SEASONAL IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

"MY LIFE IS IN THE FALLING LEAF": AMBIVALENCE IN THE SEASONAL IMAGERY AND LIFE OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Вy

ROSEMARY SARAH DAVISON

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AUTHOR:

Rosemary Sarah Davison, Hons. B.A. (McMaster

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the nuances Christina Rossetti perceives in the seasonal cycle, examining how she understands them to mirror the complexities she attributes to human life and to reflect her ambivalent feelings toward her own existence. By analyzing Rossetti's numerous portrayals of spring, summer, autumn and winter, I aim to penetrate some of the ambiguities of her life-experience ignored by many previous critics in their characterization of her life as a continual struggle between her religious convictions and instinctual desires or as a triumph over such a rift through the act of writing. Chapters one and two analyze her association of her family, in particular her mother, with the affirmative meanings she attributes to spring and summer. They also examine her linking of herself to the rejuvenating forces she sees inherent in those seasons, suggesting that, through this bond, she relationship with the material world, developing an inner sense of physical and spiritual wellbeing. They continue to show how her distancing of herself from the destructive forces of the world she sees exemplified in the volatility of spring and summer thwarts the process that has the potential to make her a happier, more fulfilled person. Similarly, in chapters three and four, I discuss how her acknowledgement of the creative powers of autumn and winter reveal her embracing of them as an attempt to experience the latter stages of human life she conceives

them to symbolize. I then argue that her regression to their more conventional associations with dying and death complicates her attempt, rooting her more firmly in the painful dimensions of existence she wants to avoid: loneliness, anxiety and despair.

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All quotations from Christina Rossetti's poetry are taken from R.W. Crump's edition (1979). The volume, page number(s) and year of composition will appear in parentheses after the first mention of each poem. In the event that the composition date of the poem is unknown, its date of publication or the publication date of the edition in which it appears will be given instead. If no date accompanies the poem, no approximate date of composition is available.

Introduction

In "Love God and Die -- Christina Rossetti and the Future," the afterword of The Achievement of Christina Rossetti (ed. Kent 1987), G.B. Tennyson asserts that the focus "for the average modern reader as well as for the modern scholar and critic must henceforth be on Rossetti the writer"; he urges the reader to question why Rossetti, as a writer, dwells upon themes of "loss, deprivation, self-abnegation, unworthiness, and the like" (Tennyson 350-51). Recent Rossetti scholarship, as if in response to Tennyson's plea, has centred attention upon Rossetti as writer, arguing that her chosen vocation as poet has allowed her to develop and express her emotions, thoughts and ideas freely, enabling her to discover herself and experience the world, thereby transcending the restrictions generally placed upon Victorian women.

Betty S. Flowers, in "The Kingly Self" (1987), focuses on Rossetti "as a female artist," explaining that while her poetry "offers itself as an act of obedience" to Christ, it submits to a Muse "who calls forth the woman artist's kingly self and bids her sing" (Flowers 174). Similarly, Katherine J. Mayberry, in Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery (1989), argues that Rossetti's literary career was a powerful, self-conscious "process of enlightenment" through which she was able to resolve her difficulties concerning sense and spirit and through which she

was able to discover "the truth" about her life rather than hide from it (Mayberry 20-59). Writing poetry, Mayberry states, "was the process that could render sense from nonsense, order from chaos, unity from ambiguity" (109). Also concentrating on Rossetti's vocation as poet, Angela Leighton, in <u>Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart</u> (1992), claims that Rossetti's writing demonstrates "secrecy, freedom and caprice," revealing a female self which is "fully in control of its own game" rather than one that destroys itself through "a religious attitude of renunciation" (Leighton 154). Flowers, Mayberry and Leighton, in analyzing Rossetti as writer and artist, discover that, through writing, she overcomes the loss, deprivation, self-abnegation and unworthiness for which Tennyson seeks an underlying explanation.

While Flowers, Mayberry and Leighton emphasize Rossetti's freedom and power as a writer, critics Winston Weathers, Theo Dombrowski and Dorothy Mermin grapple with Rossetti's struggle to achieve unity between sense and spirit; they argue that her poetry strives to realize a human experience which is both physically and spiritually strong regardless of her own problems in achieving a joyous balance between her religious convictions and her instinctual desires.

In "Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self" (1965), Winston Weathers discusses <u>Goblin Market</u> (I.11-26.1859), characterizing the poem's central characters as the psyche's warring factions; one that yearns to experience primordial freedom; the other, to pull away. He argues that the sisters' movement through "sickness and fragmentation back to a newer

and more mature balance" exemplified by marriage and motherhood embodies the "wholeness, sanity and integration" for which Rossetti craves in her own mind (Weathers 82-4). Theo Dombrowski in "Dualism in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti" (1976), also asserts that Rossetti's writing strives for the amalgamation of opposites (Dombrowski 75). Similarly, Dorothy Mermin, in "Heroic Sisterhood in <u>Goblin Market</u>," uses Laura and Lizzie to reveal Rossetti's yearning for a world in which women could be happy, self-sufficient, strong, bold and clever (Mermin 116-17).

Unlike Flowers, Mayberry and Leighton, however, Weathers, Dombrowski and Mermin agree that Rossetti achieves this strength and unity of body and spirit in writing only, remaining unable to practice it in her life. While Weathers argues that "Christina managed to envision at least some sort of coming together of the self into the whole and the one," he labels her vision a "mythic picture" rather than a reflection of her true experience (Weathers 87-8). Likewise, Dombrowski asserts that any unity of self Rossetti achieves "is purely verbal" (Dombrowski 76). And Mermin also admits that Rossetti's yearning for physical and spiritual strength and wholeness may have been an "unrealizable dream" (Mermin 117). In contrast to the more recent critics, Weathers, Dombrowski and Mermin assume that writing is a form of wishing rather than a conduit for realizing and experiencing.

While such criticism accentuates Rossetti's desire for physical and spiritual harmony in her life, it stems from earlier scholarship which characterizes Rossetti as a woman who, in reality, had renounced all

earthly pleasures to render herself worthy of the Christian god. William Michael Rossetti, Mackenzie Bell, Mary Sanders, C.M. Bowra, Lona Mosk Packer, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are among those who Mayberry identifies as critics who label Rossetti as "a rigorously self-denying woman who gradually learned to replace her need for immediate pleasures with the anticipation of eternal delights of Heaven" (Mayberry 18). Christina as repudiator of the world (Harrison 142) is the dominant image of Rossetti against which critics like Flowers, Mayberry, Leighton and every modern scholar write.

In choosing to write my thesis on Christina Rossetti, I was interested in unveiling some of the paradoxical elements of her life-journey overlooked by the dominant strains of criticism of her work -- the former which seeks to define her story only as an unresolved battle between sense and spirit and the latter which renders it a healing of such a rift through the act of writing. Drawn to her continual references to birds, flowers, trees, forests, wind, rain, sun, snow, ice, stars, moonlight and water, I wanted to discover the ambiguous elements of her art and life by way of her images of external nature.

