned to England to devote himself, in the words of James R. Moore, 'obsessively to nurturing irreligion'. Through his work as an army-surgeon in the Crimea and China, and with the help of Newton's ideas, he evolved the theory of Hylo-zoism<sup>358</sup>.

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<sup>357</sup> Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism: A Critical Study*, annotated by Robert Lewins (London: Bickers and Son, 1891).

<sup>358</sup> James R. Moore, 'The Erotics of Evolution: Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism', in George Levine, ed., *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp.231-2.



Lewins believed that despite Newton's discovery of the theory of gravity, he was not able to realize the full implications of this theory on religion, and how it shook its very foundations by stating that matter was active and not dead. Matter is not an inanimate object receiving orders from God but an independent entity with its own innate energy. He also believed that John Toland<sup>359</sup>, the Irish philosopher, was the one who:

based his refutation of dualistic supernaturalism of all kinds, without which religion has no *locus standi*...on the fact Newton made clear, blind though Newton himself was to its corollaries, that matter was active, not passive—quick with life, not dead or inert—and thus able to do its own work without the intrusion of any alien 'substance' or 'principle' that was not material.<sup>360</sup>

Based on this idea of the activeness of matter Lewins formulated Hylo-zoism. He defined Hylo-zoism as 'the native or indwelling energy or working power of matter itself'<sup>361</sup>. He defined it to Naden in a letter dated November 14, 1878: 'Hyle means matter and Zoe life; Hylo-zoism means that energy is inherent in matter itself, and not dependent on any influx from outside, or in other words on extranatural influence'<sup>362</sup>. Since this theory states that each and every piece of matter has innate energy, and this energy alone is responsible for life, Hylo-zoism completely rejects the existence of a separate being that moves the body, be it a spirit or a god; it has no place for either religion or spirituality.

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<sup>359</sup> John Toland (1670-1722) was a philosopher, a free-thinker, and a pantheist. He wrote in 1695 *Christianity not Mysterious* in which he argued that true Christianity should not go against common reason. In his work on Pantheism *Origines Judaicae* (1709), Toland argued that 'if life itself is nothing more than [bodies in motion], then the adoption of a pantheistic attitude toward the universe and God would provide a tranquil temperament and peace of mind'.

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27497>

<sup>360</sup> Robert Lewins, *Auto-Centricism; or, The Brain Theory of Life and Mind: Being the Substance of Letters Written to the Secular Review* (1883-4), ed. Herbert L. Courtney (London: W. Stewart and Co., 1888), p.37.

<sup>361</sup> Lewins, *Auto-Centricism*, p.8.

<sup>362</sup> Robert Lewins, *Humanism versus Theism Or Solipsism [Egoism] = Atheism in a Series of Letters*. (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1887), p.12.

Lewins was convinced of the validity of his theory and he published several pamphlets to promote it. He even sent letters to the intellectuals of his age trying to persuade them to follow his theory. Froude in his biography of Thomas Carlyle includes a journal entry dated January 21, 1870:

An army surgeon has continued writing to me on these subjects [of materialism] from all quarters of the world a set of letters, of which, after the first two or three, which indicated an insane vanity, as of a stupid cracked man, and a dull impiety as of a brute, I have never read beyond the opening word or two, and then the signature, as prologue to immediate fire; everyone of which nevertheless gives me a moment of pain, of ghastly disgust, and loathing pity, if it be not anger, too, at this poor \_\_\_\_\_ and his life.<sup>363</sup>

Although Carlyle did not openly name Lewins here as the ‘stupid cracked man’, Lewins understood Carlyle’s implications. He included this same journal entry in the fourth chapter of Hughes’s *Constance Naden: A Memoir*, as an example of how some older intellectuals could not overcome their prejudices against new scientific theories: ‘The boundary of the brain range of to-day becomes the truism of to-morrow; and yet the earlier generation cannot transcend their own limitations so as to enter into the borders of the promised land, but die in the arid wilderness’<sup>364</sup>.

One could argue that Lewins misunderstood Carlyle’s intentions and mistook the person Carlyle was attacking for himself; or that he was so pre-occupied with his theory that he considered any attack against materialism an attack against him and his theory. The evidence that Carlyle was attacking Lewins and no other writer lies in Carlyle’s journal entry. Here Carlyle discusses a pamphlet written by a Julian:

Yesterday there came a pamphlet, published at Lewes, by some moral philosopher, there called Julian, which, on looking into it, I find to be a hallelujah on the advent and discovery of atheism; and in particular,

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<sup>363</sup> James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London 1834-1881*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), II, 388.

<sup>364</sup> Lewins, in Hughes, p.86.

a crowning—with cabbage or I know not what—of this very  
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Julian is a pseudonym for a writer who was one of Lewins's most enthusiastic apostles and close friends, Ebenezer Cobham Brewer<sup>366</sup>. Brewer, under the pseudonym Julian, wrote about 12 pamphlets promoting Lewins's theory of Hylozoism between the years 1869 and 1871, in addition to 'Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism: A Critical Study' in 1891 which he wrote under his real name. These early pamphlets were published in Lewes by George P. Bacon with the Steam Printing Press. The first was written by Lewins himself 'On the Identity of the Vital and Cosmical Principle', but the rest were written by Julian. Nine of these pamphlets comprise a study under the title 'Biology versus Theology' which aims to explain Lewins's theory as well as to attack Christianity. It was undoubtedly clear to Lewins, as well as those familiar with his works, that Carlyle meant him in his 1870 journal entry.

Lewins did not waste any chance to recruit new intelligent minds to help him in his mission. The moment he met the young and bright Constance Naden in Southport in 1876 he began an attempt to convert her to his new creed. Naden met Lewins at the time when 'his crusade [was] approaching full tilt'<sup>367</sup>. As many of her friends believed, it was under his influence that she started to pursue scientific research. R.W. Dale, a friend of Naden and her family recorded: 'With the advice of Lewins in 1881 she joined Mason College, and in 1884 she joined the Birmingham Natural History and Microscopical Society, formed for the study of the philosophy

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<sup>365</sup> Froude, II, 388 .

<sup>366</sup> E. C. Brewer (1810-1897), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3360>

<sup>367</sup> Moore, p.232.

of Herbert Spencer<sup>368</sup>. Hughes in his *Memoir* names Lewins, in addition to her grandparents, as one of the main factors behind Naden's remarkable intellect<sup>369</sup>.

Moore illustrates Lewins's huge influence on Naden: 'Mary Shelley had learned an alternative cosmology from Dr. Erasmus Darwin; Eliot and Martineau had abandoned their first faith with the assistance of brother intellectuals. Constance would now become a philosophical materialist under the aegis of Dr. Robert Lewins'<sup>370</sup>. She tried at first to resist what was considered by her contemporaries to be heretical theory but:

Eventually the doctor did make shipwreck of her inherited beliefs, but not without offering her something both personally and metaphysically more attractive. Animism, dualism, supernaturalism, vitalism—all these had been superseded, according to Lewins, by the hylozoic view that 'matter has its own proper life, or energy'.<sup>371</sup>

And Naden thus became one of the main contributors to this theory, both in writing and in research.

After 1880, Naden convinced Lewins to change the name of Hylo-zoism into Hylo-Idealism because she believed the latter more effectively represented the scientific laws governing the universe. From that moment onwards, both scientists became primary advocates of this new creed. Lewins defined Hylo-Idealism in *Further Reliques* as the belief that:

Each individual Ego or Self is the creator of its own world ... and that there are as many worlds as there are *sensoria* to image them—a different world being represented in, and by, every individual brain; constituting thus the veritable apotheosis, canonization, or beatification of universal Humanity.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> R. W. Dale, 'Constance Naden', *Contemporary Review* LIX (Spring, 1891), 520.

<sup>369</sup> Hughes, pp.13-5.

<sup>370</sup> Moore, p.231.

<sup>371</sup> Moore, p.233.

<sup>372</sup> Lewins, in Hughes, p.74.

Hylo-Idealism believes that each human has a different perception of the world, depending on how each brain understands the codes it receives from the physical world. The human mind can understand the world only through the senses, and anything that the senses cannot perceive is unknown to it. Thus, both Naden and Lewins argue that the world we see is subjective because each individual's perception of it varies according to his or her own senses. The objective world is of no interest to Naden and Lewins since the only way in which humans could experience it is subjectively through the senses.

Because the human mind can have no access whatsoever to the world beyond, this theory rejects the idea of divine revelation completely. Moreover, since no two persons can perceive exactly the same thing, it also negates the idea of one God and one religion because each individual understands the idea of God in a different way. E. C. Brewer explains this theory in *Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism*:

That which is known becomes by that very fact a part of man's Ego, where it is moulded and fashioned by the idiosyncrasy which constitutes man's individuality. Even deity and revelation form no exception to this universal rule, and hence the thousand-and-one sects, the multitude of religions, and the numberless interpretations even of what is called divine revelation.<sup>373</sup>

Consequently, according to this theory the brain takes the role of God, for it is the only power that can control our being and hence our world. Naden writes in her essay 'Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day', which was first published in May 1884 in *Our Corner* and then reprinted in *Induction and Deduction*:

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<sup>373</sup> Brewer, p.18.

In these grey thought-cells lives the God who says, 'Let there be light', and there is light. If the optic nerve be an inefficient messenger; if, maimed or paralysed, it fail [*sic*] to convey the vibrations received from without, the creative fiat will never be issued, and the world will remain for the God of that one cerebrum, without form and void. He is not a First Cause, since a stimulus is needed to set him in action; but he is certainly the only authentic Creator of the world as yet discovered by science, philosophy, or religion.<sup>374</sup>

Through Mason College and its Sociological Section, Naden had the chance to meet and correspond with many of the distinguished thinkers of her time, one of whom was Herbert Spencer himself. Spencer was among the influential thinkers who shaped Naden's views of the world. The aim of Hylo-Idealism could easily be traced back to Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy. Spencer's ambition was 'to produce his own grand synthesis of scientific and philosophical theory, based on the premise of a "Universal Postulate" which he increasingly conceived as the indispensable prerequisite of all forms of knowledge'<sup>375</sup>. Naden believed Hylo-Idealism to be the theory that could unite these different disciplines. Based on the physiology of the brain, or what Naden called 'grey thought-cells', Hylo-Idealism tried to disprove all religious claims of God's existence and the inferiority of humans to God, illustrating thus humans' real place and function in the world. Naden believed that Hylo-Idealism's importance lay in:

its complete reversal of the theologic standpoint; and its restoration to mankind of their ancient, pre-scientific, imperial dignity and freedom. When the theory of Copernicus extended the universe by immeasurable spaces and illimitable æons, the human race seemed to dwindle from monarchs of the world into contemptible animalculæ, crawling over this insignificant sand-grain of a planet. Yet the ephemeron man may reinstate himself in far more than his former glory; for not only does the earth which he inhabits owe all its forms and colours to his creative eye, but the very spaces and æons before

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<sup>374</sup> Constance Naden, 'Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day', *Induction and Deduction*, ed. Robert Lewins (London: Bickers and Son, 1890), p.170.

<sup>375</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36208?docPos=2>

which he cowered borrow their sublimity from his imagination. Eternity and Immensity have no awfulness which he has not conferred. He alone is the 'fountain of honour'.<sup>376</sup>

In this way, Naden used Hylo-Idealism to correct scientific misconceptions as well as to convey what she believed to be humans' real place in the world. Hylo-Idealism, hence, is based on science, but its implications go beyond science into philosophy and religion. Spencer's aim for a 'Universal Postulate' is reflected in Naden's ambition for Hylo-Idealism to be the ultimate theory that explains all different fields of knowledge.

Hylo-Idealism and Spencer's philosophy meet on another point as well.

Spencer believed the antagonism between science and religion:

stemmed simply from failure to define the logical boundaries between the 'Knowable' and the 'Unknowable'. Everything in the former sphere was the proper province of science, while everything in the latter sphere was the proper province of religion.<sup>377</sup>

This is what Hylo-Idealism called objective and subjective worlds. The realm of science was the subjective world, the only world which humans could reach through their senses. Anything that lay beyond the senses was the objective 'unknowable' world, the world of religion, and science had no interest whatsoever in this world.

Spencer was acquainted with Naden's work. He commented on her early death in 1890 in a letter sent to Robert Lewins thanking him for sending a copy of Naden's *Induction and Deduction and other Essays*:

Already I had formed a high estimate of her intellect and character, and now perusal of some parts of the volume you have sent me has greatly raised this estimate. Very generally, receptivity and originality

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<sup>376</sup> Naden, 'Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day', *Induction and Deduction*, p.176.

<sup>377</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36208?docPos=2>

are not associated; but in her mind they appear to have been equally great.

Spencer, however, continued his letter commenting on the harmful effect an intellect such as Naden's could have on a woman's health:

Unquestionably her subtle intelligence would have done much in furtherance of rational thought; and her death has entailed a serious loss. While I say this, however, I cannot let pass the occasion for remarking that in her case, as in other cases, the mental powers so highly developed in a woman are in some measure abnormal, and involve a physiological cost which the feminine organization will not bear without injury more or less profound.<sup>378</sup>

Some readers were provoked by Hylo-Idealism, and a number of the articles Naden attempted to publish were rejected by publishers, due to their seemingly blasphemous contents and their divergence from the prevalent orthodoxy of the time. Her article "‘Pig Philosophy’: A Protest" was declined by Frank Harris, editor of the *Fortnightly Review* in 1889. The phrase 'Pig Philosophy' was taken from an article by W. S. Lilly entitled 'The Ethics of Punishment' published in the *Fortnightly* in July 1889. The original article was an attack on the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. Naden wrote this article after Spencer himself asked her to answer his opponent, which reflects his full confidence in both her intellectual and writing abilities. Naden happily answered Lilly:

There is, indeed, a certain incongruity in the spectacle of a philosopher in a passion; a philosopher appealing to prejudice in the name of reason; a philosopher shrieking out 'blasphemy', 'gross outrage', 'ignoble surfeit', 'Pig-philosophy', as soon as his favourite theories seem to be endangered. The atmosphere of the Inquisition hangs about his pages, and we half expect to be summoned to an *auto-da-fé*, in which Mr. Herbert Spencer, Mr. Leslie Stephen<sup>379</sup> and Professor Bain<sup>380</sup>, are to be the principle victims, clad in black robes

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<sup>378</sup> Spencer, in Hughes, pp.89-90.

