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A STUDY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S POEMS ON DEATH

THESIS

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Throughout her life Christina Rossetti was pursued by the thought of death. Many of her poems, especially her later poems, display her concerns about death. Her early poems show death as the destroyer of mortal things, reflecting her pessimism and her sometimes naturalistic views on life. Her death wish is sometimes associated with her thwarted desire for absolute love in the world. Her religious poems describe death as the gate to heaven or to hell, the final resting place from the pains of her life. Either as her religious yearning for a better place of Resurrection or as her way of expressing her unfulfilled desire in the world, her persistent theme of death is an expression of the conflict between a sometimes skeptical, sometimes religious view.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Many critics have focused on Christina Rossetti's religious devotion and on the elegant lyrical power of her poetry. Undoubtedly she was a devout Christian throughout her life;<sup>1</sup> besides, her deep religious feeling, represented in her poetry and prose, is similar to the feelings of many of her contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Walter Thomas states that like many Victorian writers Christina Rossetti felt deeply and tried to accept "the God and the doctrines of Christianity as revealed in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer and as interpreted by the Church of England" (192). Her life and works reveal her belief in all of those, "yet her poems show, too, that in the way of her attainment of the [Christian] certainty obtruded the conflict in her nature between her love of the human and the perishable and the Divine and eternal" (Thomas 196).

Many critics express their doubts about her religious devotion because her tone in many poems reflects her lack of conviction in the existence of the other world. Many of Christina's poems, especially her later religious poems, express her praise of God and her hopeful expectation of heaven, where she believed she could be with God after death. Nevertheless, those poems are so frequently sad and

pessimistic that they seem to express a longing for the world of death rather than for the bliss and accomplishment of the present, materialistic world. Nesca Robb writes that "Christina is pursued, as she was all her days, by the thought of death" (84). Marya Zaturenska believes that Christina has been primarily "the poet of death, the poet of the death-wish"<sup>3</sup> (229). According to Georgina Battiscombe, William Rossetti said of her that "she was compelled, even if not naturally disposed, to regard this world as a 'Valley of the shadow of death'" (8). Without a doubt, she was concerned with death; more than a hundred poems seem to display her views on death either directly or indirectly.

In most of the poems on death, however, her vision of the other world or death wish is accompanied by her doubtful or reluctant tone. The poems on death, while manifesting Christina's pessimistic views on the world, seem to reflect her many conflicting ideas on thwarted dreams and desires. Most of her religious poems seem to depict her earnest desire to end her present life, waiting to be restored by Christ on Judgment Day. At certain moments of those poems her delightful mood of expectation turns out to be the sincere expression of her earnest belief. However, in many of those poems, the tone of hopeful expectations surprisingly mingles with sudden touches of melancholy and elegiac moods. In other instances of her poems on death, she writes from different motives than a religious one. She

was unhappy and in a doleful mood. She wished to be dead because of her unfulfilled dreams in the present world. Or she simply wanted to escape from her monotonous life, which lacked freshness and was contrary to her most passionate, enthusiastic nature. In a way, those poems of her thwarted desires and the theme of escape are more natural and unforced expressions of her mind than are her extremely religious poems. In some of her poems, her desire for sleep is linked with her death wish because she sought in death the place of rest.<sup>4</sup>

Christina has written her poems on death wish from various motives that do not always reflect her religious convictions of an afterlife. The discrepancy surrounding her various reasons for death wish can find its explanation in her biography as well as the social conditions of her time. One major element that could have caused her to concentrate on the idea of death can be found in her childhood experiences and in her family tradition. Margaret Sawtell states that Christina's childhood instruction in the Christian faith made her "evidently for some years accustomed . . . to the thought of dying young" (12). Lona Mosk Packer mentions that "the morbid strain" of her poetry, especially [her] early poetry, "can be attributed to her romantic heritage" (18).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Christina was closely related to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood members whose works were "in the main romantic in such qualities as

melancholy, dwelling on death, mystical suggestion, . . ."  
(Thomas 44).

Some biographies also tell about Christina's various imaginative proclivities, especially about her way of getting satisfaction from her creation of a dream world. As Thomas describes, she was constantly "at home in a dream world" (138). Since her inspiration came mostly from her imagination, her ideas on death seemed to come from her imagined situation. She sought "escape" in this imagined dream world, her imagination creating for herself a world "more tranquil than earth" (Thomas 190).

The interpretation of her death wish as her wish to take off her physical body of earthly desire can find its validity in the various unsatisfactory situations of her life. She failed in her two romantic episodes. Since she was a deeply religious person, it is probable that her belief in God and the religious doctrine of her church caused her to renounce two famous suitors. Yet, however strong she felt the differences between these men and herself, the denial wounded her womanly pride and left "a staggering blow" on her mind as William Michael Rossetti says in his memoir. The disgrace and the sadness she suffered from the final loss of her womanly role inevitably became an element that led her to contemplate death as a way of escape.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, from her childhood on she was constantly

bothered by ill health. Her brother states that she "was an invalid, seeking at times the countenance of Death very close to her own" (Packer 21). She suffered after 1871 from Graves' disease, which caused the disfigurement of her body with such symptoms as "shaking hands, protruding eyeballs, . . . fearful brown skin, and . . . increased weight" (Zaturenska 184). She is said, from then on, to have become "more of a recluse than ever" with the loss of "feminine vanity" because of her illness. Christina's restricted life, forced upon her by her ill health and by the spirit and conditions of the Victorian century, made her escape to another world of imagination as is shown in her poetry.

After all, the study of her life and character, especially of her unfulfilled yearnings, allows us to see that her vision of ideal happiness and truth could be most nearly satisfied by her "flight from the Finite to the Infinite," that is, in her quest for God and the world of death (Thomas 190). Since her life was a lonely struggle between her unfulfilled dreams and various obligations inculcated by her family's intellectual, religious tradition, her death wish was her wish to escape from her dull, joyless daily life.

The poems on death suggest Christina's conflicting, inconsistent ideas on death. She desired and sought for her death in her poems from different motives, which never can be reduced to a simple formula. Her death wish was one way



of expressing her various human desires, whether religious or not. The various motives of her death wish will only explain how a delicate, sensitive mind of a poet can find a way to put both her hope and her discontent into one wish.

## CHAPTER 2

### JUVENILE POEMS AND CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

In 1847 Christina Rossetti's grandfather printed her first volume of verses for private circulation. According to Geoffrey Rossetti the collection is said to list "sixty-six pages of verse, written between her eleventh and sixteenth years" (97). Her brother William Michael Rossetti included some of those early poems in the "Juvenilia" section of his collection. The poems of Christina's early period reflect the popular themes of her day with their melancholy and unhealthy tones.<sup>7</sup> She wrote sadly of love and death, popular subjects of her time. Those subjects, as Thomas points out, were "not only in the air but also in the annuals, gift books, and individual volumes of poetry written by men as well as women" (28). The poems, though clearly "derivative and the work of a child," are important, because they show that at an early age Christina held certain of those attitudes of mind that prevail in her mature work (Geoffrey Rossetti 99); they reveal Christina's imaginative proclivities, while their subjects indicate her mind's interests during her early life.

Christina's deep interest in death seems to be influenced by "adolescent emotionalism, ill health, and the intense religious atmosphere that enveloped her mother and

her sister Maria" (Zaturenska 54). The early poems reveal the influence of a succession of serious illnesses on her character and her poetry. Christina suffered from various illnesses from girlhood on and was "more than once called on to set her house in order before what threatened to be the inevitable end" (Thomas 59). Her weak physical condition could be a major factor of her early pessimism, obsession with death, and unhealthy love life. However, in a way, she appears from the biographies to have been a born pessimist. Her sensitive mind was not only bothered by her physical condition, but also was affected by external factors, as one episode shows.

Packer describes an episode during Christina's childhood that might explain "what could have been the cause of . . . early pessimism" (18). Christina is said to have made a grave for a dead mouse she found accidentally in her backyard. After several days passed, Christina, out of sympathy, dug up the body to see what had happened to the dead mouse. Her shock over the foul smelling flesh and black insects probably remained in her memory for her lifetime:

The youthful mind would not fail to draw an obvious conclusion: Why exercise a prudent self-restraint if in the end the strawberry will be devoured by snails and once-living flesh given to the worms. It was only in the otherworldliness of

faith that she could find refuge from this kind of pessimistic naturalism which nonetheless haunted her the remainder of her life. (Packer 16)

In a short poem written in 1846 when she was fifteen, "Gone for Ever," Christina achieved a markedly characteristic note:

Oh happy rosebud blooming  
 Upon thy parent tree,  
 Nay, thou art too presuming;  
 For soon the earth entombing  
 Thy faded charms shall be,  
 And the chill damp consuming. . . .

(1-6)

This poem is an extraordinary achievement in self-expression for a girl not yet sixteen. Two contrasting images of nature, the bright, joyful exuberance of life and the cold, painful death, express the transiency of life in the poem's condensed form.

Christina was "at home in a dream world" when she wrote "The Dead City" at sixteen (Thomas 139). In this first person narrative, the speaker reaches "the splendid streets" (91) of the city, "still and silent . . . / As a city of the dead" (94-95), after having wandered through "the mazes" of a solitary wood. In the wood the speaker finds out "the living green" that has been "blighted" (62-63), and she must go on "as in a dream" with solid darkness overhead and

unseen ground beneath (77). The picture of a bleak, deadly scene expresses Christina's mental state as well as her resignation.

Two companion poems written late in 1847 when she was only sixteen are "Heart's Chill Between" on the theme of inconstancy, and "Death's Chill Between," a girl's lament for her dead lover. The poems' controlled tone with the woman's patient attitude toward the departed lover seems to picture Christina of later years:

But it is over, it is done:  
 I hardly heed it now:  
 So many weary years have run  
 Since then I think not how  
 Things might have been--  
 . . . What time I am where others be  
 My heart seems very calm-  
 Stone-calm . . . . (13-20)

According to Thomas, these poems are the first ones to be printed for the public (29). The poems prove how the theme of love goes hand in hand with the theme of renunciation even in her earliest poems. They also testify to the fact that "she could write convincingly about an unhappy love" before she even had experienced any sort of love (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti 18).