Initially, I intended to explore Rossetti's portrayals of nature from an ecofeminist perspective. In the introduction to Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism (1990), Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein pinpoint "the interconnectedness of all life," "the need for a nonandrocentric basis to human philosophy and practice" and "the importance of reclaiming those values associated with ancient

prepatriarchal and contemporary culture" as the dominant strains of ecofeminism (Diamond and Orenstein ix-xv). While aware that ecofeminism is still a problematic debate concerning the metaphorical relationship between woman and nature, I believed (and continue to believe) that it would be innovative and challenging to analyze the ambiguities of Rossetti's life by viewing them through her images of the environment which fit Diamond and Orenstein's definition and which classify her as an "A Better Resurrection" early ecofeminist. Rossetti asserts in (I.68.1857) that her life is in the falling leaf. She displays her fascination with the earth as a creative, spiritual force in "Advent" (II.212.1885 ed.). And she frequently supernaturalizes nature in poems like "Advent," "Summer" (III.74-5.1845) and "From early dawn until the flush of noon" (III.320). In doing so, she indicates that she did acknowledge her connection to the earth, appreciate the intrinsic value of each species and realize the physical and spiritual power of external nature. As well, she reveals that she cherished her relationship with the world and derived creative power from it, a power which unified her sense and spirit, making her "gladdened with an inward light" ("From early dawn until the flush of noon" 6). They show her to be someone who, at times, understood body and spirit to be intertwined rather than a woman who accepted what Susan Griffin, in Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (1978) explains as the patriarchal culture's severance of "The clean from the unclean. The decaying, the putrid, the polluted, the fetid, the eroded, waste, defecation, from the unchanging. The changing from the

sacred" (Griffin 95).

I also intended to examine the relationship between what I aimed to call Rossetti's ecofeminist notions of nature and her Christian conviction that she was separate from and superior to it. I wanted to explore the visions of nature which subsumed those which had the potential to make her complete, more physically and spiritually whole than she felt throughout her life.

While my thesis still centres upon the images of nature which convey the moments of physical and spiritual fulfilment Rossetti achieved in her life as well as unveiling her sense of being severed from the world, I have resisted approaching my subject from an ecofeminist angle. My primary reason for avoiding an ecofeminist approach is that I want to focus my study on Rossetti's portrayal of the seasons; to devise an ecofeminist theory of the seasonal cycle would be a doctoral thesis in itself as ecofeminism opposes our continual carving up and classifying of nature -- a process which counteracts ecofeminism's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life.

As well, I want to avoid manipulating Rossetti's writing to fit the theory and concentrate more on the significances she, individually, attributes to the seasons. Although I discuss the elements of her nature depictions which are similar to those of others, including Sir Thomas Malory, John Keats, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost and Northrop Frye, I aim to focus on her illustrations of the seasons as they are in order to arrive at a more accurate, intimate vision

of the ambivalent feelings toward the world and toward herself she channels through them. Her Christian convictions, in several cases, accentuate the ambiguities she sees in life rather than mutilate the insightful, uplifting visions she derives from the earth. Good Friday, Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas are Christian celebrations which often illuminate the complexities she understands to be present in the natural world as well as in the human world. To adapt the Christian calendar to a hypothetical ecofeminist theory of the seasons would again be a task too large for a ninety-page thesis to encompass and would consume my analysis of Rossetti's writing.

As a result, I avoid linking Rossetti's writing with ecofeminism, leaving such a task for a future project; probing her personal images of the seasons is enough to prove that her experience as a human being was more ambivalent, simultaneously more joyful and more devastating, than critics so far have suggested. The task I have undertaken, instead, is to discuss how Rossetti presents the continually changing landscapes and elements of spring, summer, autumn and winter to echo the complex meanings she attributes to human experience while expressing the contradictions of her personal evolution.

Exploring the relationship between woman and nature in general, Susan Griffin, in <u>Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her</u>, claims, "and all that I know, I know in this earth, the body of the bird, this pen, this paper, these hands, this tongue speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you ..." (Griffin 226-7). While

I do not refer to Griffin's woman-nature theories in my study, her statement is important because it accentuates a connection, a channel of communication and teaching between the woman who holds pen to paper and the earth, a relationship which I aim to prove that Rossetti discovers and develops.

In a loose sense, Rossetti sees in the seasons what others have seen, a pattern of transformation in nature which mirrors the progression of human life; as such, she upholds "the age-old awareness that human life, like the seasons, runs its appointed round and must endure its autumn and winter even as it enjoyed its spring and summer" (Tennyson 352-3). Like Keats, she understands that while "Four seasons fill the measure of the year," there are also "four seasons in the mind of man" ("The Four Seasons" 1818). There are times in Rossetti's poetry when spring, in which "life's alive in everything" ("Spring"I.34-5.1859), parallels human birth and spiritual awakening while symbolizing the resurrection of Christ; when summer's "gorgeous blossom days" ("Seasons"III.41.1863) exemplify the celebratory rituals of love and marriage; when autumn's chill and decay represent the waning of human life which "grows and dwindles breath by breath" ("Scarce tolerable life" II.316); and when winter's darkness and frigidity reflect the coldness of and the uncertainty arising out of death. As a result, Rossetti's seasons, in their mirroring of human life, are compatible with those discussed by Northrop Frye in "The Archetypes of Literature" (1951) in which he links spring with birth, summer with romance and marriage, autumn with death and winter with dissolution and

despair (Frye 683).

To view Rossetti's seasons as reflective of the stages of human existence, however, G.B. Tennyson argues, is to reiterate "conventional wisdom" (Tennyson 353). Yet while Rossetti tends to validate the age-old symbolism of the seasons, she searches for the nuances of each season more intensely than Frye, often discovering those nuances through her Christian convictions; she focuses on the subtleties of the seasonal cycle, deriving from it new visions of the human world, notions of human experience in general as well as insight into herself.

The first chapter which explores Rossetti's spring settings begins by looking at the affirmative meanings of birth, joy, vitality and resurrection that she writes into them; it further examines how Rossetti links her family members, in particular her mother and her maternal grandfather, to these colourful settings, engaging in an undiluted celebration of her worldly ties with them. By linking what Tennyson would call the conventional associations of springtime to her family, I argue that Rossetti accepts and reveres the earthly bonds she shares with her family rather than proving that she "consistently repudiated and devalorized 'the world'" as Antony H. Harrison asserts in <u>Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology</u> (1990). Significantly, in her springtime praise of her mother, Rossetti elevates her to a spiritual realm, transforming her into a "better sort of Venus with an air / Angelical from thoughts that dwell above" ("Valentine 1882"III.317). Her supernaturalization of her mother, in turn, suggests that she did, at

times, understand the physical and spiritual dimensions of the world to be intertwined -- an understanding that reveals her as a Pre-Raphaelite artist whose task was, in part, to accentuate "the union of flesh and spirit, sensuousness and religiousness" (Abrams 148). Her fusion of the physical and the spiritual through her writing about her mother counteracts the arguments of critics like Catherine Musello Cantalupo, in "Christina Rossetti: The Devotional Poet and the Rejection of Romantic Nature" (1987), and Jerome J. Bump, in "Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" (1987) who assert that Rossetti remained unable to see the supernatural in the natural.