<sup>379</sup> Sir Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), author, literary critic, and first editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36271>.

<sup>380</sup> Alexander Bain (1818-1903), a psychologist and one of the founders of modern psychology, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30533?docPos=2>.



embroidered with the demoniac features of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.<sup>381</sup>

The term 'Pig Philosophy' was borrowed by Lilly from Carlyle's essay 'Jesuitism' in *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Carlyle used this term to describe what he considered to be the Jesuitism of modern times: materialism. He described the new faith of the common man:

The religion of a man in these strange circumstances, what living conviction he has about his Destiny in this Universe, falls into a most strange condition....The man goes through his prescribed fugal-motions at church and elsewhere, keeping his conscience and sense of decency at ease thereby....In his head or in his heart this man has of available religion none. But descend into his stomach, purse and the adjacent regions, you then do awaken, even in the very last extremity, a set of divine beliefs, were it only belief in the multiplication-table, and certain coarser outward forms of *meum* and *tuum*.<sup>382</sup>

Carlyle claimed to have borrowed this term from a satirical essay written by his imaginary German professor Gottfried Sauerteig. Carlyle's alleged essay bore the same title and explained what pigs' philosophy about the universe would be, in a manner very similar to Plato's dialogues with his students in *The Republic*. An example of this is pigs' definition of laws and justice:

'Have you Law and Justice in Pigdom?' Pigs of observation have discerned that there is, or was once supposed to be, a thing called justice. Undeniably at least there is sentiment in Pig-nature called indignation, revenge, &c., which, if one Pig provoke another, comes out in a more or less destructive manner: hence laws are necessary, amazing quantities of laws. For quarrelling is attended with loss of blood, of life, at any rate with frightful effusion of the general stock of Hog's-wash, and ruin (temporary ruin) to large section of the universal Swine's-trough: wherefore let justice be observed, that so quarrelling be avoided. 'What is Justice?' Your own share of the general Swine's trough, not any portion of my share.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Constance Naden, "'Pig Philosophy': A Protest", *Further Reliques of Constance Naden*, ed. George McCrie (London: Bickers and Son, 1891), p.2.

<sup>382</sup> Thomas Carlyle, 'Jesuitism', *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 16 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), XIII, 265.

<sup>383</sup> Carlyle, p.267.

Naden was justifiably outraged by comparing her theory and the theories of those whom she admired to pigs' logic. Unfortunately, her defence had to wait until after her death to be published in *Further Reliques*. However, prior to this, Naden was able to publish her essay 'The Philosophy of Thomas Carlyle' in *The Journal of Science* in 1882, in which she commented on Carlyle's philosophy as represented by Froude's biography. Naden believed that:

Underlying Carlyle's fiery protestations of belief there was...a deep and constant scepticism. He admitted to J. S. Mill that his doctrines were incapable of logical proof, and shrank from conversing with Emerson upon the immortality of the soul. But...he confounded moral earnestness with religious faith, and supposed that the two were bound together in organic union. Had he carried the clothes philosophy a step further, he might have seen that 'God' and 'the Soul' are but symbols or 'garments' of conscience, and that the thing typified can exist very well without its hieroglyph.<sup>384</sup>

Naden admired Carlyle's 'moral earnestness' but she did not approve of his association of morals and religion. She was able in this essay to discredit Carlyle's claims against materialism in general and Lewins's theory in particular by arguing that he himself had sceptical tendencies he tried not to admit due to 'the limitations and impatience of [his] intellect'<sup>385</sup>.

In addition to Carlyle and Spencer, many other prominent Victorian thinkers were familiar with Hylo-Idealism. John Tyndall, the prominent physicist, stated that Hylo-Idealism was not original, but rather 'an old friend, though in a new dress'<sup>386</sup>. Oscar Wilde used the theory for his own short story 'The Canterville Ghost: A Hylo-

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<sup>384</sup> Constance Naden, 'The Philosophy of Thomas Carlyle', *Induction and Deduction*, ed. Robert Lewins (London: Bickers and Son, 1890), p.150.

<sup>385</sup> Naden, 'The Philosophy of Thomas Carlyle', p.147.

<sup>386</sup> Dale, p.521.

Idealistic Romance'<sup>387</sup>. Evidence also suggests that Annie Besant<sup>388</sup> and Charles Bradlaugh<sup>389</sup> were familiar with Naden and her theory. They published two pamphlets that discussed Hylo-Idealism in their Freethought Publishing Company: Robert Lewins's *Humanism versus Theism* in 1887, (which starts with a prefatory note written by Naden and her article 'Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day'); and Herbert L. Courtney's *The New Gospel of Hylo-Idealism or Positive Agnosticism* in 1888<sup>390</sup>. Yet the theory's destiny was to die with its supporters, and Naden's belief in it as 'the creed of the coming day' proved to be wrong.

Naden's name was familiar to her contemporaries not only through Hylo-Idealism, but also because of her poetry in which her intellect was clearly manifested. One should keep in mind, however, that she did not consider poetry to be her true vocation. One of her Mason College tutors, the geologist Professor Charles Lapworth, explains in his introduction to *Constance Naden: A Memoir*:

I doubt greatly whether she ever regarded poetry as the serious business of her life. It may be that she misunderstood her vocation, and that had she lived she would have stood in the first rank of our British poets. But with all her love for poetry, as being the noblest form of literature, and the highest medium for the expression of the emotions; her natural clear-sightedness, and the scientific set of her mind, intensified as they were by her later training, led her, I suspect, to accord to it a secondary place in her regard, because of its natural tendency to substitute phrases for things, the fascination of beauty for the dignity of truth....Her great aim was to become, not a poet, but a student in philosophy, a teacher in ethics. Poetry had gradually become to her more or less a recreation.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> This short story was published in 1891 and features Wilde's typical wit and humour. The story is about an American family who manage to 'kill' the ghost living in their newly-bought manor house with their materialism and scepticism, hence the usage of 'Hylo-Idealistic' in the title.

<sup>388</sup> Annie Besant (1847-1933), the theosophist and women's rights campaigner who was arrested in 1877 over advocating birth control in her pamphlets.

<sup>389</sup> Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), co-editor of the *National Reformer* and the founder of the National Secular Society in 1866.

<sup>390</sup> Herbert L. Courtney, *The New Gospel of Hylo-Idealism or Positive Agnosticism*. (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1888).

<sup>391</sup> Lapworth, in Hughes, pp.xvii-i.

She favoured philosophy's straightforwardness over poetry's symbols and metaphors. Indeed, after publishing her second volume in 1887 Naden stopped writing poetry and started to concentrate on philosophy.

In December 1887, Oscar Wilde wrote a short review of Naden's *A Modern Apostle and Other Poems* in the 'Literary and Other Notes' section of the monthly periodical he edited *The Woman's World*: 'Miss Constance Naden's little volume, "A Modern Apostle, and Other Poems"...shows both culture and courage—culture in its use of language, courage in its selection of subjectmatter'<sup>392</sup>. He concluded his review stating: 'Miss Constance Naden deserves a high place among our living poetesses, and this...is no mean distinction'<sup>393</sup>. Later, Wilde asked Naden to provide him with a poem or a short essay for *The Woman's World*. She accepted and sent him 'Rest', which was published in March 1888.

Moore comments on the implications of Wilde's request:

Constance represented a type of reader to whom he hoped *Woman's World* would appeal....This 'New Woman' prided herself on being a freethinker, resisted marriage but remained intensely moral, struggled against traditional sex roles while retaining 'feminine' graces, and above all gave up the cultural norm of self-renunciation for the ideal of self-fulfilment. Constance fitted this description exactly, and a coming decadent such as Wilde, it has been argued, would have shared many of her interests and sympathies.<sup>394</sup>

Thain also comments on Naden's status as the epitome of the New Woman for her contemporaries, especially for Wilde:

This request is interesting mainly because it reveals what kind of a woman her society saw Naden to be: she represented a type of reader to whom Wilde hoped *Woman's World* would appeal....The journal was aimed at the late nineteenth-century 'New Woman'—a bold,

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<sup>392</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Literary and Other Notes', *The Woman's World* (Dec. 1887), 81.

<sup>393</sup> Wilde, p.82.

<sup>394</sup> Moore, p.249.

independent, freethinking woman; an intellectual who resisted marriage, yet she did not entirely reject male ideas of feminine beauty and charm.<sup>395</sup>

Wilde's view could, hence, reflect how the intellectual liberal segment of English society received a female poet and philosopher like Naden.

After her death, appreciation of Naden's poetry increased in 'high quarters', as Hughes notes: 'At the Examination at Oxford, for the Jesus College Scholarships and Exhibitions, April 1890, the first three verses of ['The Pantheist's Song of Immortality'] were selected by the authorities as the passage set for Latin Elegiacs'<sup>396</sup>. William Gladstone in his article 'British Poetry of the Nineteenth Century', published in *The Speaker* on January 11, 1890, considered her one of the top eight leading British poetesses along with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, 'while he denies the title of "Poet" to George Eliot, to Mrs. Hemans, Joanna Baillie, and indeed all prior to Mrs. Browning'<sup>397</sup>. Hughes, however, notes that Gladstone's classification of Naden was based only on her first volume, since he only received *The Modern Apostle* as a gift from Mrs. Daniell after writing this article<sup>398</sup>.

Naden's intellect was also compared with that of George Eliot on several occasions. Herbert Spencer wrote to Lewins after Naden's death: 'I can think of no woman, save "George Eliot," in whom there has been this union of high philosophical capacity with extensive acquisition'<sup>399</sup>. Another occasion on which she was compared to George Eliot was when she went with Lewins to Coventry to visit his friends Mr. and Mrs. Bray: 'She submitted, not without some amusement, to a

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<sup>395</sup> Thain, 'Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics', p.29.

<sup>396</sup> Dale, p.34.

<sup>397</sup> Hughes, p.39.

<sup>398</sup> Hughes, p.40.

<sup>399</sup> Spencer, in Hughes, p.89.

phrenological examination by Mr. Bray, who was much struck by the resemblance of her head to that of George Eliot<sup>400</sup>. Houghton, another friend, also compared her to Eliot: ‘Like George Eliot, she had the intellect of a man, but the heart of the most womanly of women’<sup>401</sup>.

Naden’s works, like those of many Victorian women poets, were completely ignored in the first half of the twentieth century. Her poetry and prose were equally neglected. Only recently, with the movement to revive the works of nineteenth-century women poets, her poetry has begun to gain some attention from critics. In addition to James Moore’s essay ‘The Erotics of Evolution: Constance Naden and Hylo-Idealism’ in George Levine’s *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, and Marion Thain’s ‘Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics’ which have been discussed above, Patricia Murphy’s book *In Science’s Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women*, published in 2006, allocates a whole chapter to Naden’s poetry<sup>402</sup>. Naden has also received some attention in articles like ‘Robert Lewins, Constance Naden, and Hylo-Idealism’ by Philip E. Smith in 1978<sup>403</sup>; “‘Scientific Wooing’: Constance Naden’s Marriage of Science and Poetry’ by Marion Thain in 2003<sup>404</sup>; ‘Constance Naden and the Erotics of Evolution: Mating the Woman of Letters with the Man of Science’ by Andrea Kaston Tange in 2006<sup>405</sup>;

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<sup>400</sup> Hughes, p.60.

<sup>401</sup> Hughes, p.63

<sup>402</sup> Patricia Murphy, *In Science’s Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women*. (London: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

<sup>403</sup> Philip E. Smith, ‘Robert Lewins, Constance Naden, and Hylo-Idealism’, *Notes and Queries* CCXXIII (August, 1978), 303-9.

<sup>404</sup> Marion Thain, “‘Scientific Wooing’: Constance Naden’s Marriage of Science and Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry* XLI (Spring, 2003), 151-69.

<sup>405</sup> Andrea Kaston Tange, ‘Constance Naden and the Erotics of Evolution: Mating the Woman of Letters with the Man of Science’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* LXI (Sep. 2006), 200-40.

and ‘Atheist Prophecy: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, and the Victorian Poetess’ by Charles LaPorte also in 2006<sup>406</sup>.

Most of these modern critics focus on Naden’s feminist ideology as manifested in her poetry. Thain believes that Hylo-Idealism, through its inclusiveness of all the different disciplines and fields of study, was Naden’s method of overcoming the marginalization of women. LaPorte discusses Naden’s poem ‘A Modern Apostle’ and compares it with George Eliot’s poem ‘A Minor Prophet’ in the way both poems offer the character of the ‘skeptical female...who doubts her friend’s prophecies, and who extends that doubt to all supernatural religious prophecies’<sup>407</sup>. Tange explains that Naden’s poetry, especially her ‘Evolutional Erotics’, attempts to explore the relationship between science, poetry, and Victorian stereotypes, emphasizing how a woman can be a scientist, a poet, and a female. All these readings represent Naden as a Victorian poet campaigning for women’s rights.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Naden’s agenda was mainly humanist, rather than feminist. She aimed to liberate the human mind from the shackles of illusions and superstitions, replacing them with reason and science. She believed that both women and men were suffering due to the limits set against their potential by scientific misconceptions and religious dogmas. Contrary to what some modern scholars believe, Naden did not advocate absolute materialism. She sought equilibrium between emotions and mind. Her poems are about men and women who fell into the trap of total materialism or extreme idealism, and subsequently suffer from the consequences of their extreme approaches to life. She saw harmony and equilibrium between the different faculties of the human mind as the answer to many

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<sup>406</sup> Charles LaPorte, ‘Atheist Prophecy: Mathilde Blind, Constance Naden, and the Victorian Poetess’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* XXXIV (Sep.2006), 427-41.