Christina's life was continually made difficult by physical ill-health. Geoffrey Rossetti states how the

physical illness could have affected Christina: ". . . it may well be true that these pessimistic tendencies of mind were due to a semi-pathological condition of the body . . ." (98). Geoffrey Rossetti also takes an example of Christina's early portraits that reveal "a shrinking, timid person with somewhat ascetic features, heavy-lidded eyes, and sallow complexion" (98). Especially the portrait painted by Collinson in 1849 is referred to as "a true likeness of Christina" by William M. Rossetti (Geoffrey Rossetti 98)<sup>8</sup>: this portrait is of "a young girl who appears dainty and neat but with a despondent uncertainty of mind."

However, Christina's preoccupation with death and pain was not wholly the result of the prolonged ill-health and troubles of later years. In addition to the possibility of an underlying physical cause for her pessimism, Geoffrey Rossetti states that Christina was "the subject of religious exaltation which frequently bordered on the verge of religious melancholy. The sense of other-worldliness, of sin on earth contrasted to the purity of Heaven, pervades much of her work" (99). In her early poems there is "the sense of Heaven breathing in to mix with those of earth, and the hope of rest is a religious hope, assured and full of quiet joy" (Sawtell 22). To consider one example among many, in the third section of "Three Nuns," written during 1849 and 1850, this feeling of other-worldliness is forcibly expressed. The "antithesis of the spiritual opposed to the

worldly is clearly marked"; such oppositions occur in the following two stanzas most significantly (Geoffrey Rossetti 99):

\*

Thou world from which I am come out,  
 Keep all thy gems and gold;  
 . . . . .  
 My heart shall beat with a new life  
 When thine is dead and cold;  
 When thou dost fear I shall be bold.

When Earth shall pass away with all  
 Her pride and pomp of sin,  
 The City builded without hands  
 Shall safely shut me in.

. . . . .

Where their hopes end my joys begin. (152-165)

The early poems offer a glimpse of the poet's inner proclivities that made possible her later poems. They manifest Christina's sensitivity that eventually led her to "a sense of the vanity and unsatisfaction of life on earth" (Geoffrey Rossetti 102). This sensitivity was the force that produced so much of her poetry on death and thwarted desires in later years.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LOVE POEMS

Christina wrote a number of love poems in spite of her unfulfilled love affairs. Twice she refused the possible happiness of marriage. The biographies give no sufficient explanation of her reasons for rejecting two marriage proposals. From William Michael's description in his memoir, it seems as if Christina's ideals could never be met by such a man as James Collinson.<sup>9</sup> Her brother also hints at a lack of religious sympathy between Christina and Charles Cayley. According to Marya Zaturenska, Christina's love affair with Cayley was "a failure not because of their lack of love but because of other circumstantial reasons" (54).

However, Paul Elmer More points out that the real cause of Christina's unfulfilled love life lies in her mind's inclination: "some inner necessity of sorrow and resignation, . . . , drew her back in both cases, some perception that the real treasure of her heart lay not in this world" (817). The important thing is that she felt the want of the love she had denied herself all through her life. Her "celestial yearnings" were perhaps "only the unconscious expression of that want" (Times Literary Supplement 106).



Christina Rossetti always bore with her "the sadness of unfulfilled affection" (More 817). Like her thoughts in life, the chief themes of her poetry, especially of her early poems, are love and death, and the love is "either unrequited or cut short" (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti 18). Because of her preoccupation with death, even in her love poems, "death is a constant theme, and love is only something that might have been or may be in another world" (Times Literary Supplement 106).

Christina wrote of this tragic, unfulfilled love in a personal tone, which is in sharp contrast to her devout, calm, monotonous life. The question arises about how much of the experience she actually knew for herself, since she was the one who refused the consummation of a love relationship in both proposals. Partly she could imagine it or deduce it from the experience of those around her, since she had a lively and sympathetic imagination. Therefore, the fact that her love poems are so personal does not mean that they are necessarily written to or about any particular person. In fact, her feelings about a defeated love relationship could be derived either from her imagination or from her memory of various unsatisfactory relationships with men. As Battiscombe firmly states, it would be a great mistake to "use the contents or chronology of her poems as evidence to support a theory about the nature of her love-life" with such a delicate poet as Christina (18). Some

speculations, however, are hardly avoidable.

Christina's thoughts dwelt often on the feelings of both the dying and the surviving lover in her love poems. As she addressed so many of her early poems to death, the archetype of the demon-lover strikes again and again in such early poems as "When I am dead, my dearest," "Remember," "Dreamland," "Two Thoughts of Death," and numerous others. In those poems, the dying one "casts a last look of tenderness" and hopes that "the worst pang," of which he is the cause, "may be tempered to the beloved" (Robb 105). In those poems death "has been a reminder of her many vain longings and sighs" for the man in her youth (Packer 364). Sawtell adequately surmises the main stream of Christina's poetry:

One strain runs through them--expectation of early death--dividing them into the two thoughts of the parting of earthly lovers, and the ultimate eternal satisfaction to be found in a more perfect world beyond. (24)

Christina wrote her celebrated lyric, "When I am Dead, My Dearest" in December, 1848 (Packer 50). She was only eighteen when she wrote this poem, and at that time she was engaged to Collinson. It is indeed "an odd lyric to be written by a girl presumably in the first flush of triumphant love" (Packer 50):

When I am dead, my dearest,

Sing no sad songs for me;

Plant thou no roses at my head. (1-3)

Christina's doleful pessimism during her most blissful moments sounds paradoxical and therefore inexplicable. One can only guess that Christina quite sincerely never accepted her engagement with delight, nor expected her engagement to be consummated by marriage. Perhaps she was a woman whose ideal could never be met by an earthly lover like Collinson. Or, perhaps her inmost being lived in an attitude of renunciation. About Christina's attitude Sawtell writes:

She loved and was loved; but when the end of this state was already in sight, she dreamed continually of herself as dying young, as dead, as mourned by lover and friends, lost to their sight, but nevertheless enfolded herself in such a sanctuary of rest and sleep that those who mourned might feel comforted. (24)

This idea appears in poem after poem. Furthermore, her unfulfilled love affairs were related to her religion: she rejected an earthly lover out of her sense of divine responsibility. Christina's thoughts dwelt upon

the call of the divine to a dedicated life, to a detachment from the things of this world. In point of fact, Christina's heart is still 'entangled' with the potent though dim vision of the Divine Lover: to erotic love she was as yet

only half awake. (Sawtell 24)

The poems that follow in the spring and summer, "An End," "Dreamland," "Remember," "Rest," "After Death," and its companion poem, "A Pause" are often praised as "the finest of the love lyrics" (Thomas 174). They were written before she reached twenty, and their tone of mournful sadness and resignation suggests that Christina might have regretted some unfulfilled possibility in her own life. It seems as if, Packer writes, ". . . there was a blight upon her heart and mind" long before her engagement was broken:

Was it caused by the realization that she had made a dreadful mistake, that she had bound herself to one man too soon, and hence made impossible a rich and satisfying relationship which might have fulfilled her dream of sexual happiness? (Packer 51)

As a matter of fact, Christina's poems of this period make one doubt the real nature of her love life. As in her early poems before experience, so also after she has known love, her sad, uncompensated tone and the theme of an intimate relation with death appear repeatedly. Rather, in the poems of this early period, "there runs . . . the paradox of her thought; the paradox that 'death mars all' and is yet powerless to destroy the complicated web of human affections and responsibilities" (Robb 107). To her the world of death is as close as the love of the present world. According to

Thomas, these poems of youthful love "have as much to do with death as with love, but it is a death that brings no haunting fear":

Christina once wrote of the dead as those "who characteristically go down into silence"; and again: "The land of the shadow of death is no longer the dominion of the king of terrors, but rather a tiring-closet for the bride of the King of Kings." (174)

Christina's nineteenth year, 1849, was a productive one<sup>10</sup> during which she wrote her finest love lyrics. According to Thomas, it was also "the year of the greatest vitality of the Brotherhood" which might explain the reason for Christina's productivity:

The reason for this heightened poetical activity may be far to seek within the growth of her own mind, but the obvious facts are that she was then thrown constantly with an imaginative, hard working group of young people and was herself engaged to be married to one of them. (Thomas 46)

In 1849, Christina published in The Germ two poems of the unseen world: "An End" and "Dreamland." In "An End" Christina sang of how "Love," a personification of an abstract quality or a lover, is dead (1) and how the mourners sit by his grave "in the quiet evening hours" (7), remembering "all that was in the long ago" (19-20). The

poem is not about her common theme of the celebration of death; instead, it is a sad, lugubrious verse of emotional outpouring, mourning for the loss of a loved one. The survivors' eyes are described as "shadow-veiled" (18), as they sing to a few chords, "sad and low" (15).

The theme of separation caused by death and its effect upon those who remain is felt in the repressed tone of "An End." The poem's consistent tone is described by elements such as the setting of "quiet evening hours" (7) and the autumn season as well as the images of "dying flowers" (3), "the harvesting" (9), and "a few chords" (15) of music. The strong impact of the death of "Love" on the "last warm summer day" (10) upon the narrator's mind is stressed by the use of an unrestrained free verse of three stanzas, whose rhyme schemes are as irregular as the length of each line.