As well as using spring to illuminate the bonds she shares with her family, Rossetti employs it to convey the elation she experiences within herself when she feels spiritually re-born. In her poem "A Birthday" (I.36-7.1857), the festive images of spring express her feelings of spiritual resurrection. Consequently, springtime's conventional meanings of birth, resurrection and life become vehicles for Rossetti's embracing of her familial ties and for her celebration of herself.

While channelling her praise for her family and herself through the flourishing and abundance she views in springtime, Rossetti picks up on the dying, the violence and the cruelty of the spring landscape, traits augmented for her by April's association with Good Friday, equating them with the death, pain and brutality she perceives to be inseparable from life itself. Contrasting such harsh elements with what she imagines to be the pristine, unchanging spring-scape of Heaven, she becomes angered by and afraid of the "imperfections" she witnesses in earthly springtime, alienating herself from them in poems like "Symbols"(I.75.1849) and "A Portrait"(I.122.147-50). Tronically, in doing so, she roots herself more deeply in the oppressive feelings of loneliness, despair, imprisonment and anxiety she has sought to escape. Spring, consequently, in its more joyous guises of birth, celebration and life, reminds her of the experiences from which she feels excluded, evoking in her "A brood / Of bitter memories" ("The spring is come again not as first" III.322). Her sense of being cut off from spring, significantly, parallels the feeling of alienation from her mother which surfaces in "Wishes: Sonnet" (III.135.1847), her severance from a relationship which she embraces through her affirmation of spring's conventional meanings.

While spring reminds Rossetti of her loneliness, it does, however, contain voices which faintly console her in their allusion to something which is larger and more powerful than herself. In "Song" (I.58.1848), Rossetti's tears are subsumed into the ocean; her sorrow is incorporated into the earth. In "Birchington Churchyard" (II.167.1888 ed.), the April landscape beside the sea inspires in her a "lowly hope" for the future (9). In these poems, the beauty of the spring world penetrates her sadness, compensating slightly for her dominant feelings of depression and loneliness.

While the first chapter examines the universal and personal significances Rossetti derives from spring, the second examines her portrayals of summer which illuminate her intricate ideas concerning human

Several of Rossetti's poems, especially Goblin Market, posit a love. summer world which resembles the world of Faerie discussed by J.R.R. Stories" (1964), To1kien "On Fairv exemplifying supernaturalization of nature typical of Pre-Raphaelite art; the magical yet dangerous qualities of the summer world represent the wonderful yet poisonous traits Rossetti finds in the realms of romantic love. As for Tolkien, the beauty and enchantment in Fairy Land symbolize for Rossetti the "ever-present peril" of the human world (Tolkien 11). The magical. perilous summer environments that appear in Rossetti's poems bring to sensuousness, fruitfulness, beauty, betrayal, debilitation, forgetfulness and memory she sees connected to erotic love.

As in several of her spring portrayals, Rossetti expresses a yearning to embrace the summer world and the love she sees it to embody. By elevating her mother to the position of romantic lover, as in "Sonnets are full of love" (II.59.1881 ed.), she enables herself to revel in a union of love which critics like Antony H. Harrison have argued she has sought to avoid. Furthermore, Rossetti emphasizes the spiritual nature of this love "whose blessed glow transcends the laws / Of time and change and mortal life and death" (13-4) again acknowledging the amalgamation of sense and spirit that often occurs in human relationships. The physical-spiritual love for her mother clearly apparent in her poetry, then, contradicts the arguments of those critics who characterize her life as an unresolvable struggle between her instinctual and her spiritual desires. Her personal involvement in a worldly love relationship enables her to

understand the spiritual dimension of other earthly relationships, the love union between man and woman as in "Tasso and Leonora" (II.82.1846) and the bond between woman and nature as in "From early dawn until the flush of noon." In "Tasso and Leonora," Rossetti describes male-female love as a love which moves the stars "with heavenly loves and harmonies" (11). And in "From early dawn until the flush of noon," as in "A Birthday," she presents a moment of communion with the summer world in which her heart and soul, sense and spirit "are in tune" (5-6).

Rossetti's momentary transcendence of the division between sense and spirit through the conventional meanings attributed to summer is made more poignant, moreover, by her knowledge that the summer world, like the love it represents for her, will fade into autumn. This knowledge of the transience of love, however, also repels her from summer, compelling her to command in "From Sunset to Star Rise" (I.191-92.1865), "Go from me, summer friends, and tarry not," (1) a command that, once answered, leaves her "wintry cold," and engulfed in darkness (2). Her reiteration of her position outside summer as in "From Sunset to Star Rise" or "Heart's Chill Between"(III.16-7.1847) indicates that summer, while it holds love for others, speaks to Rossetti of her loneliness and the absence of romantic love in her life, communicating to her feelings of sadness, pain and anxiety that pervade her life. In this sense, summer, like spring. contradictions inherent in Rossetti's poetry that have been bypassed by her critics.

Autumn also encompasses the breadth of Rossetti's poetic

experience. Its fruitfulness and pageantry, traits ignored by Frye, yet illuminated by the Christian celebration of the harvest, become reflectors of the contentment and fulfilment Rossetti believes that human beings should experience at the conclusion of their lives. In this way, Rossetti's autumn is similar to Keats' plentiful "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" ("To Autumn" 1819). And while, in her poem "Autumn" (I.143.1858), she claims that she is alone, separated from the sensuous, celebratory autumn world, she imaginatively positions herself amid groves of oaks with "rustling leaves" and "fertile trees" (28-31), rendering her imaginative experience productive and full.

At the same time, however, Rossetti indicates that she is lonely within the autumn world she imagines, a feeling which implies that she is, in part, estranged from her own imaginative creations. Autumn. consequently, takes on the starker meanings discussed by Frye in "The Archetypes of Literature": human dying, isolation and despair. Rossetti though, I argue, continues searching for the subtleties of autumn's bleaker elements, discovering in the black pool of "Under Willows" (II.292-93.1864) the blackness and the emptiness she sees in her own past (in contrast to others like her brother Dante Gabriel who, in his Willowwood sonnets, beholds the reflection of a lost lover in a pool) and finding in its numbing wind the forgetfulness she attributes to love in her summer The lethargy she discovers in the autumn world, moreover, is connected to her sense of being weary and frozen which she also reveals in the winter landscapes she depicts. The broken goblets shattered after

the harvest festivities assume a personal significance, as well, mirroring the brokenness she confesses to feel herself in "A Better Resurrection."