<sup>407</sup> LaPort, p.429.

of her society's problems. This will be illustrated in the next section of this chapter entitled 'Hylo-Idealistic poems'.

Following that will be another section, 'Yearning', which aims to explain Naden's treatment of the spiritual world in her poetry. Despite her total rejection of religion and her denial of the existence of a supernatural world, Naden had a secret sympathy with those who chose the path of religion. She understood people's need for affirmation and hope that their good deeds would be rewarded after death, and that the world was meaningful and just. This idea is manifested especially in several poems dealing with mysticism.

The chapter's purpose will be to demonstrate the humanist, rather than just the feminist, aim behind Naden's emphasis on science and rejection of religion. Her works were targeting both men and women, trying to liberate them from all religious superstitions and scientific misconceptions that limit their abilities and deprive them of leading a happy and active life. By doing this, the chapter will help to illustrate the varied topics and themes Naden used, her various interests, and her refusal to be categorized under one label. All this will ultimately enable the reader to understand how remarkable and unique Constance Naden was.

#### Hylo-Idealistic Poetry:

Naden in her prose tried to dissociate poetry from science, giving science a higher ranking. All of her friends agreed with Hughes that 'poetry was mere amusement to her, for she had, as we know, deeper and more exalted work for her



intellectual powers'<sup>408</sup>. In 'The Philosophy of Thomas Carlyle' Naden laid down the principles for accurate scientific and philosophical research, yet she exempted poetry from following these principles:

To arrive at a sound conclusion we must eliminate, as far as possible, all mutable elements, and fix our attention upon the constant and stable residue. Having attained some comprehension of the simple and regular, we may hope in time to understand the complex and variable order of things. This is the only rational method of all true science in every age, and must be adopted by the moralist and historian, not less than by the chemist, physician, and astronomer. Only the poet may still delight us with revelations of that purely subjective truth whose evanescent glory—not visible to all, not constantly realised even by its creator—depends less upon value of substance than upon perfection of form. Poetry may be personal; philosophy (world wisdom) must be universal. He who, in these days, forgets or wilfully ignores this distinction has failed to master the characteristic lesson of his epoch. His very earnestness will exercise a reactionary influence upon contemporary speculation and progress, by fettering living emotion to dying or dead thought.<sup>409</sup>

She believed the aim of scientific and philosophical pursuit should be 'universal' knowledge. It should be objective and devoid of all forms of personal convictions and presumptions, and not governed by emotions, prejudices, or superstitions. Poetry, on the other hand, whose vocation is to entertain and please rather than educate and enlighten, should stem from 'personal' feelings and experiences. Poetry's subject matter, hence, is permitted to be the product of imagination; it can deal with the intangible world beyond since it will not be taken seriously as a source of knowledge. Naden's light-hearted poetic style, as opposed to her rigorous scientific prose, can be traced throughout her poems. This can be a further proof of her understanding of poetry as only a means of entertainment.

Many of Naden's poems, however, rebel against the concept of separating poetry from science; many of them aim to educate the reader, albeit indirectly. In

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<sup>408</sup> Hughes, p.40.

<sup>409</sup> Naden, 'The Philosophy of Thomas Carlyle', *Induction and Deduction*, p.144.

fact, in most of her poems, Naden did not hesitate to mix entertainment with learning, poetry with philosophy. She sometimes used poetry to promote her Hylo-Idealism, from which some of her poems directly stemmed. Lewins acknowledged Naden's tendency to use science in her poetry. He wrote in his forward to the 1894 edition of the *Complete Poetical Works of Constance Naden*:

I do not think I can submit to contemporary readers and serious students of common-sense philosophy a better *précis* of the principle underlying both Miss Constance Naden's verses and prose than by reproduction of the following curt and concise exposition, which adequately expresses the scope and gist both of her Poetry and Philosophy—the former in a more or less informal and cryptic manner, the latter in a more formal and implicit one. The very simplicity of the subject-matter is the principal obstacle to its acceptance. It resolves all objects into the subject self, and thus deals the *coup de grâce* to all Dualism whatsoever. So that *Anima*, an ambiguous misnomer, signifying both Life and Mind, or soul, is shown to be the product, not the germ or source, of the Hyle or Matter—the Brain, by its function, being the sole cause of consciousness, without which all is blank nullity and nihility.<sup>410</sup>

So according to Lewins, reading Naden's *Complete Poetical Works* is the best way to understand her prose and comprehend her Hylo-Idealism. Hughes also admired 'the marvellous blending of science with poetry'<sup>411</sup> especially in her second volume. Marion Thain acknowledges this tendency in Naden's works and links it to the very essence of Hylo-Idealism:

Naden speaks of the desire to see the world not as a multitude of disconnected characters and circumstances, divided and packaged by man's structures of meaning, but as a living unity. History need not be treated as a separate discipline from science, nor poetry from philosophy.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Robert Lewins, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of Constance Naden*. (London: Bickers and Son, 1894), p.vii.

<sup>411</sup> Hughes, p.34.

<sup>412</sup> Thain, "'Scientific Wooing'", p.155.

Thain believes that Naden, by uniting all different disciplines under Hylo-Idealism, is trying to break the boundaries that separate the private sphere from the public sphere. Thus, disciplines and genres that were considered male occupations, like science and philosophy, can become female vocations. This, however, does not only mean that a woman can be considered a scientist without jeopardizing her femininity. According to Thain, Naden's project had a further goal. Nature, which was considered female, was always treated as an object, a 'vessel', inhabited by a masculine God or spirit that moved it and controlled all its actions. By making energy a characteristic innate to matter itself, Naden makes female nature an active subject fully independent of any exterior forces. By destroying the boundaries between the physical and spiritual and 'locating the spiritual within the physical—as physical energy—Naden destroys the gendered dualism and raises the status of "feminine" nature, insisting that she is more than a dull material house to be presided over by the [masculine] spirit'<sup>413</sup>.

Hylo-Idealism eliminates the existence of a divine spiritual entity altogether, crowning the brain, a physical entity, as the only deity responsible for the creation of the world. When the source of all creation becomes a physical tangible entity rather than a supernatural God, the feminine, which was always associated with all that is physical, is reinstated as a creator rather than an inferior creation of a more powerful sublime masculine God. Naden's importation of science to her poetry was, according to Thain, a feminist attempt to free women from the limitations of religion and spirituality that both incarcerated and degraded them.

However, Naden's agenda was not purely feminist. Although she was a supporter of women's rights, her main aim was to set free the minds of both men and

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<sup>413</sup> Thain, 'Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics', p.89.

women: free from ignorance, superstitions, and prejudice. Her target was humanity at large, and the only way to free humanity was, according to her, through reason, science, and philosophy. This was the aim of her scientific poems. She used poetry to appeal to the men and women who were not interested in purely philosophic works like her 'Induction and Deduction', but who, nevertheless, would enjoy witty humorous pieces of poetry like 'Love Versus Learning' in *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime* and 'Scientific Wooing' in *A Modern Apostle, The Elixir of Life, The Story of Clarice, and Other Poems*.

These two poems are among the most frequently quoted and discussed of Naden's works, usually cited to illustrate her feminist aims. Both poems represent in a rather comic manner a scientist who, after too much time spent among books and theories, is not able to court or woo the woman of his dreams. In 'Love Versus Learning' the speaker realizes that she was mistaken to think that a man can be both a philosopher and a poet:

He promised to love me for ever,  
He pleaded, and what could I say?  
I thought he must surely be clever,  
For he is an Oxford M.A.

But now, I begin to discover  
My visions are fatally marred;  
Perfection itself as a lover,  
He's neither a sage nor a bard.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Constance Naden, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Robert Lewins (London: Bickers and Son, 1894), p.89. Hereafter cited as *Poetical Works*.

Although to the speaker her suitor is a perfect lover, still that does not make him an intellectual. The point that feminist critics could easily use to argue for Naden's preoccupation with women's rights and her impatience with stereotypical roles lies in these lines:

My logic he sets at defiance,  
Declares that my Latin's no use,  
And when I begin to talk Science  
He calls me a dear little goose.

He says that my lips are too rosy  
To speak in a language that's dead,  
And all that is dismal and prosy  
Should fly from so sunny a head.

The speaker is clearly dissatisfied with her lover's patronizing attitude. He obviously views her as only an object of admiration and adoration, a beautiful painting he wishes to keep locked in its private sphere away from all the disturbances of science and philosophy. This also reflects Naden's belief that her society considered women only fit for sentimental or devotional poetry; straightforward factual works, the ones Naden greatly enjoyed, were not the proper domain for women.

The situation of the suitor in 'Scientific Wooing' is almost the opposite. Spending too much time reading science made him unable to use any form of dialogue other than scientific language. Even when he tries to woo his beloved, he uses scientific terms to express his love for her:

Alas! that yearnings so sublime

Should all be blasted in their prime  
By hazel eyes and lips vermillion!  
Ye gods! restore the halcyon days  
While yet I walked in Wisdom's ways,  
And knew not Mary Maud Trevelyman!

Yet nay! the sacrilegious prayer  
Was not mine own, oh fairest fair!  
Thee, dear one, will I ever cherish;  
Thy worshipped image shall remain  
In the grey thought-cells of my brain  
Until their form and function perish.

Away with books, away with cram  
For Intermediate Exam!  
Away with every college duty!  
Though once Agnostic to the core,  
A virgin Saint I now adore,  
And swear belief in Love and Beauty.<sup>415</sup>

The beauty of the beloved is making the suitor renounce his books and exams. Yet despite his claimed wisdom, he still cannot see beyond the beloved's pretty face. The lover in this poem not only stops his beloved from following intellectual pursuits, he himself renounces science and learning for the sake of her beauty. Naden is

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<sup>415</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.308.

criticizing the way society does not allow women to be associated, even remotely, with knowledge. Feminine beauty can be destructive to knowledge just as knowledge can be destructive to feminine beauty. The two are mutually exclusive.

Feminist readers could understand these poems as an objection to the Victorian concepts of femininity. However, when these two poems are read in the light of Hylo-Idealism they gain a new dimension. Both lovers, although educated and trained in the sciences of their age, are shallow and narrow-minded. They do not have a holistic view of life. They are represented as immature and one-dimensional characters who could not understand that science and poetry, mind and heart, could all co-exist inside a human being. Hence, they fail to be appropriate scientists and appropriate lovers: 'He's neither a sage nor a bard'. Hylo-Idealism merges these fields, as it combines physical matter (hyle) with ideals, to offer a more complete human being with a deeper knowledge of human life and the human world, whose body and mind work in harmony. This harmony is what Naden aims at in these two poems. The suitor in the first poem is a lover but is not an intellectual, and the suitor in the second poem is an intellectual but not a lover. Both are lacking this harmony, hence they both fail to satisfy the hearts and minds of their beloveds. A philosopher and a poet, to Naden, can understand the importance of balance between intellect and emotions. Such a balance can liberate him from the prison of dogmas and stereotypes, and enables him to play an active role in the progress of society.

Harmony between body and mind appears again in more serious poems, such as 'A Modern Apostle' and 'The Elixir of Life'. 'A Modern Apostle' is Naden's longest poem. It relates the story of Alan and Ella. Alan is an idealist and a

visionary. He was brought up to be a Levite<sup>416</sup> in a very strict household, and was kept away from both scientific and fictional books, lest they tempt his soul away from his religious responsibilities. However, his father's attempts to '... keep his soul, pure from the stain / Of thought, of earthly love, of lore profane' were in vain:

Alas! not every saint can quite disown

Those two unsaintly organs, brain and heart.<sup>417</sup>

Bringing 'brain and heart' together here further emphasizes Naden's belief in the need for harmony between these two for a person to lead a balanced life. Books soon find their way to Alan's hands, and the more he reads, the bigger his doubts about his belief become:

Soon he waxed bolder; could it be a crime

To learn how men with spirit overcast

Doubted, and told their doubts in prose or rhyme,

Prating of 'Cosmos' or of 'Protoplast'?

What then of Job, rash questioner sublime?

What of the weary throned Ecclesiast?

He reasoned; thus accomplishing his fall,

For Reason is the Sin Original.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> A Levite is a member of the Jewish tribe of Levi who acts as an assistant to the priest in the temple worship. The tribe served particular religious duties for the Israelites and had political responsibilities as well. This term, however, can also be used to refer to a deacon, a clergyman, or a domestic chaplain.

[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50132434?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=Levite&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50132434?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=Levite&first=1&max_to_show=10)

<sup>417</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.176.

<sup>418</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.178.



The Original Sin was humans' quest for knowledge, and Naden here stresses her belief in the everlasting antagonism between knowledge and religion. Yet reading these books does not make Alan reject his faith in God completely. One day he has a vision in which God speaks to him:

Then came a Voice—'Behold what thou hast sought  
So long; thyself, and Nature's Self, behold!  
Thou couldst not spend thy prayers and tears for nought,  
By human pain my Being I unfold;  
I am the end and essence of thy thought,  
The life of all new creeds and symbols old;  
I rule in star and atom; all mankind  
Work out my purpose in their battlings blind.