In "After Death" Christina drew a picture of her imagined death. According to Packer the poem displays "the usual note of immature self-pity":

[The poem] is an externalization of a wish-dream common to young girls, that of punishing the indifferent lover by their death. In this poem an older man, who condescendingly calls the deceased "Poor child," shows his repentance by weeping once she is gone. (53)

The poem presents a pathetic self-portrait in which the young girl desires the love of a man even in the form of

"pity": "He did not love me living; but once dead / He pitied me; and very sweet it is / To know he still is warm though I am cold" (12-14). This last sentence expresses an irony. She says that she can feel "sweet" in her coldness, while the beloved man is "warm" and fully alive to the things of the world. Her voice here sounds of forced resignation. Or, she is just stressing the solace which the love-stricken dead person can get from the slight touch of compassion or "pity."

The address of the man to the girl as "poor child" vividly exhibits the man's attitude toward her. Also the poem says that the man does not "touch the shroud" or "raise the fold" of the girl's face to take a look at it, nor does he hold her hand. Even with all the knowledge about the man's feeling toward her, the poem's last statement delivers the girl's unflinching attitude toward the man, which intimates Christina's ambiguous character. The workings of her imagination by putting her self-image in this conscious but lifeless stage manifest the poet's endless yearning for love in its true sense.

A woman laid out in death or buried in the earth, as in this poem, is an obsessive subject in Christina's early poems. Dolores Rosenblum points out that the dead woman was Christina's frequent subject:

Sometimes still a conscious watcher, as in "After Death," Rossetti's dead woman testifies both to

the transcendence of desire and to the persistence of desire: she is dead because life is not enough and because the aesthetic of renunciation requires this ultimate gesture. (Rosenblum 47)

The poem, in its intimate exchange of feelings between the live and dead lovers, has to do with "the borderland between life and death, a state in which the spirit clings to the old familiar things and yet can no longer sensibly affect them" (Thomas 86).

In the sonnet "A Pause," which was written on June 14, 1853, Christina entwined her familiar themes of love and death in "the plaintive, restrained, sweetly melancholy manner. . . ." (Packer 75). As in "After Death," "A Pause" pictures the speaker as lying dead with soul "love-bound" and loitering on its way until it catches the sound of a longed-for step or voice:

My thirsty soul kept watch for one away:  
 Perhaps he loves, I thought, remembers, grieves.  
 At length there came the step upon the stair,  
 Upon the lock the old familiar hand:  
 Then first my spirit seemed to scent the air  
 Of Paradise; . . . . (7-12)

On the other hand, a pair of sonnets entitled "Two Thoughts of Death" portray Christina's "attitude toward death, at one and the same time extraordinarily morbid and unusually joyful" (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti: A



Divided Life 78). The poems are written in the Petrarchan form, one often chosen to express love. As the title of the sonnets suggests, however, the theme of the poems is related to death or an afterlife that Christina explicitly desires in many other poems. Through the melancholy tone, nature imagery, and pathetic feelings of the main character, the mainstream of the sonnets describes effectively the loneliness and the dreary feelings of a man forsaken by his lady's early death. The man soliloquizes beside the dead lover's grave, and his effort to get over the feeling of loss leads him to the meditations on death and brings the final solace to his mind.

Christina introduced a male figure as the sole character, whose inner mind is vividly expressed. Sonnet One describes the man's observation of the dead lover's decaying body, which, in its realistic picture, gives life to natural objects surrounding the grave. Sonnet Two is concerned more with the man's feelings and emotional struggle to overcome the loss. Battiscombe writes about the poems' imagery of contrast:

The first sonnet, crammed full of worms and corruption, is a production nasty enough to turn a squeamish stomach (it is tempting to remember the dead mouse in the garden at Holmer Green); the second is a triumphant answer to all this grisly horror. (78-79)

The images of contrast between the man's memory of the woman before her death and the reality of her bodily destruction show the closeness of the two states, life and death, Christina's important subjects. The adjectives that describe the lady when she was alive are "sweet and red" and "graceful." The words that depict the disruption of the lady's body are strongly accented with their implications: "rotteness," "corruption," "cruel stress," "foul," and "nothingness."

However, Christina also clearly stated that the ugly sight of one's death was only a matter of an uncertain human being's perception. The oneness of the beautiful lady and the "foul" creatures of the earth which feast upon the dead body, and therefore whose essence is the same as the beautiful body of the lady in her life, gives us a glimpse of her effort to love all the creatures of the world, even to the worms of the earth:

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

(6-9)

Sonnet One's imagery vividly expresses the poet's realization of a natural phenomenon: the closeness of the seemingly contrasting events of the world, the life and death of all creatures, is what she saw in nature

constantly. The speaker in the sestet wonders at the beauty of natural objects growing upon the lady's death. Just like the ugly worms, the green "grass" and "the dew-dropping rose" also feed upon the flesh of the once "sweet" lady. The poet's thoughts about the transiency of life and beauty of the world, including the thought about speechless flowers, are portrayed in the speaker's tone.

Sonnet Two tells how the love feeling lasts despite all the physical changes made to the lady and reveals the solace the speaker receives from the hope for the new world of death. "Heartsease," the name of the flower the speaker touches on the lady's grave, is rich with its connotations; the wild pansy, a different name for the flower, is called "heartsease" because of its ability to cure the discomforts of love.

Also the rise of "a starry moth" toward the sun implies the soul of the dead lady. The interpretation of a natural phenomenon as something purposeful might express a pathetic fallacy in the view of the man. In a way, the beautiful imagery of "a starry moth" as a reflection of the dead person's soul has something to do with Christina's beliefs in Christianity and the resurrection of the soul:

while with new life from these

Fluttered a starry moth that rapidly

Rose toward the sun: sunlighted flashed on me

Its wings that seemed to throb like heart-pulses.

. . . . .

. . . it flew straight up into the light.

(5-11)

The theme of liberation through death from the bondage of the present world is part of this poem's main import. The speaker says in the last three lines of the poem that the lady's "night," her life in the world, has turned into eternal "day," which will never "turn back to night." From whatever firm beliefs of the poet this thought comes, the powerful Italian love sonnet portrays a relationship between the strong feelings of love and the thoughts on death.

"The Heart Knows Its Bitterness" (1857) contains an attitude of despair, for which Packer gives an explanation: "an autumnal mood of sorrow and desolation settled down upon her shortly after Scott [William Bell Scott]<sup>11</sup> left for Newcastle" (Packer 72). In the poem the speaker vents her exacerbated heart to the lover who does not respond in a satisfactory way:

You scratch my surface with your pin,  
 You stroke me smooth with hushing breath:--  
 Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,  
 Probe my quick core and sound my depth.  
 You call me with a puny call,  
 You talk, you smile, you nothing do:  
 . . . . .  
 Your vessels are by much too strait:

Were I to pour, you could not hold.--

(33-42)

The sensual imagery of verbs such as "scratch," "stroke," "dig within" contrasts with the lack of understanding in the speaker's associate. According to Sawtell, the poem contains "an unusually outspoken self-justification . . . . a passionate insistence on her deep capacity for love" (48). Sawtell further writes that when she wrote this poem Christina must have been affected by the members of the Brotherhood who were deeply preoccupied with Dante Gabriel and his "Sid [Elizabeth Siddal]." Nevertheless the poem expresses Christina, who was probably

capable of a deeper and more faithful love than any of them, who stands in the background, solitary, stricken, the depth of her suffering unnoticed and unknown, forbidden by the conventions to give open expression to it, here gives vent to the smouldering fires within her, in these burning verses, and in this passionate claim to a capacity for love which seems but little comprehended by the others. (Sawtell 48)

"The Convent Threshold," which was written in July, 1858, is referred to as "the most noteworthy of these poems of what we might call official renunciation" (Thomas 162). In the poem the speaker, a woman on the convent threshold, is writing to the man with whom she had "sinned a pleasant

sin" (51) and from whom she had been "barred by blood," a father's and a brother's (1-2). Her lover is one who has sought only pleasure and knowledge (100); now she entreats that he "repent" and climb with her "the kindled stair" to heaven (16).

Alice Meynell remarks that the poem is "a song of penitence for love that yet praises love . . ." (206). However, Dante Gabriel calls the poem "a very splendid piece of feminine asceticism" (Thomas 162). Thomas writes on the poem:

. . . the passion of the novitiate is surely not altogether ascetic; in one mood she hardly regrets the past and shrinks from the future.  
(162)

As a matter of fact, the poem seems to be filled with human longing and desire and fails to sublimate human into divine love:

I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,  
My hair which you shall see no more--  
Alas for joy that went before,  
For joy that dies, for love that dies!  
Only my lips still turn to you,  
My livid lips that cry, Repent!  
O weary life, O weary Lent,  
O weary time whose stars are few!  
How should I rest in Paradise, (61-69)

The unexpected ending of this strange and powerful poem expresses the woman's desire to meet her lover in "Paradise": "There we shall meet as once we met, / And love with old familiar love" (147-148). The speaker wishes for death because it represents an ideal that offers hope that has been denied on earth. As Theo Dombrowski states, the poem, as "in [other] tormented poems of love," expresses "an attempt to achieve a transcendent unity":

Christina Rossetti is searching restlessly, half guiltily, for some kind, any kind, of unity. She considers a meeting of ghosts, as if, removed from the flesh, she and her lover can at last meet, their union sanctified. . . . Those restless desires that recur throughout the poems-- for love, for death, for salvation, for release from torment--are characterized not by lofty strength or the grand gesture, but by the desire to submit passively, to be swept up. Ultimately, though, it is the foundation of Christina Rossetti's essentially tragic view of her own emotional life. . . . (76)

In a way, as Packer says, "The Convent Threshold" "closes on a note of hope," which introduces a new theme in Christina's poetry, one that was "to grow more conspicuous with the years":

Love on earth can be renounced, but preferably

for the recompense of reunion in heaven.  
 Lovers who in this life have given up the love  
 that fails to satisfy will win each other  
 through Christian love in a newer, completer,  
 more rapturous and intense life, to which this  
 one is but a prelude. (130)

As in "The Convent Threshold," that love renounced on earth may be claimed anew beyond the gates of death is the theme of many of Christina's personal poems, "the poems in which she writes autobiography" (Thomas 163).