In spite of the more solemn meanings she attributes to autumn, however, Rossetti, in "An Apple Gathering" (I.43-4.1857), expresses her desire to loiter in the autumn world and contemplate past loves. Her wanting to linger there and think about life parallels her desire to revel in summer and to experience love in spite of the complexities she sees in it. Rossetti's wanting to stay in the world validates her relationship with it in face of the turbulence she feels inside herself. In this regard, her experience is more ambiguous than critics have suggested.

The final chapter of my thesis focuses on Rossetti's winter In it, I analyze Rossetti's adoption of winter as her secret ("Winter: My Secret "I.47.1857), a choice which critics like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Angela Leighton argue demonstrates her power to choose her destiny as a female writer even if it is a self-destructive or self-denying one. All three scholars, however, assume, as does Northrop Frye in his discussion of the seasons as archetypes, that winter is only symbolic of death and frigidity, ignoring the fact that Rossetti often views winter in a positive, inspirational light, characterizing it as creator of spring, bearer of Christmas and initiator of merriment among family and friends. Furthermore, she associates her mother with Christmas, as in her 1882 Valentine where she presents her as an embodiment of love. As a result, Rossetti's embracing of winter as her season implies that she is accepting the life-affirming experiences it

embodies for her and as in her illustration of her mother in the Valentine poem, acknowledging the potential for spirituality within those experiences.

However, her tendency to regress to winter's conventional meanings, to view it as an undeniable symbol of death, dissolution and despair, gives her desire to embrace it painful undertones. Through the dying, coldness and stasis of the frozen winter environment, Rossetti discovers the solitude, captivity, lifelessness and hopelessness that penetrate her own life and overpower her uplifting emotions.

The aim of the present study, then, is to explore how Rossetti's seasons go beyond forming what G.B. Tennyson labels a paradigm of "man's life, of his inevitable wearing away and his eternal hope" (Tennyson 354). Its purpose is to examine how each changing phase of the seasonal cycle contains the nuances and contradictions Rossetti perceives to be at the heart of human experience while reflecting back to her exceptional moments of physical and spiritual joy as well as overwhelming periods of depression, darkness and loss that pervade her life and her inevitable wearing away.

Chapter One: Spring

Christina Rossetti (1830-1893), views spring as a creative force that brings the world which has been "Frost-locked all the winter" back to life ("Spring" I.34-5.1859). Spring, that brings the rain which clothes with young leaves the "early hedgerow trees" (14) and inspires the birds to "sing and pair again" (8) is, for Rossetti, a season in which "life's alive in everything" (20). In its renewal of the natural world, spring becomes symbolic of the resurrection of Christ after the crucifixion. In "Easter Monday" (II.230.1864), she writes about the world which is growing green "Out in the rain" (1) and about the buds "On half the trees" (2) using the rejuvenated earth to reflect the re-birth of Christ: "Yea, Christ hath died, yea, Christ is risen again," she claims (13). She reiterates the link between spring and Christ's resurrection again in "Easter Day" (II.229-30.1885 ed.) when she writes:

Earth wakes her song-birds,
Puts on her flowers,
Leads out her lambkins,
Builds up her bowers:
This is man's spousal day,
Christ's day and ours (1-6).

Earth's awakening of the song-birds, flowers, lambkins and bowers is related directly to "Christ's day" of resurrection.

By linking the rejuvenation of the earth to the resurrection of Christ, Rossetti does, in part, reiterate what G.B. Tennyson labels "conventional wisdom." She presents an image of spring similar to that of

Northrop Frye who, in "The Archetypes of Literature," asserts that the "dawn, spring and birth phase," symbolize the myths "of the birth of the hero, of revival and resurrection, of creation and (because the four phases are a cycle) of the defeat of the powers of darkness, winter and death" (Frye 683).

Rossetti, however, vests spring's conventional meanings of new life and re-birth with personal significances. By linking her family members, specifically her mother and grandfather, to her opulent spring settings, she illuminates the flourishing and abundance she discovers in her relationships with them, indicating that she was able to celebrate her earthly ties. While praising her mother, moreover, Rossetti gives her spiritual power, revealing her awareness of the potential for unity between the physical and the spiritual. In poems like "A Birthday," Rossetti employs spring imagery to illuminate her own feelings of spiritual re-birth in the world. Writing about spring, consequently, becomes a form of celebrating the fruition of her family relationships and the joyous moments of spiritual resurrection she experiences in her life.

Rossetti characterizes spring as a time of reunion when the "tardiest bird will twitter to a mate," when the sap stirs in the trees and when crocus fires kindle "one by one" ("The First Spring Day" I.61.1855). She yearns to share in this rejoicing and in this collective celebration of new life; she wants her heart and spirit to "find out their Spring" in life (9). The series of Valentine's Day poems written to her mother from 1877 to 1886 which honour her relationship with her mother,

while alluding to other family ties, show that Christina's heart and spirit did find out "their Spring," the sense of unity and rejoicing she beholds among the birds, flowers and insects of springtime. She opens her 1877 Valentine (III.314-15) with:

Own Mother dear
We all rejoicing here
Wait for each other
Daughter for Mother,
Sister for Brother ... (1-5).

The opening word "Own" immediately conveys Christina's sense of belonging to her mother, a devotion to the mother-daughter blood tie further emphasized by the continual flow of possessive pronouns throughout the Valentine poems; "Mother mine," "your Valentine," "My blessed Mother" and "my Mother" are phrases which reveal Christina's commitment to the relationship. Georgina Battiscombe in her biography Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life (1981), emphasizes the closeness of the two, supporting her sense of importance of the mother-daughter relationship with the inclusion of a photograph taken by Lewis Carroll in which Frances Rossetti bends over her daughter who sits, reading in a chair. In the 1877 Valentine, however, Christina's sense of belonging extends to siblings also as she portrays herself as a sister who waits for her brother as well as a daughter who waits for her mother. Her waiting demonstrates her devotion, a dedication which is reciprocated as she waits within a group in which "all rejoice" as they "Wait for each other" (2-3). The relationship between daughter, mother, sister and brother in which, she adds, each face is transfigured by love and made lovelier, exudes the same celebratory union Rossetti witnesses among the birds, plants and animals of In her 1879 Valentine (III.315), Rossetti mentions spring,

the "sweetest thing / Brimfull of bliss" (5-6) which sets "all the throng / Of birds a-wooing / Billing & cooing ..." (7-9) and reverberates with the love she feels toward her mother.

Catherine Musello Cantalupo, in "Christina Rossetti: The Devotional Poet and the Rejection of Romantic Nature," asserts that Rossetti resists worshipping nature and that she is "sensitive to the contemporary heresy that naturalizes the supernatural and vice-versa" In the Valentine poems, celebrations of love in (Cantalupo 300). themselves, however, Rossetti worships her blood ties without hesitancy, elevating her mother to the positions of goddess and saint. In her 1882 Valentine, she describes her mother as a "better sort of Venus with an air / Angelical from thoughts that dwell above," (5-6) further portraying her as "this dear Saint of mine" (14). While Cantalupo reads Rossetti as a poet who "places the focus of spiritual enlightenment in the self and the source in God" and in whose work nature "interposes between the person and God at the risk of this enlightenment" (300), in the Valentine poems, Christina gains spiritual enlightenment through her mother rather than via God, without questioning the maternal source of power and without feeling that it will jeopardize her relationship with God; she feels free to sing "A lifelong love to this dear Saint" she calls mother ("Valentine 1882") and to revel in the "Human love & love Divine" that emanate from her ("Valentine 1878" III.315).