'But thou, whose eyes are opened; who dost see  
Thy true Soul, and yet livest—thou, rejoice!  
Go forth into the world and speak of me;  
I choose thee from all men by thine own choice;  
In evil and in good, in bond and free  
I live, and utter truth in every voice;  
Each sings his few faint notes of joy and woe,  
Only my Prophets the full concord know'.<sup>419</sup>

Alan's God is universal; he unites him with nature in a faith that includes all the different sects and religions. Alan leaves his parents and starts passionately his

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<sup>419</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.183.

mission, preaching in a church, and trying to spread God's 'true' word of love, peace, and equality, or what he calls 'Panthestic Socialism':

Here he proclaimed the Brotherhood of Men—  
God lives in all; by Him are all inspired,  
And so are equal; to the Prophet's ken  
The king is level with the drudge o'ertired,  
And what he is, should seem: with tongue and pen  
He preached Equality, until he fired  
His people; and ere long, the novel schism  
Was christened 'Panthestic Socialism'.<sup>420</sup>

The word 'fire' here suggests violence. Although Alan preaches of love and equality, his peaceful words instigate violence in his followers, and this violence is manifested at the end of the poem. At this stage, however, noble Alan meets and falls in love with beautiful, intelligent, and rich Ella:

No Raphaelite Madonna has a brow  
Like Ella's, nor could e'er have learnt the use  
Of sciences to which by voiceless vow  
Her strength was dedicate; in themes abstruse  
She locked herself, and scarce had craved till now  
A truth not yielded by her life recluse;  
As little children, miserably fed,  
Grow faint, but are not hungry for their bread.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.198.

<sup>421</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.200.

Alan idealises Ella, he sees her as the epitome of beauty. Ella falls in love with Alan's sincere nature, yet her scientific mind makes her unable to believe in what he preaches, and so they part. After a year of constant preaching, a hungry and angry mob, who were tired of Alan's pacifist doctrines, attack Ella's house. Alan is hit by a stone while trying to deter the mob from their plan. He dies of his injury but he asks Ella to continue spreading his message of love and peace after his death.

LaPorte links 'A Modern Apostle' with George Eliot's 'A Minor Prophet': 'In both works, the title character turns out to be not the unconventional religious male figure with whom the poem begins, but rather the skeptical, post-Christian, female figure with whom it ends'<sup>422</sup>. LaPorte also explains how Alan's zeal united with Ella's reason give birth to a more complete belief that unites both the mind and the heart in perfect harmony, just like Hylo-Idealism: 'Alan's and Ella's final vision, then, apparently reconciles philosophy and aesthetics with both the ethical rigor of Alan's "Pantheistic Socialism" and Ella's commitment to atheism'<sup>423</sup>. LaPorte rightly recognizes that the lack of equilibrium between mind and heart is what causes Alan's downfall. The union between his visionary ideals and Ella's reason and scepticism could have made a more practical, reliable, and just creed that could have materialized his followers' dreams of happiness and social justice.

However, and contrary to what LaPorte believes, the poem is not about Ella. At the end of the poem the reader is perhaps confused as to whether the modern apostle is meant to be Alan or Ella. The poem, however, relates the story of Alan's life, his childhood, his parents, and friends more than Ella's. All the reader knows about Ella is that she is a beautiful, intelligent, lonely young woman who fell in love with Alan's enthusiasm. Both Alan and Ella err: Alan in being purely faith-driven

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<sup>422</sup> LaPorte, p.434.

<sup>423</sup> LaPorte, p.436.

and Ella in being scientifically-driven. Naden exchanges in this poem the stereotypical gender roles of the reasoning male and the spiritual female to prove that men can suffer from extreme idealism and blind faith just like women. Mysticism and psychic powers in the nineteenth century were female, rather than male, occupations. She makes the mystic figure in her poem a male in order to demonstrate how following religious zeal and extreme spiritualism could lead to dangerous results, regardless of the gender of the follower. Ella made a mistake similar to that of the two lovers in 'Scientific Wooing' and 'Love versus Learning'. She too used only science and her mind to approach life, and when her mind collided with her emotions, she chose to follow the voice of reason instead of trying to reach a state of balance between the two. As a consequence, she had to suffer a lonely life away from her lover.

At the end both lovers finally attain peace and tranquillity:

At length she spoke—'Myself I dedicate  
To this great service: all my spirit's power—  
Through joy and grief, in good or evil fate,  
Whether the desert pathways bud and flower,  
Or the fair fields be ravaged by man's hate—  
Shall bear the superscription of this hour:  
I give whate'er I have of strength and skill;  
Trust me in this—what Woman can, I will'.

Then she was silent: for his look was fraught  
With peace that quenches all desire and dread,  
Yet spares the impress of each noble thought

That ruled in life the converse of the dead;  
As Night brings every trivial thing to nought,  
While still the mountains tower, the oceans spread:  
Long time she knelt; and when at last she rose  
Her features almost mirrored his repose.<sup>424</sup>

Ella's face is as peaceful as Alan's dead face, for she finally is able to harmonize her mind and heart. The union between Ella and Alan creates a more balanced creed which can achieve peace and happiness for all the human race: both men and women. In this respect, this poem again resembles 'Scientific Wooing' and 'Love Versus Learning'. It proves that Naden's Hylo-Idealistic aim was to free men, as well as women, from Victorian prejudices and superstitions.

'The Elixir of Life' is another poem with a similar theme. In this poem, the alchemist, after spending years roaming the world alone trying to find a person pure enough to share his gift of immortality, finally decides to give his elixir to Marah, another beautiful and intelligent woman. The alchemist idealizes Marah, believing her to be as 'pure as the radiant ether'<sup>425</sup>. The reader, however, is warned from the beginning that Marah should not be trusted:

One moment she would seem an angel, fresh  
From Heaven, and bringing joyful news to man;  
The next, a shuddering hint of World and Flesh  
And Devil, swiftly through your senses ran;  
But then her eyes and voice would quite enmesh

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<sup>424</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.234.

<sup>425</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.260.

Your soul, and you could neither bless nor ban—  
Happy, if ere the Siren's isle you passed  
Your Fate had lashed you safely to the mast!<sup>426</sup>

Naden describes Marah as both an angel and a devil at the same time, breaking contemporary stereotypes by indicating that a woman is a human being with both good and bad sides. However, the descriptions of the seductress are more prominent throughout the first part of the poem. She is described as a Siren as well as a Medusa:

Whose coils like dull-gold serpents seemed to writhe  
About her royal forehead broad and fair.

In the first part of the poem the reader is told that Marah is reluctant to drink the elixir:

‘And you to-night, this very night, shall drink  
Immortal Life’. He ceased, and fixed on her  
That look, where all the aeons seemed to sink  
In one bright Now; but did my senses err,  
Or did I see her for an instant shrink  
Before she answered, ‘Dearest harbinger  
Of gladness!’ with a smile so softly bright  
That I believed it in my own despite.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.240.

<sup>427</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.252.

The speaker is implying her mistrust in Marah's words. The reader understands and only starts sympathizing with Marah's feelings in the second part of the poem. When Marah is finally given the chance to speak freely, the reasons why she does not want to drink the elixir become clear. She explains her problem:

I could have loved him; but he is a god,  
And I am not a goddess or a saint;  
For twenty generations he has trod  
This evil earth, seeing through rags and paint  
To its vile heart; and now he bids me plod  
With him for slow millennia: sooth, 'tis quaint  
That *I* am chosen by this clear-eyed sage  
His Empress, and ensample to the Age!<sup>428</sup>

The idea of spending eternity with this sage intimidates Marah. She finds herself unable to live up to his ideals. She heeds the idea of spending everlasting life with a god, and she deems herself unfit for his idealization. Hence she conspires with one of the alchemist's servants Hubert to steal the elixir of life and run away.

I am a woman of the world, you know,  
Too tired by far to rave about the spell  
Of mutual love, and tremblingly to glow  
With girlish raptures; but to you I tell  
My thoughts and wishes, be they high or low—  
That frown again—oh free me from this bond,  
Then shall you find me sweet, caressing, fond!

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<sup>428</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.254.

Oh set me free! Bear me away, away,

.....

... I am mean, and must obey

My own mean heart; the boast, 'I have not sinned',

Was vain; for sinned I have in wish and thought—

Cares Conscience in what stuff the sin is wrought?<sup>429</sup>

Marah is not in love with Hubert, she only wants to escape from the king. Again unlike Victorian stereotypes, she is not represented as the sentimental woman who wants to be with the man she loves. She is a 'woman of the world' who wants to be with a man of the world, not with a god. Despite her cries 'I am mean' and 'sinned I have', the reader still sympathizes with her.

Marah does not reject the idea of immortality when Hubert tempts her to steal the elixir. She shudders, however, when Hubert suggests poisoning the alchemist:

'But I will give you a prepotent draught

To set before your deathless lord to-night,

Saying—"Come, pledge me! not till you have quaffed

This cup, I taste of your Elixir's might!"

So shall we capture life and love by craft,

For as he drinks, he will be reft of sight,

Hearing, and thought, by slumber—you are free!

Then quick! the goblet seize, and haste to me

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<sup>429</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.256.



'That we may drink deep, deep, of boundless bliss'—  
 But she—'It is not poison?' faintly asked—  
 'To poison he is mortal—spare me this!'

Lord Hubert turned aside; the fiend unmasked  
 Glared from his face; but soon with tender kiss  
 Again his power of smooth deceit he tasked,  
 Saying—'This potion does not harm, but cures—  
 I would not hurt a hound that had been yours!'<sup>430</sup>

Hubert's real intentions are uncovered by the reader alone, but not by Marah who falls victim to his promises of freedom and love, in the same way the king fell victim to her beauty. Hubert wants to kill the king and drink his elixir. He deceives Marah twice, first by telling her he will not kill the king, and second by making her believe that they will both drink the elixir.

The alchemist hears about the plan and abolishes Marah from his palace, deciding to spend his eternity alone, sealing his heart against all human passions and choosing instead to return to nature and study its laws:

Now, since nor love is mine nor fellowship,  
 More gloriously my life I will enweave  
 With general gladness, and for ever strip  
 My soul of passion; even as the Sun  
 Lavishes glowing heat, but garners none.

.....

There is one way of peace, but one—to live

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<sup>430</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.258.

The universal Life; to make the whole  
Of Nature mine; to feel the laws which give  
Form to her Being, sovereign in my soul:  
By this one road, enfranchisement I gain  
From the heart-stifling narrowness of pain.<sup>431</sup>

Thain believes the 'king is nearly poisoned because he did not learn to know his wife well enough. "The Elixir of Life" is Naden's major revision of the Romantic quest for the realm of truth and immortality'<sup>432</sup>. Thain also argues that 'Naden breaks the mould of the Romantic woman in order to criticise the whole Romantic quest [for immortality]. Marah's response to her husband's offer of immortality is to criticise his Romantic nonsense'<sup>433</sup>. Marah did not reject the king's 'Romantic quest' and immortality, she only rejected sharing this quest with him. Furthermore, despite the fact that the alchemist king, as Thain argues, was not able to see Marah as a human being, outside the stereotypes of the angel or the devil; Marah falls into the same trap when she does not recognize the lies of Hubert. At the end, Marah asks the king for forgiveness, not only out of her feelings of guilt, but also love, as the following lines suggest:

'Marah!' she seemed to shudder at the name;  
Perchance some tardy touch of penitence  
Or late-awakening love had stirred her frame,  
Deep-thrilling till it pricked the inward sense.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.265.

<sup>432</sup> Thain, 'Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics', p.85.

<sup>433</sup> Thain, 'Constance Naden and a Feminist Poetics', p.86.

<sup>434</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.262.

Marah realizes that her fault was in not understanding the king's idealism, in the same way he could not see her as a 'woman of the world'. Just like the previous poem, 'The Elixir of Life' illustrates how both men and women can fall in the trap of narrow-mindedness and stereotypes. The king thought Marah the ideal woman and loved her for that. Marah thought the alchemist was an ideal man, 'a god', and she shunned him for that, looking instead for a less-ideal husband. This is a further demonstration of Naden's belief that Hylo-Idealism was a humanist rather than a feminist, theory.

Besides stressing the importance of Hylo-Idealism from a philosophical point of view, Naden tried to explain in her poetry its scientific implications, especially in the way humans perceive the world. Some of these poems are purely scientific and do not include any reference to women or men, but are directed towards all readers. A good example is her poem 'Starlight II' in *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime*:

Man needs no dread unwonted Avatar  
The secrets of the heavenly host to show;  
From waves of light, their lustrous founts we know,  
For every gleaming band and shadowed bar  
Is fraught with homelike tidings from afar;  
Each ripple, starting long decades ago,  
Pulsing to earth its blue or golden glow,  
Beats with the life of some immortal star.

A life to each minutest atom given—  
Whether it find in Man's own heart a place,  
Or past the suns, in unimagined space—  
That Earth may know herself a part of Heaven,  
And see, wherever sun or spark is lit,  
One Law, one Life, one Substance infinite.<sup>435</sup>

The poem can be interpreted as a simple introduction to astronomy, but that was not Naden's purpose. Monism and the uniformity of matter form the grounds of Hylo-Idealism, and Naden is using this poem to represent this idea. Matter is the source of life, it unites human beings with the sun and the stars. They do not need to look for explanations of the world in religion and myths, since science offers all the needed answers. Science informs them that what they perceive through their senses is only part of themselves since it is the creation of their 'thought-cells'. They need not fear what lies beyond their senses because it is as good as non-existent to them. Monism, which was conveyed indirectly in the previous two poems, is the prominent concept here.