On the other hand, "The Prince's Progress," written around 1861-65, is a bitter comment upon the failure of earthly love and the deficiency of the earthly bridegroom, whose delay is responsible for his bride's death. The poppy symbolism, appearing throughout the poem, gives it unity. The red and white poppies "symbolize the race between love and death, the theme of the poem" (Packer 198):

Red and white poppies grow at her feet.  
 The blood-red wait for sweet summer heat,  
 Wrapped in bud-coats, hairy and neat;  
 But the white buds swell, one day they will  
     burst,  
 Will open their death cups drowsy and sweet:--  
 Which will open the first? (31-36)

Death here is the penalty for the failure of love. The final fate of the princess deprived of love is symbolized by



the "white poppies she must wear" in the last stanza. Her bier is "strewn with white poppies," the sleep-inducing flower. Packer comments on the thematic import of the poem:

. . . disillusionment is not necessarily absent from "Prince's Progress." Both hope and disappointment are present in this poem as separate elements that do not blend. Symbolically the death of the princess represents the renunciation of love, a theme to which Christina was committed. (202)

In her great sonnet series "Monna Innominata," Christina fully expressed her themes of love and sad renunciation. According to Packer, "the thematic chord of reunion in paradise had been struck again and again, in poem after poem, and it was to swell to a full crescendo in the 'Monna Innominata' sonnet sequence and the Italian love poems" (224). In these poems the ideal, noble conception of love remains impossible to achieve on the earth: not in real life, but only in dreams, are lovers finally united. As Thomas states, the sonnet sequence "tells the story of love foregone; only in dreams are she and her friend at one, and youth and beauty having passed away, only a life reborn will annul loss and the grief. . ." (163). The third sonnet reveals that love such as Christina might have "celebrated" is only "the stuff of dreams" (Packer 228):

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,  
 . . . . .  
 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,  
 Though there be nothing new beneath the sun.

(29-31; 37-42)

The poem's "mournful music" expresses "not the luxury of a fanciful melancholy, but the real pangs of a woman who had forgone love from a sense of duty" (Times Literary Supplement 106). In the eleventh sonnet Christina described her painful experience of parting and unfulfilled desire:

Many in aftertimes will say of you  
 "He loved her"- while of me what will they say?  
 Not that I loved you more than just in play,  
 For fashions' sake as idle women do,

(141-144)

Christina Rossetti's dual perception of things often led her to see the opposing qualities in a thing. Her sensitive eyes saw life as an initial stage in a continuum of death. Because she experienced daily death-in-life, conversely, she also believed in life after the actual death of a person. This belief, however, looks like a wistful

dream, as her uncertain, fluctuating tone designates. Especially in the case of her wistful dream of reunion with a person she loved, her unconfirmed attitude was more apparent.

In the "Later Life # 26," life is referred to as "Death's self" which is "set off on pilgrimage." Christina's insecure feelings about life were made explicit in her comparison of the early years of life to the "travelling with tottering steps" in the poem. The mature years of life, "the second stage" in the poem, sound bleak and more insecure, when it is compared to "one mere desert dust / Where Death sits veiled amid creation's rust."

On the other hand, "Later Life # 28" expresses a wistful dream of being loved by somebody. In this direct, first-person narration, Christina created a situation where she could express her earnest but stealthy desire for being loved by somebody she only knew of. The situation of "her friend's death" seems to be the only possible way that Christina could make her love feelings known to her secret lover. In the poem the dead lover watches over the living "with unslumbering eyes and heart." The speaker's wistful dream of the realization of her love relationship in death is a pathetic one, and the fact reminds one of the unfulfilled desire of the poet whose quiet, secluded life kept her from obtaining any balanced, self-fulfilling love relationship with a man.

Christina created a situation in the sestet, where a dead lover constantly stays with his old friends (probably females) and encourages them, "brimful of words," "brimful of knowledge," and "brimful of love." The repetition of the word "brimful" connotes her deep wishes and creates a lovely, rhythmic effect. The paradox lies in the fact that the speaker has to expect the self-fulfilling love only after her loved one's death, the situation in which nothing can be expressed, and therefore nothing can be sure.

Thus, as Christina's poems progressed toward her mature thoughts about death, love, and life, her resolution to rely on her religion becomes deeper. With her sad resignation, her mature poems express a more passive attitude than her early poems, a "passive attitude toward the powers that command her heart and her soul--a passivity which by its completeness assumes the misleading semblance of a deliberate determination of life" (More 818).

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EXPRESSION OF DESIRE FOR REST OR ESCAPE

The ceaseless longing for rest reoccurs as one major theme of Christina's poems. Since many of the poems express "infinite weariness," death is welcomed in them as bringing rest (Thomas 174); the imagery of sleep and the grave as a resting place describes Christina Rossetti's cry of impatience toward her life of monotony and illness. According to Packer, Christina's longing for the grave as "an ideal to be achieved" was "possibly a symptom of anemia" caused by her unhealthy physical and spiritual conditions (34). Sawtell mentions that Christina's longing for "rest in sleep" was an "escape from intolerable dreariness and weariness, with a desire that was an agony" (22). In most of the poems about her desire for escape, her language sounds "a note of despair rather than hope" (Sawtell 22). Or, it could just be that she was affected by a literary tradition, since "the rest, the sense of fleeting Time, and the mortality of earthly things seem to be common in many a young poet" (Sawtell 12).

Packer says that in the spring of 1849 Christina's "health gave rise to serious anxiety": "In view of the menace to her health, the poems she wrote that April are of particular interest" (53). Of the four bearing the date of

April, 1849, "Dreamland," with its exquisite "music and cadence" and "its spiritualized sensuousness and portrayal of veiled or shadowy images," establishes "the region between reality and unreality" (Thomas 45). The poem pictures dreamland as a shadowy resting-place where sunless rivers bear onward a sleeper, who lies forgetful of all earthly sights and sounds. The poem describes a dead person who takes an everlasting rest in "her perfect peace" (32). By selecting a female as a main character of this poem, Christina almost identifies herself with the dead one, revealing her innermost desire for escape from worldly concerns.

The death image is closely linked with the typical "sleep" image, which means for her a place of perfect "rest." As the poem says in the last stanza, the dead person will "rest" until the "joy shall overtake" her "sleep." In this sense, death as a resting place appears to be a waiting place for a better resurrection day, a time of "her perfect peace." The image of "a mossy shore" (26) as the site of her "dream land" where the dead person lies down, though typical of the background of a few poems of Tennyson, suggests the possibility of the regeneration and fertility of the afterlife.

Some of the expressions work on a symbolic level. For instance, Christina says the lady was "led by a single star" (5). The single star might signify her own life, which

possibly consisted of a few consistent desires and interests. The expression that the "shadows are / Her pleasant lot" sounds like the poet's self-definition of her own life as a quiet, reclusive one. Also, the prevalent, unified attitude to abstain from the worldly riches of "the rosy morn," "the fields of corn," "the grain," and "the rain" contributes to understanding the otherworldliness of the poet's nature.

On the other hand, the poem "Rest" expresses the spirit of resignation. The poem is addressed to the "Earth," which covers and protects the dead body. In this Italian sonnet, death is portrayed as a waiting place between the physical world and "Paradise." The world of death turns out to be a resting place where temporarily the "wearied" poet wanted to reside. Though fully alive to the world, Christina's thoughts were centered on and her life was directed toward the life after death, to that rest which she described in such persuasive tones:

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.

(1-4)

It is a wistful dream of the poet to get away from the world of trouble and concern, which has "no room for mirth / With its harsh laughter." The combination of words in "harsh

laughter" is an oxymoron, exhibiting Christina's inner conflict.

In the poem "she" whose heart has ceased to stir is "curtained with" a silence more musical than song:

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. (5-8)

The fact that the world of death can be "almost Paradise," instead of a perfect Paradise, is ironic. Even in her death of "stillness" and "silence," the speaker seems to be unable to get over the world, contrary to Christina, who often expressed her desire to escape.

In the sestet the speaker asserts the meaningfulness of death in paradoxical terms: "Darkness more clear than noonday holdeth her, / Silence more musical than any song." As More comments, in this stillness, "this silence more musical than any song," the feminine heart speaks with "a simplicity and consummate purity":

Nor could one, perhaps, find in all Christina  
Rossetti's poems a single line that better  
expresses the character of her genius than these  
exquisite words: "With stillness that is almost  
paradise." That is the mood that, with the  
passing away of love, never leaves her; that is  
her religion; her acquiescent Yea, to the world



and the soul and to God. Into that region of rapt stillness it seems almost a sacrilege to penetrate with inquisitive, critical mind; it is like tearing away the veil of modesty. (820)

Unusually, the narrator of the poem describes the dead lady as having no consciousness: ". . . her very heart has ceased to stir" (11).

Christina's constant preoccupation with death and longing for rest yielded "Restive" (1854), the third poem of the "Three Stages" series. According to K.E. Janowitz, the poem explores Christina's "existence in terms of its own recurrent pattern of hope and despair" (198). In the poem life is seen as a burden she must carry until the release of death. Whatever the cause of her unhappiness, the speaker shows patient endeavor overcoming her death wish, a true awareness of her human condition.

In stanza one the speaker imagines herself as able to see and hear, yet lines seven and eight of stanza two indicate a loss of awareness:

I thought to deal the death-stroke at a blow:  
To give all, once for all, but never more:-  
Then sit to hear the low waves fret the shore,  
Or watch the silent snow.