While Valentine's Day evokes the connection she shares with her mother, the spring flowers that bloom shortly thereafter illuminate the bond she experiences with her maternal grandfather. In "Lines to my Grandfather" (III.130.1845), Rossetti paints the apple-tree blossoms "bright red / With soft colour glowing" (15-16), the pear-tree's "pure

white blossom / Like stainless snow," the cowslip, "yellow and the primrose, pale." She praises the kingcup flowers and daisies -- kingcups representing wishes for wealth and daisies being symbols of beauty and innocence. She claims that she loves the "gay wild flowers / Waving in fresh spring air" (30-31). Her poem-letter is, at once, a prayer to springtime and, with its endearing framework "Dear grandpapa" and "I sign myself, / Your dutiful, / Affectionate Granddaughter" (40-42), a confirmation of her love for and sense of duty toward her grandfather. In its praise of spring's flourishing and abundance, it becomes a testimony to the growth and wealth she finds in her family relationships as in her relationship with her grandfather.

Spring, in its bursting of new life, symbolizes birth for Rossetti and being born both physically and spiritually emerges as a fundamental theme in Rossetti's work; being born physically into the world and being born spiritually while in the world are joyous events for Rossetti. Critics tend to be limited in their perception of a division of sense and spirit when it comes to discussing Christina Rossetti's life and Georgina Battiscombe argues, in the opening chapter of her writing. biography, that the "conflict between two sides of our nature is the common experience of every human being" and that for Christina it was "unusually painful" because "her two cultural streams met and mingled without becoming a unity" (Battiscombe 13-4). While Battiscombe's assertion is certainly supported by poems like "Memory" (I.147.1857-65) and "A Portrait" (I.122.1847-50) and validated by critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, her use of the term "cultural streams" is deceiving in that it immediately links Christina's Italian background with the sensual and the tempestuous and her English upbringing with the

spiritual and the repressive, an association which is problematic because it stereotypes the cultures involved. An assessment like that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979) is less limiting in its omission of any account of cultural conflict. However, like Battiscombe's interpretation, it still denies the occasional intertwining of Rossetti's sense and spirit as in the union that occurs in "A Birthday." Being born spiritually sparks physical reactions in Rossetti, engaging her directly in the movements of nature around her while spiritual revelation evokes worldly elation. In "A Birthday," Christina experiences ecstasy and joy which are simultaneously physical and spiritual reactions. The words "birthday" and "love" are interchangeable and whether we interpret Christina's love as love for a human being or love for God, we are presented with a birthday which is both spiritually and physically celebrated -- a joyous amalgamation of sense and spirit which compensates, partially, for the rift she suffers between the two throughout her life.

The spiritual and physical elation Christina Rossetti experiences, furthermore, compels her to celebrate herself; she wants to be raised "a dais of silk and down" which is hung with "vair and purple dyes, " carved with "doves, " "pomegranates" and "peacocks with a thousand She wants it to be worked with "gold and silver grapes" and "leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys." The decorations with which she yearns to adorn herself are symbols of royalty. The all-seeing eyes of the peacock recall the autocratic rule of the divine right of kings. Rossetti's use of these symbols, alongside her springtime images of the singing bird in the watered shoot, the apple tree and the rainbow shell

demonstrates the mirth she feels within herself.

Spring, because it symbolizes the growth, fullness and the elation she experiences with her family and within herself, is something that Rossetti craves. In "Spring Quiet" (I.120.1847), she sighs, "Gone were but the Winter / Come but the Spring," as she anticipates the thrush singing in the whitethorn, the robin in the holly-bush, the budding boughs releasing fresh scents into the air and the clear stream running over a mossy stone. The earth becomes a "cool green house" (12) whose scents whisper, "We spread no snare" and "Here dwell in safety" (16) offering Christina protection from the coldness of winter. The refuge that Christina finds in the spring environment parallels the sense of comfort she discovers in the relationships with her family -- a comfort conveyed via expressions like:

Blessed Dear & heart's Delight, Companion, Friend & Mother mine Round whom my fears & love entwine ("Valentine 1878" 1-3).

Her wish for spring, then, becomes a yearning for the things it represents: the abundance, the growth and the comfort of human relationships.

Spring, however, while it embodies the vitality yearned for by Rossetti, represents the imperfection and mortality of the world she shuns; in its growth, it displays brevity, in its fullness, it suggests pregnancy and mortality and in its aggression, it implies cruelty and violence -- meanings Rossetti perceives to pervade human ties. For Christina, spring's growth is connected to its dying. In "Spring," she writes:

There is no time like Spring that passes by, Now newly born, and now Hastening to die (37-39). Similarly, in "A Year's Windfalls" (I.129-32.1863), she states that with the gusts of April, "Rich fruit-tree blossoms fall," "Apple trees and pear trees / Shed petals white or pink" and "sharp showers sink and sink" (25-32). The downward motion of the blossoms, petals and rain indicate that Rossetti sees a dying already inherent in spring; her lines recall Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "Spring and Death" in which the speaker dreams of Death who weaves "a subtle web of black" (20) around the trees and flowers, barring the green "with coffin black" (11).

Rossetti draws from the brevity of spring to capture the ephemeral nature of human life. In "Sweet Death" (I.74-5.1849), she writes:

The sweetest blossoms die.

And so it was that, going day by day
Unto the Church to praise and pray,
And crossing the green churchyard thoughtfully,
I saw how on the graves the flowers
Shed their fresh leaves in showers,
And how their perfume rose up to the sky
Before it passed away (1-8).

The blossoms' dying, the petals' falling and the perfume's passing create the same movement of descent as the flowers in "A Year's Windfalls." In "Sweet Death," though, the foliage descends toward human graves in a churchyard, immediately illuminating the fleeting nature of our own human existence; spring's dying becomes symbolic of humanity's dying.

As well, Rossetti witnesses a violence in springtime, a cruelty which matches the brutality she sees in human nature. In "Spring," spring-life pierces the sod and breaks forth beneath the earth's surface (8). Piercing and breaking are sharp actions which, while they initiate new life, are aggressive and violent. In their violence, they conjure up the image of the crucifixion which, while it symbolizes redemption from

sin, exemplifies the brutality inherent in human nature and human relations. In her poem "Good Friday" (I.186-87.1862), Christina describes the sun and moon who hide "their faces in a starless sky" while a "horror of great darkness" shrouds the world (10-11). The same image, derived from The Bible, occurs in Reverend E. Monro's "The Story of the Cross," appearing in The Book of Common Praise. In the story, he writes about the "Shadows of midnight" which fall "Though it is day..." (Monro 123). In "Good Friday," Christina places her speaker at the base of the cross, fixing her eyes on Christ's blood as it falls "drop by drop." She focuses on Christ's physical suffering, although that suffering leads to spiritual salvation (her poem is similar to John Keble's "Good Friday" in which the speaker gazes upon Christ's "streaming wounds" as he lies at the foot of the cross, 51-54). The bleak April landscape, with its piercing, breaking and hiding, resonates with the violence, cruelty and shame Christina perceives to be at the root of human nature; it contains the sin for which Christ was martyred.