The same idea occurs again in 'The Pantheist's Song of Immortality' in *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime*. The speaker here celebrates the immortality of the forces that form the human body:

Canst thou repine that sentient days are numbered?  
Death is unconscious Life, that waits for birth:  
So didst thou live, while yet thy embryo slumbered,  
Senseless, unbreathing, e'en as heaven and earth.

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<sup>435</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.143.

.....

What though thy name by no sad lips be spoken,  
And no fond heart shall keep thy memory green?  
Thou yet shalt leave thine own enduring token,  
For earth is not as though thou ne'er hadst been.

.....

Yes, thou shalt die: but these almighty forces,  
That meet to form thee, live for evermore:  
They hold the suns in their eternal courses,  
And shape the tiny sand-grains on the shore.

Be calmly glad, thine own true kindred seeing  
In fire and storm, in flowers with dew impearled;  
Rejoice in thine imperishable being,  
One with the Essence of the boundless world.<sup>436</sup>

The poem aims to comfort and give hope that death is not the end of life. It gives a more positive view of the afterlife than the Christian portrayal of heaven and hell. It used to be thought that religion offered immortality to the souls of the faithful, whereas all that science and atheism gave was decay and annihilation. Naden is trying to correct this misconception by reassuring her readers that the forces that form the human body, the energy that moves it, even the cells that form this body, are all immortal. They only change from one form to another, but they are never annihilated. The two negatives 'not' and 'never' in 'For earth is not as though thou

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<sup>436</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.43.

ne'er hadst been' are creating a positive reassurance. Humans should celebrate the fact that they carry the whole world within them, and that after their death they will be reunited with the elements.

It is wrong to understand this poem as Naden's adherence to pantheism. Her rejection of the supernatural and all sorts of religious beliefs, including pantheism, has been well-recorded throughout her various writings. She explains in her pamphlet 'What is Religion? A Vindication of Neo-Materialism', which was annotated by Lewins and published for the first time in 1883 by William Stewart, and reprinted after her death in *Further Reliques*:

Since, then, we cannot transcend the range of our own being, and, if we will have deities, are forced to create them ourselves, we must banish all transcendental phantasms from our positive creed to the domain of poetry and art. If we are Pantheists in moments of exaltation and ecstasy, we shall be Materialists in hours of introspection and stern self-analysis. Though incapable of universal scepticism, and forced to assume the real existence of some proplasmic substance, generating all those images of which our consciousness is composed, we shall not clothe this proplasm with divine attributes and bow in worship of the Absolute and the Unknowable.<sup>437</sup>

The 'Absolute' and the 'Unknowable' refer to Spencer's distinction between the Knowable and the Unknowable. Naden's usage of pantheism in the poem is nothing more than the 'exaltation' of a poet who is trying to use religious symbols to illustrate her idea. This quote also emphasizes the need for humans to be both idealists and materialists.

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<sup>437</sup> Constance Naden, 'What is Religion? A Vindication of Neo-Materialism', *Further Reliques of Constance Naden*, ed. in George McCrie (London: Bickers and Son, 1891), p.122.

### Religion and ‘Yearning’:

After establishing the importance and the need for Hylo-idealism, Naden knew that religion would be a major obstacle in her attempt to spread her theory. She had been hostile to religion from her childhood, probably due to her strict upbringing. Later, her scientific training confirmed her doubts as to the existence of God. In 1878 Lewins wrote to Naden to explain the implications of Hylo-zoism for an understanding of the supernatural world:

Immanence means indwelling, and Transcendence not indwelling, but transmitted from elsewhere. Now all true science, which is only common sense *in excelsis*, negatives transcendence, and ratifies the thesis that self-energy is as much an inalienable property of matter as impenetrability (which is, in scientific phraseology, the impossibility of two molecules occupying the same space at the same time), and thus you see we get entirely rid of ‘spirit’; what has gone by that name being merely the power or energy of matter to perform unaided all its own operations. Certainly this is an idea far, far grander, more sublime and beautiful than the traditional prescientific and quite irrational fancy about the duality of matter and spirit, a hypothesis necessarily invented to ‘explain’ phænomena when matter was falsely held to be passive and ‘brute’, *i.e.*, dead. This thesis leaves us free to be either Pantheist or Atheist, which, at bottom, are really correlative (not *anti*-Theist), according to the bent or mood of each individual mind.<sup>438</sup>

The advances in physical sciences left no room to doubt the non-existence of the supernatural. The duality of body and spirit was proven to be false; nothing existed beyond the senses. Knowing that religion would stand in the way of her theory was one more reason behind her attacks on Christianity. She believed she would not be able to achieve her project of liberating humans from superstitions and prejudices as long as religion remained a reference point for them. Naden perceived religion to be

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<sup>438</sup> Lewins, *Humanism versus Theism*, pp.12-3.

degrading to human intelligence and dignity, as Lewins writes in his forward to Naden's *Complete Poetical Works*:

Where reason, based on positive science, comes into play, or, in other words, when man ceases to be an infant, religion or Theism disappears as a childish illusion utterly incompatible with right reason and rational ethics. All religious ideals and systems—none more than the Christian—are based on hideous immorality. For what can be more iniquitous than the doctrine of Atonement—*i.e.*, of the vicarious sacrifice of a sinless victim for a sinful criminal? But preceding this ethical *crux* is the logical fiction. For how can the Parthenogenetic birth of Christ redeem him from the primeval 'curse' entailed on all mankind by the mythical 'disobedience' of our federal head and representative? From this 'curse' virgins are no more exempt than their grandmothers....Indeed, a *replica* of Adam's abiogenetic<sup>439</sup> 'creation' would not serve, since earth and air partook of the 'curse' entailed on our 'first parents'. No God is needed since man...derives all the faculties required for existence out of the telluric *matrix* or *humus* (living earth) from which he sprang.<sup>440</sup>

This idea is clear in many of Naden's early poems. In 'The Astronomer', the first poem of *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime*, Naden portrays the character of an astronomer who spent all his days gazing at the stars so that he can no longer relate to his fellow humans. Moore believes the astronomer in this poem is none other than Lewins<sup>441</sup>. He is depicted as a lonely 'god' who dwells high up in his observatory away from any kind of human interaction. He gained this god-like status not through religion but through science. He gave up the idea of having a wife and children for the sake of a life of science and solitude. Now he wonders if his choice was right:

White, cold, and sacred is my chosen home,

A seat for gods, a mount divine;

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<sup>439</sup> From 'Abiogenesis' which is 'The (supposed) origination or evolution of living organisms from lifeless matter without the action of living parents; "spontaneous generation"', [http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50000391?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=abiogenesis&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50000391?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=abiogenesis&first=1&max_to_show=10)

<sup>440</sup> Lewins, *Complete Poetical Works of Constance Naden*, p.xi.

<sup>441</sup> Moore, p.235.



And from the height of this eternal dome,  
Sky, sea, and earth are mine.

All these I love, but only heaven is near,  
Only the tranquil stars I know;  
I see the map of earth, but never hear  
Life's tumult far below.

Bright hieroglyphs I read in heaven's book;  
But oft, with eyes too dim for these,  
In half-regretful ignorance I look  
On common fields and trees.

Scant fare for wife and child the fisher gains  
From yon broad belt of lucent grey;  
Rude peasants till those green and golden plains;  
Am I more wise than they?

Oh, far less glad! And yet, could I descend  
And breathe the lowland air again,  
How should I find a brother or a friend  
'Mid earth-contented men?<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.3.

Dale, who knew Naden since childhood, believes the loneliness of the astronomer, as well as most of Naden's other characters, represents in fact Naden's own loneliness, after realizing that her path of science is driving her away from the people she loves, especially where religion is concerned:

In several of her strains there was a recurrence, though with striking variations, of the same *motif*, and this disclosed the innermost secret of her own heart. She had become conscious of detachment from the life which surrounded her and from the life of her own earlier years. The discovery made her sad, but there was no remedy; and she was seeking consolation in a vague, unknown, ideal world....The detachment which appears in all these poems was the result, in part, of the falling away of early religious faith.<sup>443</sup>

Naden's 'falling away' from religion must have made her feel detached from her family. However, her intensive study of science made her more convinced of what she perceived to be the falseness of religion, and made her more certain of the choice she made. Her solace did not lie in an ideal imaginary world but in factual science.

The astronomer's brief moments of doubt end as soon as he imagines how his life would be away from his observatory. He realizes he would long to 'dwell once more alone and free', despite his wife's pleadings. The thought of the abandoned wife is easily replaced by that of Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy. The love and promises she offers surpass for him the love of any mortal. Urania orders the astronomer:

... Be thy heart my secret shrine,

So shall thy strength endure.

So shall thy god-like wisdom soar above

All rainbow hues of grief or mirth,

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<sup>443</sup> Dale, pp.513-4.

And I will love thee as the stars do love

Even thy distant earth.<sup>444</sup>

Science elevates the astronomer to the level of gods. Although he is lonely, he prefers his solitude with the stars to living with ordinary people. Urania's visit to the astronomer in his moment of weakness, eliminates his doubts. The wisdom she promises him is represented in his tale of the evolution of human thought:

Man knelt to constellated suns supreme,  
But as he knelt to golden clods,  
Nor, till he ceased to worship, e'er could dream  
The greatness of his gods.

He wove for all the planets as they passed  
Strange legends, wrought of love and youth,  
While o'er the poet-soul was vaguely cast  
A shadow of the truth.

.....

When the skies glitter, when the earth is cold,  
In some divine and voiceless hour,  
The heavens vanish, and mine eyes behold  
The elemental Power.

Now has the breath of God my being thrilled;  
Within, around, His word I hear:

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<sup>444</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.5.

For all the universe my heart is filled  
With love that casts out fear.

In one deep gaze to concentrate the whole  
Of that which was, is now, shall be,  
To feel it like the thought of mine own soul,  
Such power is given to me.<sup>445</sup>

When humans stopped kneeling and praying to invisible gods, and started using the power of their minds, only then they were able to realize their true gods and their immense power. Naden's poem echoes her prose. The gods she is referring to are the 'grey thought-cells' inside 'the fountain of honour', as she describes them in 'Hylo-Idealism: The Creed of the Coming Day'; they are the ones deserving to be revered. Everything around is part of the mind. It is the ultimate creator and it resides inside the human. Human beings can approach and start to understand this 'god' by thinking rather than kneeling to other gods. When they start contemplating the power of the mind, they can realize that the whole world actually exists through it. The mind is the god who exists within and without, everywhere, and science becomes the only way for humans to approach this deity. Despite his earlier doubts, the astronomer does not regret his choice, for Urania's visit reminds him of his status as a scientist, and of the god inside him. Naden had a higher regard for science than for God.

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<sup>445</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.7.

Naden not only used scientific facts to discredit religion, she tried to illustrate the doctrines she considered to be cruel and unjust in religion to further attack religious establishments. 'The Confession' is the poem that follows 'The Astronomer' in *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime*, and it includes a subtle attack against Catholicism in particular. The speaker of the poem is a woman who is confessing to her priest the tormenting secret of a hideous sin. Before this sin the speaker was happy in her innocence, but her sin has made her worse than the 'foul wretches' of 'the loathsome lairs':

This night I passed through dim and loathsome lairs,  
Where dwell foul wretches, that I feared to see:  
Yet would to God my lot were such as theirs!  
They have not sinned like me.

And then I saw that lovely girl who stood  
Here, where I stand, some venial fault to show:  
I was as fair, as innocently good,  
One long, long year ago.

High thoughts were mine, and yearnings to endure  
Some noble grief, and conquer heaven by pain:  
Alas, I was a child; my prayers were pure,  
Yet were they all in vain.

Love came and stirred my breast; not fierce or vile,  
But springing stainless, like some mountain stream;

And I was happy for a little while,  
And lived as in a dream.

Thou art a priest, and dwellest far apart;  
In vain I speak of joys thou hast not known:  
Even to *him* I scarce could show my heart,  
Although it was his own.<sup>446</sup>

The reader does not know, till this point, the girl's sin. Naden, through the girl's words is expressing her view on religious institutions. They are all useless and prayers are vain. God who used to have the girl's heart can no longer see what is in it. Naden's priest is distant. He cannot understand the agony of sinners because he does not know their feelings. He isolates himself from everyday life with all the experiences and tests it brings. He cannot relate to the emotions of the people and the reasons that drive them to sin, and hence cannot understand such feelings and sympathize with sinners. The girl used to ask God to put her under trial to prove her sincere faith and gain salvation. There is a sense of shame in her words. She was too proud and vain when thought she could resist sin. She was young and as ignorant as the priest of human nature and human sin. She did not know how powerful and seductive sin could be and she thought she would know the right path to follow and hence win her way to heaven. When put through this experience, however, she fails and commits a horrible sin. This further demonstrates the huge gap between the teachings of the church and real life. Naden believes that life is not as simple and

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<sup>446</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.11.

straightforward as religion portrays it to be, it is full of complications and powerful seductions, humans are bound to cede to these seductions and sin.

As the speaker continues to relate her story to the priest, the reader is finally told the speaker's sin. Her lover visits her one day with 'blood-stained hands' and 'eyes aflame':

But 'tis a common tale—thou knowest all:

A word, a gesture; then a sudden blow;

And then—a dead man's fall.

He then tells her about his plan to flee the country and makes her promise to keep his secret. Consequently an innocent man gets convicted of the lover's crime and sentenced to death while the girl keeps silent. Her feelings of shame and guilt are unbearable, she cannot even ask for mercy:

Ah, not to fiery love would Christ deny

The gift of mercy that I cannot seek:

Father, a guiltless man was doomed to die,

And yet I did not speak.