'Oh rest,' I thought, 'in silence and the dark:  
Oh rest, if nothing else, from head to feet:

Though I may see no more the poppies wheat,  
Or sunny soaring lark. (1-8)

Janowitz writes that Stanza two "represents an interesting psychological progression from the preceding lines": "at this point the poet-speaker moves away from the image of life-in-death described above to one suggesting actual death" (200). The speaker envisions being enveloped by darkness as well as silence. Her portrayal of a human "rest" is "that of a winter of the human body and spirit which carried with it the connotation of the grave" (Janowitz 201).

Nevertheless, in lines nine through twelve of stanza three the speaker retreats from this bleak dream of death, breaking its spell by reminding us that she is still alive: "And much there is to suffer, much to do, / Before the time be past" (11-12). The suggestion of suicide, strongly implied by the imagery of the preceding lines, gives way to a resigned acceptance of the continuance of life.

Christina's impatience toward her life is explored in the exhausted tone of the poem. The phrase, "a tedious monotone," in stanza five gives a sense of empty sameness to her life. The lines "I thought to shut myself and dwell alone / Unseeking and unsought" carry a double implication. The speaker here desires "both a shutting out of the external world and a 'shutting' of herself, a cessation of all vital impulses within her" (Janowitz 201).

In stanza six, however, there is a sudden change in mood:

But first I tired, and then my care grew slack,  
Till my heart dreamed, and maybe wandered too:-  
I felt the sunshine glow again, and knew  
The swallow on its track. (21-24)

The desire for life reasserts itself in those lines of vigilance and alertness. The speaker's vivid description of the life and movement of nature indicates her own renewal of interest in the external world. The poem seems to express Christina's new and fresh reawakening to love of the world, however short-lived it may turn out.

The heavy caesuras and regular iambic rhythm convey "the stance of simply enduring until death" (Janowitz 201):

These joys may drift, as time now drifts along;  
And cease, as once they ceased.  
I may pursue, and yet may not attain,  
Athirst and panting all the days I live:  
Or seem to hold, yet nerve myself to give  
What once I gave, again. (33-40)

Christina wrote "A Burden," a valediction for "her" dead in July, 1858. Lying "at rest asleep and dead" (1), the dead are fulfilled, the living still "hope and love with throbbing breast" (33), and long for the "nest of love beneath / The sod":

There is a nest of love beneath

The sod, a home prepared before:  
 Our brethren whom one mother bore  
 Live there, and toil and ache no more--  
 (60-64)

The poem sounds melodramatic with its "emotional effusions" and repetitive, "coherent pattern" of three-lined stanzas (Rosenblum 44). In the poem, as usual, the dead are both present and absent; they forget and remember; and they are able to "watch across the parting wall" (66).

On the other hand, the poem "The Spring" written in 1859 is about Christina's frequent theme of the transience of earthly joy: "There is no time like Spring that passes by, / Now newly born, and now / Hastening to die" (37-39). The phrase "Hastening to die" in the last line, in its surprisingly concise way, conveys the sense of futility in life and nature. Janowitz writes:

"Hastening" carries a double connotation. It suggests the wonderful burgeoning force of nature" as it is expressed in much of the poem. The word also reflects the ominous sense of time and change which emerges in stanza three. The joyfully precipitous motion of life in living things is seen by the poet as equally the inevitable movement towards decay and death. (198)

Death is sought as "an antidote to life" seen as suffering in several religious poems. "Cobwebs" (1885), "Better So"

(1861), and "Life and Death" (1863) are not exceptional in portraying Christina's pessimistic view of life and her desire to escape from wearisome troubles. Dombrowski illustrates this painful situation in her religious poems:

The religious poems, of course, inherit a wealth of traditional opposites; . . . . Time and eternity, earthly misery and heavenly bliss intensify by antithesis the torment of a trapped soul longing for escape. And the torment is especially intense because the speaker in many of these religious poems seems torn between longing and loathing, hope and despair, resolution and weariness. (71)

In "Cobwebs" the poet is "painfully conscious of the oppositions upon which life is founded" (Janowitz 201). The poem expresses the poet's yearning toward the union of those opposite facts by describing a "land" where no vibrant "pulse of life" exists. The land of Christina's dream intimates her spiritual sterility, which was enforced by her various unsatisfactory situations, or it is a place that provides an escape from all conflict, whether or not that conflict directly threatens the individual:

It is a land with neither night nor day,  
Nor heat nor cold, nor any wind nor rain,  
Nor hills nor valleys; but one even plain  
Stretches through long unbroken miles away,

. . . . .  
 No pulse of life through all the loveless land  
 And loveless sea; . . . . (1-4; 11-12)

In "Better So" Christina introduces sleep imagery again. In the first stanza the speaker comforts a dead friend by saying that all of life's "struggle," "pain," and "pangs are at an end" (5). Yet, ironically, the affirmation of life upon death appears in the speaker's wistful tone of the third stanza:

I would not speak the word if I could raise  
 My dead to life:  
 I would not speak  
 If I could flush thy cheek  
 And rouse thy pulses' strife  
 And send thy feet on the once-trodden ways.  
 (13-18)

In "Life and Death" Christina asserts the negation of life on earth and the affirmation of death as a resting place, waiting for regeneration. The poem states the poet's extraordinary world view, which is filled with sad, unpleasant attitudes toward nature and its phenomena.

In the first stanza she denies even the happy, delirious movements of natural objects:

. . . One day it will be sweet  
 To shut our eyes and die;  
 Nor feel the wild flowers blow, nor birds dart by

With flitting butterfly,  
 Nor grass grow long above our heads and feet,  
 Nor hear the happy lark that soars sky-high,  
 (1-6)

As a loser of worldly happiness, her dislike of "the waxing wheat" (8) or someone who "sits in our accustomed seat" (9) expresses her jealous, unfavorable response to those happy-looking things.

In the second stanza the harvest imagery is linked with the death theme in its biblical sense. The poem's meaning is intensified, because it speaks of Christina's disapproval of those bleak natural scenes after the harvest. She stated the bleak view of nature in her low tone: "the wane of shrunk leaves" (12-13), "the blackened bean-fields" (15), or "dead refuse stubble" (17) in the autumn fields.

For whatever reasons, Christina's gloomy, sad view of life is apparent, because she seeks death as a place of "sleep" waiting for another life of unchanging satisfaction. The last line summarizes the poem's theme: "Asleep from risk, asleep from pain" (17). Thus the poet identifies death with "sleep" as in many other poems (Lowther 687).

The dissatisfaction with her life and the weariness Christina Rossetti felt from unrequited desires have close relations with her constant expression of a death wish. Her sonnet 17, in the "Later Life" series of 1882, denotes the unhappy feelings and the theme of escape in her direct,

first person voice. She appears never to have lived in the present tense; rather, she has dwelt either upon old memories or in the future ("foresight" in the poem). The elements of unreality and certain dreamy qualities are apparent in her use of diction in the octave. The expressions "foggy," "dreaming," "winds," "certain," and "out of reach" imply the untouchable, flimsy nature of her hope. They denote her yearnings for the unknown place which she imagines embodies the fulfillment of her best wishes, in other words, the world of death.

In the sestet, the explosion of her impatience and of extreme, unhappy feelings testifies to the ineffectualness of her desire. The dream world, which could be an exit to the different world, lasts only for a moment. The disappointment and frustration coming from the recognition of the reality are so strong that they lead her to the "impatient" outcry of direct emotional revelation. The phrase, "weary impatient patience of my lot," in its paradox, points out her recognition of confinement in the present world and the restrictions of her human environment. Christina's repeated exclamation in the sestet, "I am sick of all I have and all I see, / I am sick of self, and there is nothing new" (11-12) shows the close relationship that her desire to escape from her present world had with her frequent and fervent thoughts on the abstract world of death as a way of change.



In "Sleeping at Last" (1893), Christina presents an image of perfect peace, in which the human soul is seen as liberated from the "tumult" of life (Janowitz 200):

No more a tired heart downcast or overcast,  
No more pangs that wring or shifting fears that  
    hover,  
Sleeping at last in a dreamless sleep locked fast.

(5-7)

Though she remained deeply religious, this poem written during the last years of her life does not intimate any hope of regeneration. Instead, it reveals only an exacerbated heart full of a wish for liberation from the bondage of an unhappy life.

## CHAPTER 5

### DEATH AS AN EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS HOPE

From her early poems of religious hope to her later serious poems on afterlife, Christina Rossetti carried an attitude of "quiet joy" for her lifetime (Sawtell 22). According to Hugh Walker, she was a poet who stood "straining her eyes towards heaven" (82). Since her thoughts dwelt constantly on death and afterlife her poems are "chiefly devotional" (Walker 82). The most frequent of Christina Rossetti's themes is "the longing for Heaven as a place where all her misgivings will be quieted and where all imperfect terrestrial delights of eye and ear and heart will be made perfect" (Times Literary Supplement 105). In fact, her religion offered her "the last refuge of a disappointed heart":

It is from the beginning a touchstone of experience, an interpreter of joy and pain alike. It does not prevent her from being tossed about in the flux of her changing moods, but it keeps her from being finally swept away by any one of them.

(Robb 108-109)

Thus, closely related to the themes of death, love, and escape, Christina's longing for Heaven turned out to be one of the major subjects of her poetry.

Nevertheless, in her poetry Christina dealt with the subject with "pathetic insistence" (Times Literary Supplement 105). Her reliance on "the sure and everlasting delights" of religion often offered her "consolation . . . from imagining," when she was "prevented by distress of mind and body from taking pleasure in the precarious delights of this world" (Times Literary Supplement 105). Thus, there seems to be an "insecurity about her dream of Heaven very different from the splendid certainties of Milton's vision" (Times Literary Supplement 106).

According to Thomas, four hundred and fifty out of a total of nine hundred and ninety-six poems belong to "the devotional section," constituting the largest body of English religious verse since George Herbert's (191). Furthermore, Thomas states that, Christina composed most of the devotional poems--three hundred and sixty three poems out of four hundred and fifty--after 1866, after "her hard-wrung renunciation of human love and marriage" (191).