Rossetti, like the landscape she describes and like the killers of Christ, pierces and breaks herself in order to purge herself of the sin she understands to be in humankind. She complies with the Christian doctrine which commands that she baptize herself in the death suffered by Christ -- a command expressed in The Book of Common Prayer which reads, "Grant, o Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him ..." (Easter Even, The Collect 149). While, in "A Birthday," she experiences spiritual re-birth, now Rossetti heaves onto herself the weight of Christ's death, claiming in "The Love of Christ" (I.66-67.1858):

Thee did nails grave upon My hands, thy name
Did thorns for frontlets stamp between Mine eyes:

I, Holy One, put on thy guilt and shame; I, God, Priest, Sacrifice (16-20).

Her verse indicates that, <u>because she bears the knowledge of human sin</u>, she must continually mortify herself to pay for the guilt and shame in human nature.

While scourging herself to pay for humanity's guilt and shame, Rossetti acknowledges the pregnancy of the world she sees in spring as a reminder of death. In "Spring," she writes of the seeds, roots and fruit stones "swollen with sap" (16) emphasizing a heaviness, a pregnancy in the nature she beholds. She calls spring "life nursed in its grave by Death" (9) metaphorically describing the earth as both womb and grave. Her metaphor is a reiteration of the traditional Christian notion established in the story of Eden which implies that sex between man and woman immediately brings death to the world, a theory discussed by Ernest Becker in The Denial of Death(1973). Woman's capacity to have children, Becker asserts, reminds men of the body and consequently, of human mortality:

He [man] sees her tie to the earth, her secret bodily processes that bind her to nature: the breast with its mysterious sticky milk, the menstrual odors and blood, the almost continual immersion of the productive mother in her corporeality ... (Becker 39-40).

Becker's discussion of Western civilization's linking of woman with nature and with death is helpful when analyzing Rossetti's poetry because it helps us understand that Christina, in seeing death in spring, a season of creation, in viewing the spring-laden earth as both womb and grave, is expressing a view set out in The Bible. Spring, then, becomes a season which mirrors the brevity, the violence, the cruelty and the death

Rossetti understands to be part of human experience.

Having employed spring to bring out what she sees as imperfection of the world, Christina re-creates spring in her imagination, perfecting it to parallel the perfection she hopes for in Heaven; in Heaven, spring is static to match the eternal life she hopes to find in Christ after death. In her poems "Paradise" (I.221-22.1854) and "Saints and Angels" (I.229-30.1875 ed.), Rossetti crafts spring-scapes that are frozen in their beauty, outweighing the ugliness, change and imperfection inherent in spring on earth. The flowers in "Paradise" are more fair "than waking eyes / Have seen in all this world of ours" (3-4). birds' songs which soar "like incense" in Heaven's skies are so "full of grace" that they make cold the nightingale on earth (11-16). The fourfold River is full of "music grave and low" providing strength and rest impossible for Earth to hold (17-24). The same river in "Saints and Angels" is silent and still unlike tempestuous earthly waters. The paradise through which it flows is complete rather than "full of loss" like the Earth (3).

The perfection Rossetti attributes to the heavenly spring-scapes reflects the perfection she imagines herself attaining in a sensuous union with Christ, a sensuous union which is untainted because it is constant and pure. Paradise "upbuilds the bower for the bride" ("Saints and Angels") and provides a place where "Every love shall abide and every lover...". Christina, when a bride adorned in "raiment white" with a "crown of gold whose gems are seven" (7-8) in Heaven, is able to "touch

and handle and attain" all that she has renounced on earth because, in Heaven, things are pure ("Paradise" 44).

In "Poet of Mystery: The Art of Christina Rossetti" (1987), W. David Shaw discusses Rossetti's merging with God in a relationship with offers her the opportunity to heal herself. He argues that "Instead of remaining self-abased and depleted, Rossetti must learn to merge with God: she must trust that her broken heart will be acceptable to him and that she can find in her atonement with him all the heart can wish" (Shaw 56). The anticipated union with Christ whose purity is revealed through the pristine paradisal landscapes, then, becomes compensation for the breaking and piercing Rossetti understands to be part of her human existence in this world. This sense of compensation, in turn, which shifts her away from her own pain and fixes her attention on God, is what W. David Shaw conceives as the "conditions for her recovery" (56).

An interpretation like Shaw's, however, becomes problematic once read in relation to Rossetti's portrayal of Heaven's spring-life which, while it illuminates the tranquillity, unity and perfection she hopes for in joining with Christ, locks her into a dream-like world of stasis in which she is unable to grow, change and heal. In its "perfection," Heaven's spring landscape is paralysed, forming a world in which there is no life-affirming movement toward the future. In this respect, it is frozen and offers Christina no hope of continuity. The gem imagery Rossetti uses reinforces the state of paralysis in Heaven; in "Paradise," the dream-speaker imagines the streets of Heaven set in gold (35) and in

"Saints and Angels," she mentions the land studded with "gold and bdellium and the onyx stone" (11). The hardness of the gems contrasts with the swaying of the plants and flowers which grow and die on earth. The river in "Saints and Angels" which is silent also suggests stasis and death, foreshadowing the state of paralysis Christina will suffer in order to "perfect" herself. Having understood that there is rapidity, violence, cruelty and death in the life embodied by the spring world on earth and having conceived of the perfection in the life with Christ in Heaven, Rossetti strives to embrace the constant world of paradise. To embrace paradise, however, she must stamp out everything she sees to be imperfect, especially spring as it contains the failures she sees in life and in In "Symbols" (I.75-6.1849), she witnesses the problems of herself. spring-life around her; she watches the dying of a rosebud when she was "Waiting to see the perfect flower," a flower she expected to be strong (3-4). She gazes at some eggs which "should have hatched in May" but were abandoned by "two old birds" (10-11). Disappointed at the imperfection she beholds in the rosebud and the eggs, she destroys them, exclaiming, "Then in my wrath I broke the bough / That I had tended so with care," and adding, "I crushed the eggs, not heeding how / Their ancient promise had been fair" (16-17). Her words indicate that, in her destruction, she has blinded herself to the "ancient promise" always inherent in springtime; her anger at nature's fallibility overpowers her knowledge of the hope she initially attributes to spring and to the celebration of relationships it exemplifies.