When she hears about her lover's death she decides to go to confession, but this is only to ask for mercy for his soul, not for hers. She does not regret her silence, she is asking for forgiveness for her lover alone, and she is ready to carry the full burden of the sin so that her lover may go to heaven instead. She will even undergo penance to save his soul, not hers. Perhaps after spending 'ages' in purgatory, she might attain God's mercy. This echoes Lewins's idea of the doctrine of Atonement

and the sinfulness of human beings discussed earlier. The sinner does not need to redeem himself; his lover could redeem him with her own confession and sacrifice:

But now they say that he I love is dead;  
Calmly I listen; see, my cheeks are dry;  
My heart is palsied, all my tears are shed;  
And yet I would not die.

Let me do penances to save his soul,  
And pray thy God to lay the guilt on me;  
Strong is my spirit; I can bear the whole,  
If that will set him free.

For could my expiating woe and shame  
Raise him to Paradise, with Christ to dwell,  
Then were there joy in purgatorial flame—  
Nay, there were Heaven in Hell.

And then, perchance, when countless years are past,  
Ages of torment in some fiery sea,  
The grace of God may reach to me at last;  
Yes, even unto me.

The last sentence comes as an answer to the silent priest's doubts that a sin as horrible as the speaker's could ever be forgiven, especially since she does not regret her sin. She assures him that God's mercy is immense and may include her. The



speaker's certainty that she will be forgiven at the end further illustrates the gap between the priest and religion on the one hand, and humans with their feelings and instincts on the other. The priest should not be a mediator between the girl and God because he cannot sympathize with her. According to Catholicism, confession is the first step towards absolution, yet the priest seems to be reluctant to grant the woman his blessing, and she knows this. Now that she has sinned, she is no longer like the naive priest, she now understands the sinful nature of humans and believes that she will reach absolution only through suffering.

Naden's poem 'The Roman Philosopher to the Christian Priests', which follows 'The Confession' contains a more direct attack on Christianity. It depicts an imaginary conversation between a 'Roman sage' and some Christian priests. The Roman seems to be tolerant toward the new faith. He was not against the new belief but rather against the priests who were spreading it. He is very calm in the beginning. But as the poem progresses his words become more intense. He expresses his hatred and scorn for the priests who misled his daughter when they converted her to Christianity. He believes that all religions, including Christianity, are similar, unlike the Christian priests who are starting a war against all other old beliefs:

Well have ye spoken, but the words ye said

Stir in my constant soul nor love, nor rage;

Through you my life is bare, my joy is dead,

Yet speak I calmly, as a Roman sage.

.....

Clear truth to vulgar minds no comfort yields;

The fair old myths have served their purpose well:

Is Heaven more bright than our Elysian fields?

And was not Tartarus sufficient Hell?

Till now, the ancient symbols have sufficed;

But there is room for all; the world is wide:

Zeno was great, and so, perchance, was Christ,

And so were Plato, and a score beside.

If I were young, I might adore with you;

But knowledge calms the heart, and clears the eye:

A thousand faiths there are, but none is true,

And I am weary, and shall shortly die.<sup>447</sup>

He acknowledges their talents in debating, yet the world they offer him is not attractive, it is grim and grey as the words 'bare' and 'joy is dead' indicate. Hence, their words are not powerful enough to convert him. The 'vulgar minds' of the priests like to live in illusions, and that is why they believe in myths like religions. They cannot tolerate the idea that all religions are false. They seek comfort in illusions, which have the same purpose as old myths. The Roman sees no need for new creeds since the illusions of the old were working well. 'Knowledge' and truth are what 'calms the heart' and ease the mind, not faith and illusions. The Roman's attitude of tolerance is due to his rejection of all religions. He realizes that all these faiths are based on myths, they are only 'symbols' and, despite what they claim, none of them knows the exact truth of the universe and hence they are all false. This

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<sup>447</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.16.

poem represents some of Naden's thoughts about religion and its uselessness in a scientifically-advanced age like hers.

In 'What is Religion? A Vindication of Neo- Materialism', Naden associates science with morality, and she places them both against religion:

A man actuated by an ardent desire for present gain or pleasure is not now restrained by the distant prospect of torments in another life; and it may be doubted whether the nature which could only be scourged into honesty by the fear of hell would not be forced to manifest its deep degradation in some more insidious but not less harmful mode of guilt. Heroes and reformers do not need our solicitude; they will always continue to supply their own inspiration, without the need of a 'great Taskmaster'; for to them heroism is the highest happiness.<sup>448</sup>

Lewins in his notes to 'What is Religion' also differentiates between morality and religion:

I find that nations in their religious phase are always in reality most immoral. Certainly the Byzantine empire after Constantine, Europe during the Crusades, and Germany after the Reformation were so. Luther died despairing of humanity. Calvinism is, of all forms of *Pessimism*, the most horrible and immoral.<sup>449</sup>

Here Naden's system of beliefs is very clear. She separates religion from morality and calls God a taskmaster. He is portrayed as a school master who rewards those who obey his orders and punishes those who do not. She perhaps advocates the return to the times when nations were not religious, when people were moral for the sake of morality itself, not out of fear or greed; times like those of the Roman sage perhaps. In this poem religion seems to corrupt moral and family values, by turning the daughter against her father and by distorting human bonds. The Roman's lack of belief, in this sense, makes him more moral than the priests. Christianity, by going against the Roman's family values, went against moral judgment and established its

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<sup>448</sup> Naden, 'What is Religion?', *Further Reliques*, p.127.

<sup>449</sup> Lewins, in Naden, 'What is Religion', p.127.

own 'corrupt' morality, as is understood from the poem and from Lewins's note. It is also interesting in this poem how philosophy is set against religion. The only thing the reader knows about the Roman is that he is a philosopher. His philosophy is what makes him doubt the priests' ideas and values. Perhaps what Naden is suggesting here is that a person cannot be a true philosopher and a believer at the same time.

The Roman is portrayed as a dignified and reasonable man; whereas the priests, although silent throughout the poem, are represented first as delusional, then as hypocrites:

Ye sons of slaves, unworthy to be free!  
Calmly I speak, but fear me, crafty priests!

The only thing the old man cannot tolerate is having his daughter pushed to her death due to her Christian beliefs:

I have not warred with doctrines, but with deeds;  
In fair and generous mood I met you first;  
I hated not her teachers, nor their creeds,  
And yet she scorns me as a thing accursed.

She deems my lordly house unclean, defiled;  
She scarce will sip my wine, or taste my bread.  
Ye boast of virgin martyrs—if my child  
Die for her faith, my vengeance on your head!

.....

Go, eat and drink, and call your feast divine;  
But, if my daughter dies, ye shall not live:

The ancient Roman spirit is still mine,  
And I forget not, neither can forgive.

The Roman sees no harm in having Christians worshipping all around Rome, for he sees no difference between their faith and Rome's paganism. What he minds, however, is having faith intervening between him and his daughter. He is hurt to see his daughter's scorn for him only because he is not Christian, and blames her teachers for distorting his image as a father. He is enraged by the idea that his food is deemed unholy only because he is not a Christian. The instinctive natural love between a man and his daughter is destroyed by the sly priests. In Matthew 10:34-39 Jesus tells his disciples:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Naden's poem is a comment on the ideas represented in Christ's words. Religion goes against human moral and family values by encouraging believers to leave their families and die, if necessary, for their faith. At this point the Roman becomes aggressive towards the priests. The calm sage cannot tolerate a faith that defiles his relationship with his daughter. Through the Roman Naden expresses her own anger towards the intolerance of a religion that would separate family members of different faiths, an anti-science and immoral religion that goes against human nature, as she writes in 'What is Religion?':

In our own day, when art, morality, thought, politics, and education are finally separated from religion; when the living soul of ancient theosophies has departed; when the stern beauty of 'divine philosophy' has well-nigh ceased to attract even youthful votaries, our only hope of salvation lies in the conscientious endeavour to draw new life from nature, and to make science itself a well-spring of ideal truth.<sup>450</sup>

Science and nature are the only sources of truth, not religion as the priests claim.

When any faith goes against nature, it goes against the source of truth in society and condemns it to moral corruption.

Naden's attack on religion continues in 'The Last Druid'. The difference between the two poems, however, is that in this poem the Christians are now in power, after destroying all the ancient pagan gods. The druid is not as strong and proud as the Roman, he knows he has been defeated and soon there will be nothing left of his old beliefs. His only wish now is for rest in death:

Despairing and alone,  
Where mountain winds make moan,  
My days are spent:  
Each sacred wood and cave  
Is a forgotten grave  
Where none lament.

This is my native sod,  
But to a stranger God  
My people pray;  
Till to myself I seem

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<sup>450</sup> Naden, 'What is Religion?', *Further Reliques*, p.133.

A scarce remembered dream  
When morn is gray.

I know not what I seek;  
My heart is cold and weak,  
My eyes are dim:  
Across the vale I hear  
An anthem glad and clear,  
The Christians' hymn.

Oh, Christ, to whom they sing,  
Thou art not yet the King  
Of this wild spot;  
I am too weary now  
At new-made shrines to bow;  
I know Thee not.<sup>451</sup>

The gloom and despair of the druid are juxtaposed with the cheerfulness of the Christian hymns. The Christian God is a stranger, a new comer, an outsider to the world of the druid. In a Romantic manner, nature around the druid is in sympathy with his misfortune. There seems to be an organic unity between him and nature, which is also frightened of having this strange God ruling over her. Nature, like the druid, fears the Christians because perhaps she suspects, like him, that the doctrines they are bringing will go against her. They will deprive her of her independence and

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<sup>451</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.19.

inner energy and make her a servant to the orders of the Christian God. This monotheistic God will claim power over nature and steal the dignity she had when she used to be inhabited by the ancient gods. The druid's statement 'thou art not yet the King' is a cry of protest against the new-comer. The druid here is the antagonist of Christ, for he is represented as the king of 'this wild spot', the last fortress standing against the advancement of Christianity.

The druid is both wise and proud. He knows that his defences will not last long, that he is the last druid left in this battle. He tries to appeal to the soft side of the new God asking him for mercy through death. He will not reject his old faith and he knows that he is defeated, so he chooses to die rather than live and see the world he loves being ruled by a strange God:

But if in truth Thou live,  
If to mankind Thou give  
Life, motion, breath;  
If Love and Light Thou be,  
No longer torture me,  
But grant me death.

Give me not heaven, but rest;  
In earth's all-sheltering breast  
Hide me from scorn:  
The gods I served are slain;  
My life is lived in vain;  
Why was I born?



Gone is the ancient race;  
Earth has not any place  
For such as I:  
Nothing is true but grief;  
I have outlived belief,  
Then let me die.

These dim, deserted skies  
To aged heart and eyes  
No comfort give:  
Woe to my hoary head!  
Woe! for the gods are dead,  
And yet I live.

The druid's rejection of a Christian heaven and his preference for returning to nature further stress his unity with her. Unlike the Roman sage, the druid was a believer. He realizes that he was living in a delusion and wasting his life when he sees his gods being destroyed by the Christians. He does not want heaven anymore, he only wants rest. Rome when pagan had enough space for all different creeds, but now with Christianity there is no place for any other belief. Clearly this was Naden's reaction to all the different Christian creeds that were emerging in nineteenth-century Britain. Each sect claiming to offer a true interpretation of Christ's teachings, hence deeming all the rest as false and sometimes heretical. The intolerance of these sects to other believers made Naden question their credibility.

Naden's attack on Christianity and her juxtaposition of religion and nature reaches its climax in her poem 'The Carmelite Nun'. The poem reveals the mixed feelings of fear and regret a nun has after spending her life in solitude. At the time when the poem was written, Anglican sisterhoods were becoming popular with middle-class Victorian women, and Naden chose to comment on this phenomenon in her poem. The fact that the nun here is Catholic rather than Anglican, as the word Carmelite indicates, is irrelevant. The feelings Naden portrays could be those of any nun who chose to abandon her family and friends for a life of solitude:

Silence is mine, and everlasting peace;  
My heart is empty, waiting for its Lord;  
All hope, all passion, all desire shall cease,  
And loss of self shall be my last reward.

For I would lose my life, my thought, my will;  
The love and hate, the grief and joy of earth:  
I watch and pray, and am for ever still;  
So shall I find the death, which yet is birth.

Yet once I loved to hear the wild birds sing,  
I knew the hedge-row blossoms all by name;  
Keen sight was mine, to trace the budding spring,  
Clear voice, for songs of joy when summer came.

Too dear I held each earthly sight and sound,  
Too well I loved each fair created thing,

And when I prayed to Him I had not found,  
I called Him in my heart 'the mountains' King'.  
  
All, all is past—gone, every vain delight;  
No beauty tempts me in this lonely cell:  
Yet why, O Lord, were earth and sky so bright,  
Winning the soul that in Thyself should dwell?<sup>452</sup>

In her essay 'Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique', Glennis Byron comments on Naden's usage of the dramatic monologue form to portray the nun's life:

Naden's 'The Carmelite Nun'...begins with this apparently confident pronouncement from the speaker: 'Silence is mine'....What the monologue then goes on to show, however, is precisely how little peace this woman has. Instead of being blessed by silence, she seems haunted by the sounds of the world and longs for death, for that time when the 'music of the heavenly throng' might drown out these other voices. Her heart is not empty, but full of old emotions; loss of self might well be seen as a 'last reward', since it is an intense consciousness of self that so torments her. Naden, perhaps not surprisingly an atheist, suggests the comforts of religion to be no more than illusions, and the dedication of one's life to religion a simple waste of potential.<sup>453</sup>

The first stanza is obviously ironic: loss of hope, passion, and self can hardly be a reward. The nun lives in a state of suspension, a death-like life void of any kind of excitement. She is passively 'watching' and waiting, in a manner similar to

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<sup>452</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.22.