In her devout religious poems Christina often wrote in a different tone from in her poems on escape. She might have written her deeply religious poems out of her unsatisfactory worldly affairs. Also, the influence the religious atmosphere of her era had on her works can not be ignored.<sup>11</sup> However, whether her decision was affected by external forces or was made by her voluntary choice, she finally found solace in her religion after painful

realization of unrequited human desires. As Linda E. Marshall states, in spite of her renunciation, different from her poems on the theme of escape, from her devout religious poems

emerges a more peaceful and humanized vision of the intermediate state, more the anteroom to Heaven than the exit from hell-on-earth, and a place where the soul is lovingly aware both of the living and the gathered dead. (58)

In "The Martyr (See, the sun hath risen)," (1846) written when Christina was only fifteen, she shows her deep concern about death; her concern can be explained in relation to her devout religious beliefs. The poem centers on the idea of renunciation in the eager laying down of life for the glory of God. Since the poem belongs to the early stage of her poetic development, it reveals a sentiment "almost ludicrously overstrained" (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti: a divided life 41). The poem depicts a female-martyr, whose character interestingly resembles Christina's own life of ascetic abstention and quiet suffering.

The poem tells of the Christian hope of redemption upon death. The martyr's progression from "the prison" toward "heaven" is described as a continuous road, which suggests not only the martyr's increasing faith in the life after death, but also the painful disembodiment of a human being. If the poem can be read as an allegory, the martyr's coming

out of the prison gate means the birth of a baby. The poem's description of the long, painful road that lies in front of the "young and tender" (3) girl signifies the poet's view of life on the earth.

The poem also establishes the consistency of the martyr's resignation and determination toward the destined place. The heroic effort or the forced resignation proves Christina's beliefs in Christianity. However, in spite of the "hope" and anticipation toward the moment of redemption of her soul upon her death, the girl's entreating cry toward God, "Christ, . . . receive me, / Let no terrors grieve me" (25-26), attests to the poet's deep sympathy with the overwhelming hardships a human can experience on the way of self-denial.

Nevertheless, the moment of the burial of the dead martyr's body is described with the beautiful images of a religious ceremony in the last two stanzas:

Now the fire is kindled

And her flesh has dwindled

Unto dust;--her soul is mounting up on high:

Higher, higher mounting,

The swift moments counting,--

. . . . .

Satisfied with hopeful rest, and replete with God.

(46-54)

In "Sweet Death," written in Feb. 1849, Christina

expressed her death wish through the analogy of a scene she once observed among the churchyard graves. She compares the ephemeral "fresh leaves" of flowers leaving their "perfume" to the sky on their early death to the deaths of human beings (6-7). The young deaths are described as elements of blessing to the soil while they "nourish" (10) and offer some "lasting value" to the green "grass" (16).

The everlasting churchyard grass works as a metaphor whose image suggests her "God of Truth" (18). The connotation of the "green" color of the grass, which is described as the ultimate transformation of all the variously-colored leaves and "blossoms" and therefore "hath lasting worth," implies her God in heaven. The poem says in the last stanza that her God "art better far than" youth and beauty that die:

And youth and beauty die.  
 So be it, O my God, Thou God of Truth:  
 Better than beauty and than youth  
 Are Saints and Angels, a glad company;  
 And Thou, O Lord, our Rest and Ease,  
 Are better far than these. (17-22)

As Christina's deep meditation on death, the poem also reflects her beliefs in afterlife. For the poet, death, whether of the young or the old, seems "sweeter" than any "sweet life." Her anticipation of being reunited with God, especially with the "God of Truth," at the time of her death

almost turns her to an extreme admiration of death as in the rhetorical question of the last stanza: "Why should we shrink from our full harvest? why / Prefer to glean with Ruth?" (23-24) Her preference for the "full harvest," which means the death of the whole of humankind, to the partial or gradual collection of grains from the field has something to do with her impatience. As Diane D'Amico suggests, "the final question" of the poem might express "some regret that one must leave this earthly life, the world of sweet flowers" (283). The Biblical allusion to "Ruth" in the last line is also rich in its religious implication, though. Ruth, a gentile woman in the Bible, works in a field of Bethlehem collecting some leftover grains and finally becomes the wife of her Jewish master.

"Sleep" as an image of Death is clearly described in "Sound Sleep," of August, 1849. In the poem Christina "looked death straight in the face. She lived to think of death as fruitful; the turf and flowers upon the grave are to her the symbol of its fruitfulness" (Lowther 687). In this jubilant poem, almost like a nursery rhyme, Christina describes the place of one's "rest," a graveyard, with sweet and peaceful natural images. The poem's frequent internal rhymes with its heavy rhythms of repetitive words help the formation of the poem's mood as bright and hopeful.

The poem begins by presenting scenes of ripe "corn-fields" (6) and "creeping" wild flowers (3). Those natural

objects indicate the time of harvest, an image which, for Christina, was linked closely with death. The description of nature in its full ripeness and the time of a day, which phrases such as "latest sunlight flushes" (9) and "evening hushes" (11) indicate, work together to create the time of one's "rest" in death. The rhyming of verbs in "laughing," "weeping," "sleeping," "creeping," "heaping," "keeping," and "reaping" in the first stanza and of "blushes," "thrushes," "flushes," and "hushes" in the second stanza also gives an impression of an abundant autumn field ready for God's harvest.

The resurrection theme appears in the third stanza in the bright "singing" of the lark and the "ringing" of "church-bells." The live movements of nature, such as the "springing" of "the grass and weeds," "the bats," and "winds," seem like the preparation of a new life after resurrection. The sleep of the dead person among all beautiful elements of nature might be what Christina actually pictured as the state of her own death, as the following fourth stanza summarizes:

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. (17-22)



On the other hand, Christina's feeling of disappointment and impatience, caused by her various thwarted hopes in life, led her to an explosion of death wish in "A Better Resurrection" of June 1857. The poem presents a deeply religious confession of the poet, which "tallies with her will to complete surrender" (Sawtell 47); it speaks of "a very desperate, all but hopeless state-- indeed quite hopeless, but for the one hope which does not ever quite fail her--":

I have no wit, no words, no tears,  
 My heart within me like a stone  
 Is numbed too much for hopes or fears,  
 Look right, look left, I dwell alone.  
 I lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief  
 No everlasting hills I see;  
 My life is in the falling leaf;  
 O Jesus, quicken me. (1-8)

The cry is one of "such purely human anguish that the last line strikes on the reader with a sense of shock" (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life 112).

In the title of the poem Christina expressed her belief that resurrection after her death would be "better" than any blessings during her life time, which are represented by spring images in the poem ("everlasting hills," "bud," and "greenness"). Introducing a few natural images, which connoted her emotional status adequately ("a stone" and "the

falling leaf" in stanza one; "a husk" in stanza two), she summarizes her empty, inefficient life in three, rhymed stanzas.

The poem is a prayer whose form describes efficiently Christina's emotional states and earnest desires. Each stanza contains alliterations of /w/, /l/, and /b/ sounds respectively, whose regular rhythms show how her humble and sincere request to God is made. Each stanza has the rhyme scheme of a b a b c d c d; the seven lines are written in iambic tetrameter while the eighth line is in trimeter. The short eighth line in each stanza summarizes her desperate entreaty.

Christina used various images and metaphors to describe her disappointment in various aspects of her life. The first stanza depicts the failure of her love: "My heart within me like a stone / Is numbed too much for hopes or fears" (2-3). She also complained of her loneliness and "grief" in her bleak future with "no everlasting hills" of love and creativity (6). The implication of "the falling leaf," whose autumnal image suggests the onset of winter in the next stanza, represents her ascetic life without fruition.

Christina's dissatisfaction with her lifetime work, perhaps her poetry, is revealed in the second stanza: the speaker says that "My harvest" is "dwindled to a husk" (10). Introducing winter images, the poem refers to her life as

"void and brief / And tedious in the barren dusk" (11-12), which shows no prospect of "bud" or "greenness." However, the metaphor, "the sap of Spring," contrasting to former images, promises fulfillment of a far-off hope. The third stanza portrays the inefficiency of her decrepit body or weak health through the image of "a broken bowl" (17). Her offering of her humble body as "a royal cup for Him" (23) in the last stanza sounds like the expression of her devout religious attitude, though.

The elaborate description in each stanza that presents her hopeless condition is followed by the last stanzaic line as it delineates her hope for the future in afterlife. Through those last lines, she carefully but deliberately puts her religious hope for a "Better Resurrection":

O Jesus, quicken me.

. . . . .

O Jesus, rise in me.

. . . . .

O Jesus, drink of me.

In the verb "rise" of the second stanza the resurrection theme seems to reach its climax.

Packer describes Christina's effort to create the image of resurrection theme:

As we read "A Better Resurrection," we sense the labor involved in such a process--the strain, the effort, the summoning of vast reserves of

spiritual energy in order to build of suffering a bridge over which to make the perilous crossing to an unknown bank. This crucial and creative work at the level of personality is given aesthetic expression in the poem, as material shapes and is in turn shaped by structure. (110)

"Up-Hill" (June 1858) affirms Christina's belief in afterlife and a final rest in her death. The poem received more critical attention than any other of Christina's poems. Shove describes the poem as "sharp and poignant" (86). Thomas mentions "the strong feeling" involved in the creation of "many poems on the theme of the restfulness of the grave, yet a grave which is but an inn on the pilgrim's passage to heaven" (199). George Lowther praises the poem's language: ". . . homeliness is mingled in the stately language of Common Prayer; and the half-mournful, half-exhilarating noise of the chanting of homely words, the rolling from choir of the Psalms sounds in the changing cadences of Christina's verse" (683). According to More, the poem expresses the "culmination of her pathetic weariness," which is always "this cry for rest, a cry for supreme acquiescence in the will of Heaven, troubled by no personal volition, no desire, no emotion, save only love that waits for blessed absorption" (820).