As she obliterates the marred life she perceives to be symbolized by the dying rosebud and the abandoned eggs, Rossetti freezes the wonderfully affirmative meanings she associates with life, writing in poems like "A Portrait":

She gave up beauty in her tender youth

Gave up all her hope and joy and pleasant ways;

She covered up her eyes lest they should gaze

On vanity, and chose the bitter truth (1-4).

She renounces the beauty, joy and hope she expresses in her Valentine poems and in "Lines to My Grandfather" in order to choose the "truth," a truth which, while bitter, is steadfast, consoling and her "Rest and Ease" ("Sweet Death" 21).

Catherine Musello Cantalupo discusses Rossetti's pulling away from the beauty she sees in nature, arguing that, in poems like "The Thread of Life" (II.122-23.1881 ed.) and "An Old World Thicket" (II.123-28.1881 ed.), Rossetti "confronts Romanticism and moves to a religious and poetic conversion of the Romantic ideology of nature" which renders human attachment to nature "a hindrance to spiritual progress..." (Cantalupo 275-287). In "The Thread of Life," Rossetti's focus on the silence and irresponsiveness of the landscape certainly reveals the sense of human detachment from external nature pinpointed by Cantalupo. Rossetti writes:

The irresponsive silence of the land,
The irresponsive sounding of the sea,
Speak both one message of one sense to me: -Aloof, aloof, we stand aloof, so stand
Thou too aloof bound with the flawless band
Of inner solitude; we bind not thee ... (1-6).

While there is a rejection of nature here, however, there is a claiming of

self as Christina states, "Therefore myself is that one only thing / I hold to use or waste, to keep or give" (II 1-2). Rossetti's aloofness from the land and the sea and her claiming of self are directly related in that, in this particular case, they are both forms of self-imposed captivity reinforced by the words "bound" and "self-chain" (7). In accepting the notion that she is separate from nature, she is restraining herself, compelling herself to write, "Thus am I mine own prison" (II 1). By restraining herself, she implies that she subconsciously desires not to separate from nature, a yearning reiterated by her gazing at the trees, sun and birds and her asking "Why can I not rejoice with you?" (11).

Imprisonment, sadly, becomes synonymous with exile for Rossetti; numbing her to the life and death movements inherent in spring or in nature at large, Rossetti eliminates herself from the rejuvenating forces of life that she celebrates in the Valentine poems to her mother and in the poem dedicated to her grandfather. She is exiled from the life she sees exemplified by spring, watching it unfold and flourish from the In "The First Spring Day" (I.61.1885), she opens her first two outside. with "I wonder," indicating that is stanzas she imagining contemplating life rather than participating in it which would demand an expression like "I know," "I sense" or "I experience." Although Christina assumes that the sap will quicken, the bird will twitter to a mate and the spring will dawn, hoping that she too will "blossom and rejoice and sing" (18), she is "sore in doubt concerning Spring." If she were absorbed in the life-flow she beholds around her, she would have no cause to doubt the exuberance implicit in springtime.

Her sense of alienation from life emerges in her poem "L.E.L."

(I.153-55.1859) which expresses the isolation suffered by women poets Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Felicia Hemans. Christina observes:

All love, are loved, save only I; their hearts
Beat warm with love and joy, beat full thereof:
They cannot guess, who play the pleasant parts,
My heart is breaking for a little love.
While bee-hives wake and whirr,
And rabbit thins his fur,
In living spring that sets the world astir (15-21).

The self-renewing cycle of life, implied in the whirring of the bees, the thinning of the rabbit's fur, the stirring of the springtime world and the loving and rejoicing among human beings is a movement from which Christina feels separated.

Exile from spring and exile from human loving and rejoicing comes to represent much later in Rossetti's life, exile from the mother-daughter bond she cherishes and praises in her Valentines, a tie she expresses through her writing of spring. In "Wishes: Sonnet" (III.135-36.1847), Rossetti wants to be beside "the mighty sea" which she depicts in "The Thread of Life" to be silent and indifferent to her existence. Moreover, she wants to be with her mother, claiming, "But be I where I may, would I had thee, / And heard thy gentle voice, my mother kind" (13-14). Unable to feel the essence of spring contained in the sheep-bells, new hay, wild flowers, butterflies, trees and warm sea-winds, Rossetti is numb to her mother's spiritual presence; Frances Rossetti is an absence. While Rossetti once experienced her mother through her celebration of the spring birds and flowers she mentions in the Valentines, alienated from spring, she is severed from her mother's spiritual power.

Spring, now frozen and distant from Rossetti, like the familial bonds and joyful-painful life experiences it represents for her, becomes

emblematic of her own death in life, contrasting with its earlier symbolism of the revelatory moments she expressed in "A Birthday." While spring represents all the things she has rejected in her life, the death Rossetti understands it to contain outweighs the promise of new life it inspired in her early poems. In "The spring is come again not as at first" (III.322), she writes:

The spring is come again not as at first
For then it was my spring; & now a brood
Of bitter memories haunt me & my mood
Is much changed from the time when I was nursed
In the still country. Oh! my heart could burst
Thinking upon the long ago: the crude
Hopes all unrealized; the flowers that strewed
My path, now changed to painful thorns & curst (1-8).

In spite of knowing that spring is still lovely, Rossetti sees the flowers as cursed thorns emblematic of the bitterness she feels when faced with unfulfilled hopes. Her use of the word "thorns" is fitting because it relates to the crippling of her spirit which "cannot soar / As it did once" (10-11). This re-emphasizes Rossetti's state of psychological paralysis echoed in the pristine paradisal world which she has made the focal point of her life; the "thorns" with which she scourged herself to bring herself closer to God are now in everything she sees, even the flowers, reminding her of the pain she has inflicted on herself.

Spring, in reflecting back at her the life from which she has withdrawn, sparks anxiety and turmoil within Christina, compelling her to writhe inside her mental prison. Her "brood / of bitter memories," her changed mood, her bursting heart and her "brow now marked with many a line" reveal her restlessness, echoing the violence she depicts in poems like "Good Friday." Rossetti's anxiety, at times, swells into delirium as in the following lines of one of her unpublished poems (III.343.c.1849):

So I grew half delirious and quite sick, And thro' the darkness saw strange faces grin Of Monsters at me ...

I heard the quick Pulsation of my heart, I marked the fight Of life and death within me; then sleep threw Her veil around me ... (1-10).

As in "Song," in which the speaker weeps beneath the moon in May, the anxious speaker of this unpublished poem unveils for us a poet who was fretting, afraid in the prison she had created for herself.

Christina's mourning, though, is not complete; her lamentations frequently look beyond the immediate source of sorrow, not only, as critics like W. David Shaw suggest, to gaze toward the after-life with Christ, but also toward a physical reunion with the earth and consequently toward continuous renewal through the natural forces of the universe. "Song," the melodies of the girl who sings die on the air while the tears of the speaker who observes the girl are "swallowed by the sea," subsumed into the deep-rooted motions of the earth which are larger than herself. While this consummation suggests that Christina sees a superficiality of existence in those who only understand the playful side of life like the girl who sings, it indicates that she sees a profundity in those who, like herself, are aware of the mingling of joy and sorrow in the world, in those who have experienced tears in May. But Christina goes beyond expressing the depth of human experience in sadness, presenting her reader with some acknowledgement of the physical continuity of life which is, though muted for Rossetti, a faint source of consolation.