<sup>453</sup> Glennis Byron, 'Rethinking the Dramatic Monologue: Victorian Women Poets and Social Critique', in Alison Chapman, ed., *Victorian Women Poets*, Essays and Studies (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p.88.

Rossetti's female heroines. She is not waiting for union with God, but for an escape from her death-in-life state.

Her earlier life was, however, bright and cheerful, and to portray that the nun uses nature. All the early joys she experienced before entering the convent are associated with nature, which suggests that the gloom in her present life is due to her distance from nature. God then was not imprisoned in a church or a convent, he was associated with nature, he was 'the mountains' King'. 'Earthly' here takes its original meaning as natural, belonging to Mother Earth and nature, it does not mean 'sinful' as Christianity represents it. Earth in Christianity is always associated with sin, and perhaps that was another problem Naden had with religion. The astronomer in the earlier poem was alone, yet he had the joy of being close to nature, observing all its laws and wonders. The nun's life became miserable the moment she departed from nature. The nun is taught to believe that even thinking about the beauty of nature is sinful. She admits that the beauty of nature could have higher power over her than God. The idea of Christianity being 'unnatural' or anti-nature develops further in the following stanzas:

I cannot quite forget that I am young;

I sometimes long to see my mother's face:

Oh, when I left her, how she wept, and clung

About my neck in agonized embrace!

And there was one—Ah, no, the thought is sin—

Why come these thronging forms of earthly grace?

Close, close, my heart! Thou shalt not let them in,

To break the stillness of this holy place.

Oh, Mary, Mother, help me to endure!  
I am a woman, with a heart like thine:  
But no—thy nature is too high and pure,  
Thou canst not feel these low-born pangs of mine.

Oh, for the vision of the Master's face!  
Oh, for the music of the heavenly throng!  
I have but lived on earth a little space,  
And yet I cry, 'How long, O Lord, how long?'

Like the druid, the nun only wants rest. She feels sinful just for remembering her mother. For Naden, this indicates the cruelty of Christian teachings which deprive a mother of her daughter and punish the daughter just for missing the mother. What makes the situation even more powerful than that in 'The Roman Philosopher' is that Naden was an orphan and she never knew her mother, so she could not understand why a woman would willingly choose to be separated from the embrace of her mother in this manner. The way convent life separated young women from their mothers was never comprehensible to her.

To help her endure her longing for her mother, the nun turns for solace to another mother figure, Mother Mary, another mother who lost a child. However, this attempt is futile. Thain argues that:

Like Rossetti, Naden is interested in exploring the individual's struggle when he or she feels torn between commitment to the physical world and an allegiance to the spiritual. Unlike Rossetti, however, she sees the pull of the physical as the stronger, and more important, force. 'The Carmelite Nun'...enacts a struggle in which the narrator knows that she is supposed to be looking to the spiritual

‘father’ (waiting for a ‘vision of the Master’s face’) but in fact seeks the ‘mother’. ‘Mother’, here is identified with Mary, the earthly mother of Christ, but also has resonances with Naden’s Hylo-Idealistic terminology, where ‘mother’ is always Mother Nature, the physical world, as opposed to the spiritual father.<sup>454</sup>

The Virgin is locked in the convent away from nature just like the nun. She is ‘too high and pure’, which further alienates her from the nun and her ‘earthly’ desires. Hence, the nun feels that the Mother of the Lord cannot console her and sympathize with her. Furthermore, the nun feels intimidated by the Virgin’s purity and sublimity. Her sacredness distances her from the nun who cannot find any affinities between herself and the mother of God. She cannot understand human sins, just like the priest in ‘Confession’, because she is too pure to experience them. The nun in the last stanza is not praying, but rather expressing her regret for leaving her family and depriving herself of the embrace of her mother and nature. Her cry at the end for death is not out of her hope to meet her ‘Master’. She only wants death to deliver her from this life of emptiness and solitude and, like the druid, bring her back to the breast of her mother: nature.

Despite Naden’s absolute rejection of religion, and her firm belief in science as the only source of truth, Naden the poet had surprisingly shown some interest in certain aspects of spiritualism, namely mysticism. William Hughes confirms that she was interested in the works of James Hinton and the Rev. R.A. Vaughan’s *Hours with the Mystics*<sup>455</sup>. Charles LaPorte argues that:

Blind and Naden actually work hard to reclaim and redeem some of the prominent religious elements of the mid-century poetess tradition, and that Eliot’s unusual combination of sentimental piety and

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<sup>454</sup> Thain, “Scientific Wooing”, p.162.

<sup>455</sup> Hughes, p.11.

religious skepticism gives them a particularly useful model for doing so.<sup>456</sup>

This combination of scepticism and piety LaPorte believes to result in Naden's 'Atheist Prophec[ies]'. Yet in a few of her poems feelings of deep piety and mystical yearning for God and faith are openly expressed. 'The Mystic's Prayer', 'The Agnostic Psalm', and 'The Elixir of Life' are all examples of this. They all uncover Naden's early fascination with mysticism despite Hylo-Idealism's utter rejection of it.

Naden seemed to be intolerant and hostile to Christianity only as an organization; however, she admired Christ and his message of love and peace, and she had deep sympathy with those who followed his teachings. The influence of Vaughan's *Hours with the Mystics* is particularly evident in 'The Mystic's Prayer'. In the first chapter of the first book of Vaughan's work, the three friends Atherton, Gower and Willoughby try to find an adequate definition for mysticism. Atherton finally relates to them how a picture was able to convey the definition of mysticism better than words:

It was the interior of a Spanish cathedral. The most prominent object in the foreground below was the mighty foot of a staircase, with a balustrade of exceeding richness, which, in its ascent, crosses and recrosses the picture till its highest flight is lost in darkness...A half light slanted down—a sunbeam through the vast misty space—from a window without the range of the picture. At various stages of the mounting stairway figures on pillars, bearing escutcheons, saints and kings in fretted niches, and painted shapes of gules and azure from the lofty window in the east looked down on those who were ascending, some in brightness, some in shadow.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> LaPorte, p.427.

<sup>457</sup> Robert Alfred Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2 vols. (London: Strahan & Company, 1884), I, 11.

This picture had lived inside Naden's mind, and when she wanted to portray the image of a mystic monk praying, she used a very similar setting for her poem:

My God, who art the God of loneliness,  
Who, Life of human souls, art yet alone,  
Who, Lord of joy, dost bear the world's distress,  
Come Thou, and quench my being in Thine own;  
Come, in this mute cathedral make Thy throne  
While moonlight through the blazoned window streams,  
Where kings and saints a ceaseless vigil keep;  
Their reflex glories, like celestial dreams,  
Haunt the grey carven brows of those who sleep,  
Illuming changeless eyes, that will not wake and weep.<sup>458</sup>

These anguished words continue throughout the poem in a manner that is completely different from the prayer in 'The Carmelite Nun'. Although in both poems the speakers are in pain, the monk's anguish here is because of his extreme love for God. He does not miss his family or the physical world, he only wants union with God. This poem indeed is awkwardly situated in Naden's volume. It comes after 'The Roman Philosopher' and 'The Carmelite Nun' and before 'The Pilgrim' and 'The Pantheist's Song of Immortality'. The concepts of God, soul, and divine revelation, which completely oppose Hylo-Idealism, are all present in the poem. It does not aim to negate these concepts, like the anti-religion poems that precede it in the volume, but rather to reinforce them with the mystic's genuine pleadings and prayers. He prays for Christ and the Madonna, with the aim of union with the Maker:

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<sup>458</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.36.



Not martyrdom I crave, nor length of days;  
But grant me, Lord, ere this frail form decays,  
The perfect union that my soul has sought,  
The ecstasy that knows nor prayer nor praise,  
The raptured silence, unprofaned by thought.  
No more wilt Thou in heavenly dreams appear,  
When of Thy mystic Essence I am part,  
For mine own soul I see not, nor can hear  
Even the pulsings of this fevered heart,  
Fevered and weary; but full calm is near;  
Almighty calm, in endless being blest,  
Infinitude of life, too deep for aught save rest.

He does not aim to be a hero or a saint, to have his statue erected in a cathedral as a testament to his sincerity. He is not after any physical or moral gain. He only wants to enjoy an everlasting peace and bliss in union with the Divine.

‘The Agnostic Psalm’ can further clarify Naden’s understanding of some people’s need to follow the path of faith. She believes that the idea of God may only be:

... The glorious phantom of a dream  
That in the brain of mortal man has birth<sup>459</sup>

Nevertheless, she still admits that:

... Yet oft the heart will deem

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<sup>459</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.140.

That through its inmost deeps Thy light doth stream  
Bestowing peace for grief, calm joy for mirth.

E'en thus rich music enters tuneless ears,  
Tuneless, and all untrained by ordered notes;  
Yet its ethereal essence inward floats,  
And mingling with the secret source of tears,  
Awhile endues the spirit's wistful sight  
With dim perceptions of unknown delight.

The speaker understands the feelings of peace and calm that faith can bestow on its followers, the same feelings science gave Naden. Perhaps she yearned for those innocent feelings of piety and faith, despite her scientific conviction that they were unreal. This is what her poem 'Yearning' attempts to explore:

I murmur songs of past delight,  
To tunes of present pain:  
Around me is the empty night  
That answers not again.

My thoughts were better told by tears,  
And yet I scorn to weep:  
Forgetting hopes, forgetting fears,  
My eyes and heart shall sleep.

Yet must I see, in visions wild,

The joys I cannot gain,  
And, like a little lonely child,  
Stretch out my arms in vain.<sup>460</sup>

The speaker yearns to listen to and even sing the delightful hymns and prayers of her childhood. Although she can sleep peacefully now without worrying about the hope of heaven and the fear of hell, a part of her still misses these beliefs.

The idea of the solace of religion as opposed to that of science reappears in Naden's second volume *A Modern Apostle* in her poem 'Resipiscentia'<sup>461</sup>. The reader of this poem encounters three voices representing three different ways of dealing with the ills and pains of life. The second voice recounts how he was relieved from his pains the moment he asked Christ for help:

I prayed to Christ an unbelieving prayer,  
Half blasphemous, half mad—but straight there shone  
Into my soul's despair

A strange, pure light—then on my brow I felt  
A healing hand, and on my sleepless eyes;  
Till, knowing nothing, feeling all, I knelt,  
And with deep groans and sighs

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<sup>460</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.66.

<sup>461</sup> The closest meaning to the word 'resipiscentia' is 'resipiscence', which means 'recognition of errors committed' and 'return to a better mind or opinion' which is probably Naden's meaning.  
<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50204071>

Yielded to Christ my soul, its secret need,  
Its woe, its doubt, its dread, its self-disdain,  
Its myriad petty sins, that grow and breed,  
And, mob-like, rule the brain.

All these he took away—he made me yield  
The last regret, the lingering sense of wrong;  
I am as one from year-long tortures healed,  
Made sound, and hale, and strong—

Who every morning feels a sweet new joy  
Because he wakes without the accustomed pain;  
Who runs and leaps more lightly than a boy,  
Having been born again

Into a long-forgotten world of health,  
Where he may woo bright eyes, nor need to fear  
That but in pity or in lust of wealth  
They feign to hold him dear.<sup>462</sup>

He fully believes that Christ healed him from his illnesses. This man becomes genuinely happy and healthy after his mystical encounter with Christ. After receiving Christ in an Evangelical manner he was reborn into a life of health and happiness, and he asks his friend to follow his lead and drink:

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<sup>462</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.291.

... this Elixir that has made me whole—  
Though thou be sick to death, thou shalt not die—  
Repent, and heal thy soul!

The first voice is sceptical of his friend's words. He believes that sin is what makes him human, and that no power, no matter how divine it is, can redeem one part of him, leaving the other sinful:

Life as it is, and must be, and has been  
No piecemeal penitence can show aright,  
Deeming the one part foul, the other clean,  
Here black, and there snow-white.

.....  
Could I believe thy glorious Gospel true,  
That were no cure for this organic ill:  
Can Christ unweave my tissues, mould anew  
The matrix of my will?

My grief has no beginning and no end;  
I do repent of antenatal sin,  
Whose poisoning juices thread my veins, and blend  
With the fresh life within.

That in my blood this virus I must keep  
To-morrow, next week, next month, all my years,  
Until my day of death—for this I weep

With ignominious tears.

The first voice doubts his friend's vision. He is happy for his friend's well-being, but he does not believe 'repenting' can undo the evil and illnesses of the world. He insinuates that his friend is self-deluded, but he does not deny him his delusions, as long as they are helping him achieve peace and happiness. This echoes Naden's stance on faith, she understood faith's ability to calm people, and she believed it could be an anodyne that would help them overcome their sufferings in life.

The first voice's depressive view of life is juxtaposed by a third one. The last words in the poem, which are spoken by a third voice, offer an alternative way to endure the hardships of life:

Nay, hope is thine! Who chants this grim complaint  
Has steadfast heart, free mind, and insight keen;  
Such man may purge away the leprous taint  
While yet he cries 'Unclean!'

Daily thy tissues die—are born afresh  
Daily, not moving thee to joy or dole;  
Yet all the slow mutations of thy flesh  
Gently transmute thy soul.

Go, live in hope and labour, fearing nought;  
Starve the foul germs of hate, and lust, and greed;  
Force day by day thy brain to patient thought,  
Thy hand to earnest deed.

Long were the darkling months before thy birth,  
Long years regenerate a frame defiled:  
It may be thou shalt enter heaven on earth  
Clean as a pure-born child.

The third voice admires the second voice's bravery in facing life as it is without delusions. Science offers hope for the desolate souls by giving factual explanations of the world and its systems, instead of the delusions of religion. This is what the third voice, and Naden, are trying to explain. The secret to a happy life, hence, lies in hard work and 'patient thought'. Through them, humans can 'enter heaven on earth'.