In this poem, through a series of catechistic questions, Christina resolved carefully the question of

eternal life in her most sincere voice. As do many other religious poems, this one relies heavily on the image of the "journey," to which her strenuous, patient life is compared. For the traveller, however, death appears to be the only possible resting place. The "road" to the "inn" at the summit never allows the traveller to slow down or to take rest "for the night" (5). Except for the final destination at the summit, the home for the wearied traveller, the poem says that there is only "a roof for when the slow dark hours begin" (6). The traveller has to go "from morn to night" (4). The poem says that even at the front of the inn they "will not keep you standing at that door" (12).

However, the poem's last confirmation of the final resting place is filled with affirmation and relief. The exquisite, tender tone of the last stanza describes the inn where the tired traveller is to rest at last: "Will there be beds for me and all who seek? / Yea, beds for all who come" (15-16).

As Sawtell says in her book about Christina and her religion, the poem can be praised "for the sincerity of its faith that, although the Virtuous path is long and arduous, the traveller will find everlasting joy and comfort in God's inn at the summit" (84).

In her deeply religious poems Christina desired death not "as an escape from this naughty world but as an entry to another and incomparably better one" (Battiscombe, Christina

Rossetti: A Divided Life 79). In such poems she wrote exultantly of the joys of heaven, a place full of flowers, trees and singing birds. From her imagination Christina wrote as if she knew the birds in the poem "Birds of Paradise" (1864):

Golden-winged, silver-winged,  
 Winged with flashing flame,  
 Such a flight of birds I saw,  
 Birds without a name:  
 Singing songs in their own tongue-  
 Song of songs-they came.  
 . . . . .  
 They flashed and they darted  
 Awhile before mine eyes,  
 Mounting, mounting, mounting still  
 In haste to scale to scale the skies,  
 Birds without a nest on earth,  
 Birds of Paradise. (1-4; 19-24)

Some of Christina's best lyrics offer two contrasting views, beginning on a hopeless, sorrowful note of earthly death and separation accompanying the death and ending "in a sudden, heartening call of joy" of heaven (Lowther 687). The poem "Young Death" (1865) presents the loathful bodily destruction of earthly death in the first stanza and the blissful meeting of Christ in heaven in its second stanza. The transition from the first to the second stanza happens

as if it were the leap from hell to heaven. The "terrible realism of the first stanza" is expressed "in a tolling monotone," while "the gracious images and blithe, confident rhythm of the second" picture heaven (Lowther 689):

Dying from the birth;  
 Dust to dust, earth to earth,  
 Ashes to ashes.  
 . . . . .  
 Then shall be no more weeping  
 Or fear or sorrow,  
 Or waking more or sleeping  
 Or night or morrow,  
 Or cadence in the song  
 Of saints, or thirst or hunger:  
 The strong shall rise more strong,  
 And the young younger. (12-14; 21-28)

In "Mother Country" Christina saw her life after death in a wistful dreamlike vision. Her vision of the world of death is filled with vivid images of heavenly joys:

Oh what is that country  
 And where can it be,  
 Not mine own country,  
 But dearer far to me?  
 Yet mine own country,  
 If I one day may see  
 Its spices and cedars,

Its gold and ivory.  
 As I lie dreaming,  
 It rises, that land;  
 There rises before me  
 Its green golden strand,  
 With the bowing cedars  
 And the shining sand;  
 It sparkles and flashes  
 Like a shaken brand. (1-16)

Here Christina entwines her religious dream with an idealistic picture of Wordsworthian vision. However, as Battiscombe describes, Christina never looks back "to a heaven that lies about us in our infancy"; "her gaze is always forward towards the city that can only be entered through the gate of death. Heaven, and no other, is the country of her poetic imagining" (Christina Rossetti 25).

Nevertheless in other parts of the poem Christina reveals the uncertainty of her attainment of the ideal country with such paradoxical expression :

Life made an end of,--  
 Life but just begun;  
 Life finished yesterday,  
 Its last sand run;  
 Life new-born with the morrow,  
 Fresh as the sun:  
 While done is done for ever;



Undone, undone. (57-64)

In 1871 Christina was afflicted by a particularly troublesome illness, the effects of which lasted until her death. This bodily ill-health and wearing pain had also to be fought and overcome. Under her hard circumstances, Christina was able to fall back on a hope of a blessed rest after death, though (Geoffrey Rossetti 111).

In "Love is Strong as Death," dated "before 1882" Christina exhibited religious consolation within the two identically-structured stanzas of question and answer. In the first stanza, the "astounded" speaker who has not "sought," "found," or "thirsted for" God in her past desperately entreats God for her soul's salvation; the person receives God's answer in a most assuring way in the second stanza. The poem, while representing the poet's devout religious view, shows her final resolution to accept death with a positive attitude. It is also noteworthy that the poem was written during her later years, the time of resignation about one's unfulfilled life.

The poem sounds like a love poem, and the "Love" who "bound" the lady "with love's bands" is God (9). Christina used amorous expressions in the poem as in between two worldly lovers' relationship; the verbs such as "sought," "thirsted for," and "clasp" (12) connote the strong emotions: "I have not sought Thee, I have not found Thee, / I have not thirsted for Thee" (1-2).

Two identically structured stanzas depict the seemingly contrasting images of death and love. The horrifying images of death are expressed by phrases such as "cold billows" (3) or "buffeting billows" (4), while the security of love is represented in the second stanza's images. As a devoutly religious person Christina confirmed the oneness of two contradictory concepts through her Christian belief:

Yea, long ago with love's bands I bound thee:  
 Now the Everlasting Arms surround thee,--  
 Through death's darkness I look and see  
 And clasp thee to Me.' (9-12)

On the other hand, Christina's constant preoccupation with life after death and her sense of the immanence of Heaven found their expression in the "Later Life" series of 1882. In the tenth sonnet of "Later Life," this sense of the immanence of Heaven appears markedly:

Tread softly! all earth is holy ground.  
 It may be, could we look with seeing eyes,  
 This spot we stand on is a Paradise  
 Where dead have come to life and lost been found,  
 Where Faith has triumphed, Martyrdom been crowned,  
 Where fools have foiled the wisdom of the  
 wise; (1-6)

In the sestet the unifying or ruling force to build the world of heaven appears to be a universal or generalized love. Christina seemed to express her desire to unify life

and death or fear and hope by this universal love through the image of doves returning to their nest:

Some who went weeping forth shall come again  
Rejoicing from the east or from the west,  
As doves fly to their windows, love's own bird  
Contented and desirous to the nest. (11-14)

Theo Dombrowski explains what "the unity of heaven" could mean for Christina:

. . . the unity of heaven generally completes the incomplete, the self fragmented in life. On another level, those who fail to achieve a unity with another in life achieve in death a greater unity with Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom; this unity is greater than that available to any human love, . . . (75)

The image of Christ as the embodiment of this universal love Christina desired upon her death is described in the fifteenth sonnet of "Later Life":

Love pardons the unpardonable past:  
Love in a dominant embrace holds fast  
His frailer self, and saves without her will.  
(11-14)

In the sixteenth sonnet Christina points out the concept of unity clearly: "Our teachers teach that one and one make two: / Later, Love rules that one and one make one" (1-2). It seems clear that for her "this ecstatic state of unity--

a unity that seems to merge her very individuality in the concept of oneness--is so potent" (Dombrowski 75).

According to Thomas, Christina was a poet "of the approaches to union with God," not a poet "of the full vision and absorption into the Divine being" (196). Thomas further explains the Christian mysticism that affected Christina's attitude toward life and death:

Mysticism implies an active union with God, the perception of an eternal principle with which the soul of man desires alliance or identity, . . . . The Christian mystic like St. John believes that though God is in man, man without holiness may not see God, who is the originator and source of all good; and that man to attain such holiness, to win the true self and sink into God, must undergo purgation through self-renunciation and suffering, must lose his life in order to save it. The first essential of the traveler on the mystic way is the hunger and thirst for God, the restlessness of the soul until it find rest in God. (196)

Christina's life and poems reveal that she deeply felt and tried to accept all this. Her silent suffering and the attitude of self-renunciation throughout her poems show how she struggled to attain "the mystic's certainty that she is at one with the Infinite" (Thomas 196).

However, in spite of her hard-wrung effort to attain

the mystic's goal, in many cases she could not quite overcome herself, her various human desires and need for earthly love: "she prays in agony of spirit that she may desire Christ above all things; she believes that He craves her life, her love, yet her heart is divided" (Thomas 196). In the twenty-fourth sonnet of "Later Life," Christina realized her limitation as a human being in her humble, meditative tone. In the first quatrain she affirmed that "the wise send their hearts before them" (1) to heaven and "the foolish nurse their hearts within the screen of this familiar world" (3). In the sestet she feared that she was among the foolish :

Oh foolishhest fond folly of a heart  
 Divided, neither here nor there at rest!  
 That hankers after Heaven but clings to earth;  
 That neither here nor there knows thorough mirth,  
 Half-choosing, wholly missing, the good part:--  
 Oh fool among the foolish, in thy quest! (9-14)

On the other hand, Christina expressed a strong fear of death in the twenty-seventh sonnet of "Later Life." Her fluctuating belief in the other world sounds natural and human, as she faces closely the inescapable fact of the end of every life on earth. Her inconsistent attitude toward death in spite of her devout religious beliefs reveals itself both in her poems of her later years and in her biography. Packer describes the possible reason for

Christina's insecure feelings on death:

If, as she firmly believed, life on earth was a trial, then the soul which had proved itself unworthy in this life lost its chance of salvation, of eternal survival in the life beyond this one. As for herself, she was not at all sure she had passed the test. (403)

In the twenty-seventh sonnet Christina's fear of death is expressed. The fear of both physical disintegration and spiritual annihilation is vividly disclosed. In predicting the conditions of her own death, Christina revealed that, despite her Christian optimism, she regarded death naturalistically and was far from blind to its revolting features:

I have dreamed of Death:-what will it be to die  
 Not in a dream, but in the literal truth,  
 With all Death's adjuncts ghastly and uncouth,  
 The pang that is the last and the last sigh?  
 . . . . .  
 A helpless charmless spectacle of ruth . . .