Although Naden in this poem is praising the first voice for his courage, one finds no condemnation of the self-delusions of the second voice. Despite Naden's preference for the scientific factual way of understanding the world rather than the fictional religious one, she sympathizes in some of her poems with those who instead choose to follow the path of faith. She acknowledges that some people need religion to maintain their hope in the future; she understands that for those people the world can appear dark and unjust without religion or the prospect of heaven. She even acknowledges the power faith can have on the minds of humans, that it can cure the ill and make the disabled walk again. She does not try to disregard the importance and power of mystic experiences; neither does she deny their truthfulness for those who experience them. She understood well people's need for faith; it was the exploitations of organized religion she was against.

In a very interesting manner, Naden used images of mystical experiences in her poetry to stress atheist concepts. For example the astronomer experiences a mystical trance in which the goddess Urania pays him a visit in order to strengthen and affirm his faith in astronomy. The astronomer before her visit doubts his choice of science and solitude, yet Urania's visit confirms his belief in science:

For oft, when sleep has lulled a brain o'erwrought,  
Strange light across my brow is thrown;  
The glorious incarnation of my thought,  
Urania stands alone.

.....

But what is she, whose beauty makes me blind,  
Whose voice is like the voice of Fate?  
What, save a lustrous mirage of the mind,  
My slave, whom I create?

Yet from such dear illusions Wisdom springs,  
Though these may fade she shall not die;  
In fabled forms of heroes and of kings,  
E'en yet we map the sky<sup>463</sup>.

Paradoxically, the mystical visit of Urania gives the astronomer the wisdom to recognize the imaginative nature of this experience. He knows that it is an 'illusion', a self-delusion that helps him reach tranquillity and peace of mind, exactly like the mystical experience of the monks.

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<sup>463</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.5.



Another mystical experience used for a non-religious purpose is found in 'The Elixir of Life'. From the very beginning of the poem, the speaker is telling the readers that all the incidents they are about to witness are the products of a vision:

In some strange waking vision I beheld  
A man and woman in their summer prime,  
Who seemed memorial forms of classic eld [*sic*],  
And yet the fairest, newest births of Time;  
My heart they rapt, my questionings they quelled:  
But now I bid my plain ungilded rhyme  
Repeat the marvels that I saw and heard  
Vivid in colour and distinct in word.<sup>464</sup>

The speaker refers hastily to the fact that this is a vision and moves immediately to describing the characters of his dream. The speaker's reference to the vividness of the dream is to further stress its being a vision rather than just a passing dream. Another quality that makes this dream similar to a mystical vision is the way in which the alchemist is repeatedly referred to as a god, and Marah as a goddess or a mythical figure.

The vision is not only used to convey Naden's Hylo-Idealistic concepts of harmony and equilibrium. In this vision, the speaker witnesses a 'god' who errs, a 'god' who cannot see the real intentions of his wife and is about to be poisoned by his servant, a 'god' who is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. The poem concludes with a further stress on the loneliness and sadness of this semi-god:

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<sup>464</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.239.

Then was he silent; in that human breast  
Immortal, sorrow seemed at war with thought;  
The tears burst forth: like the empoisoned vest  
Of Jove-born Heracles, remembrance wrought:  
Fainter, more distant, grew the murmurs pressed  
From that heroic heart; my Vision, fraught  
With marvels, faded, and a chilly stream  
Of work-day light poured in and quenched the dream.<sup>465</sup>

Both the reader and the speaker pity this noble and foolish semi-god who is destined to spend eternity in constant loneliness. No mortal human can be envious of him.

Naden's sympathy with mysticism could be seen also in the way she approached the character of Christ. Although she had strong views against religion, which obviously stemmed from religion's contradiction with scientific facts, this was not reflected in her representation of Christ. She was hostile towards all religious authorities and dogmas that tried to give science a secondary place. However, her position towards such authorities did not influence her opinion regarding Christ and some of the prophets. Lewins, in *Auto-Centricism: or the Brain Theory of Life and Mind* explains his view on mysticism in general and Christ in particular, which could be very similar to Naden's:

A mystic is thus only a true thinker in the making, always more or less of heroic mould. It really is...improper to stigmatise Christ, who, whatever his intellectual incompleteness, must have had the noblest moral instinct and emotions...St. Paul, Mohammed, etc., were epileptics, and, no doubt, actually cerebral derelicts, as were Swedenborg and Comte; but some of the very loftiest and most evolutionary work of the world, the very culmination of human nature, has been done by men of that calibre. They are *for* us, not

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<sup>465</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.267.

*against* us; and from blindness we betray our cause when we mistake friends for foes.<sup>466</sup>

He also describes him as ‘a perfect specimen—the most perfect we have any knowledge of—of the purest and most *naïve* Idealist’<sup>467</sup>. It is important to notice Lewins’s distinction between religion and mysticism, for here he does not consider Christ or St. Paul as holy men, but rather as wise noble humans. Through mysticism, they understood the fact that humans are one with nature, a concept that could be indirectly linked to Lewins’s Hylo-zoism. Moreover, these humans were reformers for they tried to improve the state of humans, they were visionaries, and Lewins respected that.

Naden’s view on Christ and mysticism was similar to Lewins’s, although it is not fully clear whether she already had that view before meeting Lewins or whether she was directly influenced by his opinion on the matter. She respected mystics and their practices, as the poems above illustrate, and regarded them as highly moral and noble. Prophets were, perhaps mad, yet noble human beings. Naden was impatient only with the different inhuman interpretations that contradicted Christ’s original noble message of love and peace, interpretations that divided families and incarcerated women in small cells. Her poem ‘Christ, the Nazarene’ illustrates this. In this short poem, which appears in the same group of poems as ‘Resipiscentia’, some copiers are gathered around an old ‘fresco’ trying to decipher the face of Christ:

The copyist group was gathered round

A time-worn fresco, world-renowned,

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<sup>466</sup> Lewins, *Auto-Centricism*, p. 11.

<sup>467</sup> Lewins, *Auto-Centricism*, p.14.

Whose central glory once had been  
The face of Christ, the Nazarene.

And every copyist of the crowd  
With his own soul that face endowed,  
Gentle, severe, majestic, mean;  
But which was Christ, the Nazarene?

Then one who watched them made complaint,  
And marvelled, saying, 'Wherefore paint  
Till ye be sure your eyes have seen  
The face of Christ, the Nazarene?'<sup>468</sup>

Each Christian creed tries its best to understand Christ's message, to paint its own portrait of Christ. Yet none of these interpretations is certain since they are only speculations made by theologians. None of them can claim to have seen the true face of Christ and held the sole true interpretation of his word.

Naden's treatment of the story of Alan in 'A Modern Apostle' further illustrates her feelings towards Christ. Alan was an idealist who dreamed of saving the world through love, just like Christ. The parallel between Alan and Christ could be traced especially in the ending of the poem. He died by the hands of the people he loved and wanted to save. Alan's mother explicitly links Alan to Christ when she accuses Ella of killing him:

... 'Your fault!' she cried—'it is your fault!

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<sup>468</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.302.

His blood be on your head, if he must die;  
Like the proud Pharisees, who did exalt  
Their barren lore, and shouted “Crucify!”  
You slew my son’.<sup>469</sup>

Naden indirectly suggests near the end of the poem that the mystic vision Alan had was the product of the fairy tales his mother used to tell him, and that it was nothing more than delirium:

Ere night, there came a change; for Alan woke  
From torpor to delirium; now he seemed  
To see again his Vision, and invoke  
With prayer, some Power divine; anon, he dreamed  
Of his old home and his old faith, and broke  
Into sad cries of ‘Mother!’ and there streamed  
From his hot lips full many a wonder wild  
Of elves, and wraiths, and witches who beguiled  
The hearts of chieftains.<sup>470</sup>

Alan’s vision was the result of his vivid imagination and the magical stories of his mother. She used to relate these stories when he was a child, behind his father’s back. He repressed them until they came out in the form of a mystical vision. This is the analysis of Naden the scientist: Alan’s vision was no more than a hallucination, and his deep and genuine belief in it makes him a semi madman.

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<sup>469</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.230.

<sup>470</sup> *Poetical Works*, p.226.

His madness, however, does not make him a villain. Naden throughout the poem emphasizes Alan's nobleness and purity of heart. Like Christ, he was an idealist and had a lofty aim: peace, love and prosperity to all humanity. Lewins's description of Christ could be applied perfectly to Alan's character:

He was practically a self-deceiver, the dupe of his own delusions. He had good intentions; but hell is proverbially paved with such. He belonged to the class quite familiar in history...—souls of the very noblest *timbre*, but doomed to a tragical fate as criminals....To such natures, at least, death comes best when it comes fast, and the proverb holds good, that the gods love those who die soon. Only it is quite an act of ingratitude and misapprehension to defame and insult the memories of these grandly moral supremacies and martyrs of humanity—impracticable though were their ideals and tragical their lives.<sup>471</sup>

Naden's 'A Modern Apostle' was the poetical expression of Lewins's essay.

Constance Naden was truly a remarkable woman. In an age that discriminated against women in numerous ways, she was able to prove herself a true intellectual and a dedicated scientist. She used scientific laws to form a philosophic theory, and she used this theory to liberate her society from what she perceived to be its most dangerous enemies: superstitions and stereotypes. She maintained her objectivity when dealing with topics and issues that went against what she deeply believed in, keeping an open mind and open heart to all different ideas and beliefs. She corresponded with some of the most eminent thinkers of her time and she challenged the deepest Victorian convictions. Still, she was also an accomplished poet who did not hesitate to explore diverse topics and themes and to prove she was capable of excelling in them all.

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<sup>471</sup> Lewins, *Auto-Centricism*, p.20.

## CONCLUSION

Women's religious writings, poetry in particular, are now one of the most popular areas in Victorian studies. As this thesis demonstrates, the amount of published research in this area is growing. One of the reasons for this is the diversity of Victorian women's beliefs and their interpretations of religion and spirituality. The poets studied in this thesis are only three examples among perhaps hundreds of nineteenth-century women poets who explored these fields.

Emily Brontë's status as the daughter of an Evangelical clergyman had enabled her to have a full grasp of her father's creed. She disagreed with many of his doctrines, and she had a considerable freedom not to practice religion or go to church. However, she was still aware that some of her views would not be fully tolerated in her father's household, or by some of her readers, so she chose to disguise them by using two meanings of the term 'god' in her poetry. Her poems exhibit contradictions when they are viewed as merely religious because of this double meaning. However, when the signifier 'god' is understood in some of her poems as a metaphor for the poetic imagination, this contradiction disappears and Brontë's true meaning is revealed. Although her treatment of the imagination brings

her closer to the Romantics, she diverged from them in her treatment of nature. Her attitude towards nature was a mixture of love and hate, despite the significant role nature played in her works, especially *Wuthering Heights*. She loved nature but she felt uncomfortable when nature played the role of God's messenger, as in 'A Day Dream' and 'The Butterfly'. These mixed feelings were due to her impatience with nature's passive submission to God's law. Hence, she sought solace neither in religion nor in nature, but in the world of her poetic imagination.

Christina Rossetti as well had her own thoughts concerning religion. She had some hidden doubts about the religious practices of her age. These were apparent only in a few of her early secular poems. Due to the way she was perceived by her contemporaries as 'Santa Christina', and the amount of devotional works she composed, many critics have fallen in the trap of considering Rossetti as only a religious or devotional writer. This label ignores the great number of secular poems she wrote when young. Although religion played a significant role in her later life, her adolescence and youth were like those of any other young Victorian woman, filled with stories of love and betrayal, ghosts and demons, faith and doubt. Her representation of dreams, ghosts, and love stories, in addition to her adoption of the doctrine of Soul Sleep, illustrate that. The way she has been lately imprisoned in the frame of religion threatens to undermine her early secular works which were as important in her poetical development as the later ones. It also reduces her genuine individuality by considering her only a product of a religious movement.

Constance Naden is a representative of the New Woman who started to gain access to the public sphere of science and philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike Brontë and Rossetti, her main focus was on science and philosophy, rather than religion and spirituality. In fact, she not only trained herself in these



disciplines, she was able to produce, with the help of her mentor Lewins, a new theory: Hylo-Idealism. One of the theory's ultimate aims was to eliminate the role of theism and the supernatural, placing science as an alternative interpreter of the universe. Although the theory did not deny the existence of God, it claimed that the divine could never be approached by mortals. Hence, it destroyed not only the concept of revelation, but religion in general. It considered all the prophets noble reformers yet it deemed their visions as mere hallucinations. Despite this, Naden was able to sympathize with the followers of religion because she understood people's need for the assurances it could give. She was realistic enough to understand that not all her contemporaries were aware of science and philosophy, nor were they ready to accept a theory that announced the end of God's rule on earth. The first step of her project was to spread scientific ideas in order to make science a more effective solace than religion, and she used her poetry to do that.

Brontë was not able to voice her opinion of her father's faith freely, hence comes the lack of direct comments made by her on religion. Rossetti was also unable to express some of the doubts and anxieties she had as a young woman, doubts that were reflected in the restless dreams of her poems and perhaps her nervous breakdown. Even the atheist Naden had a secret attraction to mysticism and a sympathy for theists, which did not directly correspond with the scientific atheism with which she was associated. For this reason, the poets chose art, poetry in particular, as a vehicle for expressing these thoughts through imagery and symbols. Labelling them as 'devotional', 'Romantic', 'Evangelical', 'mystical', or even 'atheist' denies them their individuality. It makes them followers of groups rather than unique creative thinkers who had their own views on their society's religious beliefs, and who were able to voice these views in a sophisticated poetry.

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