(1-8)

In the sestet Christina cautiously intimates her possible failure to attain spiritual redemption. The imaginary scene of the dying person and the surrounding watchers in their anticipation for the dying person's spiritual salvation conveys the breathtaking atmosphere realistically:

So long to those who hopeless in their fear  
 Watch the slow breath and look for what they  
 dread:

While I supine with ears that cease to hear,  
 With eyes that glaze, with heartpulse running down  
 (Alas! no saint rejoicing on her bed)  
 May miss the goal at last, may miss a crown.

(9-14)

Nevertheless, in the eight years of life that remained to her after the death of her mother in 1886, Christina more and more turned her mind to a "contemplation of a reunion in Heaven" (Geoffrey Rossetti 111). Christina showed her triumphant, almost heroic, efforts to overcome her fear of physical death and relied more on her religious hope of redemption after death. In a short, untitled poem composed before 1886 she almost welcomed death: "Hail Life and Death and all that bring / The Goal in sight" (10-11 The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti 145). In the remaining few years of her life "affirmation, not doubt or even resignation, was the dominant note in her poetry" (Packer 392). Numerous Poems dated as 1893 exhibit Christina as a quiet, resigned woman. In "Lord, Grant Us Calm" Christina entreated her God to do whatever He desires, even to the annihilation of the earth: "Still let the earth abide to set Thee forth, / Or vanish like a smoke to set forth Thee" (9-10).

In "While Christ Lay Dead the Widowed World," the reunion of Christ and the world is described in terms of the joys of the bridal ceremony. On the other hand, the poem "Safe Where I Cannot Lie Yet" suggests an attitude of quiet acceptance, of positive reconciliation:

Safe where I cannot lie yet,  
 Safe where I hope to lie too,  
 Safe from the fume and the fret;  
 You, and you,  
 Whom I never forget. (1-5)

Sometimes Christina broke into "the rhythm of a victory march in her effort to express the triumphant nature of her vision" as in "All Saints: Martyrs" of 1893 (Battiscombe, Christina Rossetti 26):

Hark! the Alleluias of the great salvation,  
 Still beginning, never ending, still begin,  
 The thunder of an endless adoration;  
 Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation  
 Which have kept the truth may enter in.  
 (24-28)

Christina gave expression to her belief in the resurrection of the body after death, which meant that she "still retained her traditional orthodox belief," when she wrote "To Every Seed His Own Body" in 1893 (Packer 402):

Bone to his bone, grain to his grain of dust:  
 A numberless body reunion shall make whole



Each blessed body for its blessed soul,  
 Refashioning the aspects of the just.

. . . . .

Each with his own not with another's grace,  
 Each with his own not with another's heart,  
 Each with his own not with another's face,  
 Each dove-like soul mounts to his proper place:--  
 O faces unforgotten! if to part  
 Wrung sore, what will it be to reembrace?

(1-4; 9-14)

According to Packer, on her deathbed Christina asked her brother William: "If I meet Mamma in the other world, shall I give her your love?" Her last question, though it could be a good-natured, whimsical remark on her part to console her brother, sounds like a good example of her firm belief in afterlife; then, she seemed to have had "little doubt about personal immortality," whether it came from her conscious effort or not (Packer 403).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Christina Rossetti placed unusual importance and stress on life after death and the immanence of Heaven. Her quiet, reclusive life has been a constant subject among the critics. Her poetry and prose works from her earliest to her latest period reveal her unrestrained concern about death. Her deep interest in life after death creates confusion about her feelings toward experiences and activities of the here and now. In fact, as Geoffrey Rossetti writes, most people "cannot be permanently in sympathy with her attitude, however much they may believe themselves intellectually to understand it" (116). She represents the type of mind, which, finding great satisfaction in the beliefs and practices of Christianity, "reinforces the instructed faith of her childhood by a later experience of mystical exaltation" (116).

Christina Rossetti's life sounds like a lonely, uneventful one. Her reclusive life style also seems to have been exaggerated, because she abstained from the road many women walk. She refused marriage proposals twice, apparently for religious reasons. Most of her life she stayed in bed with constant illnesses. She spent her later years in an old house on Torrington Square, London, keeping

vigil at a number of deathbeds of her own family members, her sister Maria, her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, her nephew, uncle and two aunts, and finally her most beloved mother.

In spite of her reclusive life, she was a famous poet of her time. In her church she maintained good, lasting relationships; she was "sister, daughter, friend, and member of the larger community of the Christian church" (Rosenblum 44). Being born into a literary family, she enjoyed her talented brothers' company and became involved with various activities of the members of the Brotherhood. As Rosenblum states, "despite her reclusive ways, her retreats into invalidism as well as art, Christina was not a private person" (44).

As in her undefinable, dual life style, her obsession with the world of death does not easily yield its motive. She wrote her poems on death from various inner necessities which can never be easily identified. She wrote poems on death from her adolescent romantic fancy, her disappointment with love affairs, her desire to rest from her exhaustive illnesses, or from the religious instructions she received from her childhood.

However, besides all the explicit reasons for her obsession with death, the most important clue to her otherworldliness can be sought in her inborn nature. If her seclusion was a part of her nature, she seemed to have

cultivated an "aesthetic of renunciation." As Rosenblum comments:

. . . this self-effacing mode affords Rossetti the means to compose a distinctive self as woman and poet. As Sandra Gilbert has pointed out, Rossetti belongs to a company of woman poets who, . . . , have cultivated an "aesthetic of renunciation," substituting suffering and self-abnegation for the "self-assertion lyric poetry traditionally demands." (35)

In a way, her faith was "more absolute than any other system of beliefs," culminating in her "mystical exaltation" (Geoffrey Rossetti 116). Also, her preoccupation with death and not with her present world offered her an exile like her poetry writing:

As a spinster she might have felt exiled from the country of love; as a Victorian woman poet she was in some sense exiled from the country of poetry; as "saint," however, she could choose her exile. (Rosenblum 44-45)

Therefore, for Christina, death meant a certain element of life that could afford various solutions for her unresolvable problems. As Lowther points out, whether it was an imaginary or real one, in her poetry

She seems to have had the sight of death always before her, not as a terror, but as a familiar

shape, almost a friend; a friend, somber indeed, but of cooling presence, amid the heat of dusty life. Every day she seems to have looked on death, with quiet, unwavering eyelids, and the sight imparts a serenity and fearless dignity to her life. She had little or none of the horror which belongs to [humans] in [a] natural state.

(687)

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Shove Fredegond says in Christina Rossetti: A Study that Christina "was Christian to the core and marrow of her being and Christianity sustained her where all else would have failed" (30).

<sup>2</sup>Eleanor Walter Thomas writes in her biography that "Christian virtues and practices" have been subjects of various writings of the Victorian "devout souls" (191).

<sup>3</sup>Zaturenska further writes about how the death of Francesca, Christina's mother, affected Christina's thoughts about death. See A Portrait with Background (229).

<sup>4</sup>According to Linda Marshall, the "doctrine of soul sleep was . . . revived in the nineteenth century" (57). Also, for further explanation refer to Jerome McGann's "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti" (135-137).

<sup>5</sup>Packer illustrates some of the romantic verses and the Gothic romantic novels which the Rossetti children must have read with enthusiasm during their childhood in her Christina Rossetti (18-19).

<sup>6</sup>As in this marriage proposal, the renunciation theme has been, as George Lowther points out, "the central fact of her life and the mainspring of her poetry" throughout her life (682).

<sup>7</sup>Eleanor Thomas writes that "Sir Walter Raleigh

condemns the aesthetic school for substituting for public and healthy feelings 'the emotions of the recluse, the fugitive, the pilgrim, the mystic, the rebel,' and for pursuing an art inspired by wishfulness, longing, melancholy. This desire to escape from life, to sleep, to die, mark in varying degrees the work of James Thompson, Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Earnest Dowson, John Davidson" (Christina Rossetti 5).

<sup>8</sup>Several biographies such as L. M. Packer's and Margaret Sawtell's Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion contain Christina's portraits from her childhood to adult years.

<sup>9</sup>William M. Rossetti gives an illustration of Mr. Collinson's wavering mind in his decision-making. Rossetti describes Collinson as having a "timorous conscience." Also, Paul Elmer More calls Collinson "an artist of mediocre talent." On the other hand, Rossetti's description of Charles Bagot Cayley runs like this: "the abstracted scholar in appearance and manner--the scholar who constantly lives an inward and unmaterial life, faintly perceptive of external facts and appearance. . . . He united great sweetness to great simplicity of character, . . ."

<sup>10</sup>According to Thomas, during that period Christina wrote at least twenty-seven poems, many of them her most beautiful and best loved pieces: for example, the song "When I am dead, my dearest," and the sonnets "After Death,"

"Rest," and "Remember" (Thomas 46).

<sup>11</sup>W. Bell Scott is described in the Memoir as "a man whom Christina viewed with great predilection." Packer speculates on the possible love relationship between Christina and Scott in length.

<sup>12</sup>The great hymn writers of the mid-Victorian period often chose the same subjects as Christina, and were possessed by a similar spirit. . . . They wrote out of the depths, as Christina did, in supplication that unfeeling hearts be stirred and miserable sinners forgiven, or even more often they sang exultantly of the Church Triumphant and the glory of Christ (Thomas 192).



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