The sea has a similar function in Rossetti's poem "Birchington Churchyard" written shortly after her brother, Dante Gabriel's death. She describes Gabriel's burial place as a "lowly hill" which overlooks "A flat-shored sea of low-voiced creeping tide" (3). With its murmuring

voice, the sea here is more like the fourfold river Rossetti imagines in paradise than the silent, indifferent ocean in "The Thread of Life." By the sea, the graveyard, at once becomes a symbol of death and of life. The spring landscape that surrounds it, now consoles Rossetti because, in its beauty, it reminds her of God and of a peaceful future for her brother whose life was so turbulent; it speaks to her, giving her a "lowly hope" (9) and leaving the door of her psychological prison slightly open.

As a result, springtime, in its contrasting guises, mirrors the complexity of human existence, expressing in Rossetti's poetry some of the ambiguities of her life overlooked by critics who seek to define her experience as an unresolved war between sense and spirit or unquestionable triumph over such a rift through the act of writing poetry. While spring, for Rossetti, reflects the spiritual wealth and growth she discovers in her family relationships and mirrors her own moments of physical and spiritual elation, it also represents the cruelty of human life she strains to avoid. The violence and imperfection she sees exemplified in the spring world parallel the cruelty she witnesses in human society. In many of her poems, consequently, Rossetti rejects the problems she perceives to be inseparable from the life symbolized by spring, opting for a heavenly spring environment which is unmarred and unchanging. In embracing the static paradisal world and the constant relationship with God she sees it to represent, however, she embeds herself more deeply in the darkness of existence she has sought to avoid, succumbing to loneliness and despair. The beauty of the spring world, however, infiltrates her sadness at times, suggesting that she harbours a faint sense of hope beneath her sorrow, a distant sense of consolation which re-emerges in her portrayal of autumn.

Chapter Two: Summer

Like Christina Rossetti's spring settings, which illuminate her exceptional moments of inspired union between sense and spirit while reflecting her movement toward loneliness and despair, her portrayals of summer highlight similar patterns overlooked by critics striving to define her work and her life. While Rossetti, like Northrop Frye, links summer, especially May and June, with the celebratory rituals of love and marriage, she explores the painful aspects of these rituals via the more stormy months of July and August; she employs the volatility of these months to reflect the inconstancy and betrayal she sees in human love relationships.

Rossetti further examines the dark side of love by making her summer worlds magical, transforming them into places of enchantment similar to what J.R.R. Tolkien, in his essay "On Fairy Stories" (1964), calls Faerie -- a dangerous world in which the hero must undergo a perilous journey to arrive at a happy ending. In this respect, Rossetti's magical summer settings also coincide with the romantic green world discussed by Frye in Anatomy of Criticism (1957), validating a medieval notion of summer which supernaturalizes the earth. As such, Rossetti's summer settings render her a Pre-Raphaelite poet whose task is, in part, to close the gap between sense and spirit. The haunted glen in

Goblin Market, the twilight world of "The Lotus Eaters: Ulysses to Penelope" (III.144-45.1847) and the melancholic night-scape in "Serenade" (III.93-4.1845) all form supernatural settings which drug the characters in some way and are symbolic of the perils encountered in romantic, and especially sexual, relationships; they illuminate the disease, hunger, lethargy and forgetfulness Rossetti views in such liaisons. Also, the mystical summer worlds Rossetti creates, as in "Serenade," reflect back at her characters images of the lovers they are trying to forget, revealing one of love's great ironies -- the plight of the person who tries to forget, only remembering more -- a theme presented, also, by Dante Gabriel in his Willowwood sonnets.

Rossetti displays an eagerness to embrace summer and the complicated love rituals it exemplifies for her; she wants to accept its pleasure and its pain together because, as she writes in "Praise of Love" (III.134.1847), it is a "foretaste of our promised Heaven" (6-7) in spite of its failings. Significantly, via her portrayals of summer, as through her spring settings, she elevates her mother to the position of lover, thus enabling herself to experience a love which is both physical and spiritual. There are times, as well, when she gives herself up to the summer landscapes, much as she worships God, thereby allowing herself to experience fleeting moments of self-love which also engage her body and soul in a revelatory union. Furthermore, although she does not write about an earthly male lover of her own with the same vigour, in poems like "Tasso and Leonora", she acknowledges that human love, like the summer

goddess she creates in "Summer" (III.74-6.1845), is able to transcend earthly constraints: physical space, time and death.

Yet, Rossetti's moments of enthusiasm for worldly love are overpowered by her desire for a love which is pure, a desire which is paralleled by her wish for a summer world which stands still at June forever ("Summer"III.287.1863). Believing that she is unable to find this untainted love, other than with God, Rossetti rejects romantic love as she renounces summer, evoking the same feelings of captivity, paralysis, nostalgia and anxiety she creates in removing herself, ideologically, from spring and the vitality she understands it to represent. Ironically, the religious love for which she opts causes her pain and uncertainty and as she moves toward it, she alienates herself from the love rituals that have been a foretaste of God's love; sadly, she binds herself to the darkness of existence she has sought to erase from her life, as she gives way to thoughts of loss and death.

While Rossetti's spring settings burst with new life, her summer landscapes are lush and abundant, swelling with the flowers, foliage, colours and scents born of spring. In "Seasons", she calls the days of summer "gorgeous blossom-days / When broad flag-flowers drink and blow," describing the dragon-flies, branches, oak trees, blossoms and herds that move beneath the "summer blaze" (1-3). In "The Months: A Pageant" (II.60-74.1881 ed.), she has May declare, "The world and I are far too full of bliss / To think or plan or toil or care" (131-132), adding, "And all that is, / Is fair" (136-137). The blissful and fair summer world parallels

the realm of human love for Rossetti much as it mirrors the archetypes of love, marriage and romance for Frye who marks summer as the zenith of the seasonal cycle, claiming it to be representative of the "marriage or triumph phase" of human life ("The Archetypes of Literature" 683). Rossetti, in characterizing summer as emblematic of romantic love, reverts to a medieval notion of summer such as the analogy presented by Sir Thomas Malory in Le Morte D'Arthur (completed between 1469-70). In summer, he asserts, "all herbs and trees renew a man and woman, and likewise lovers call again to their mind old gentleness and old service, and many kind deeds that were forgotten by negligence ..." (Malory 69). Her regression to this summer-love symbolism reveals her as a Pre-Raphaelite poet who seeks to dissolve the boundaries between the physical and spiritual.

Summer, for Rossetti, speaks of love to the world. May, in "The Months: A Pageant," having claimed that she is full of bliss, asks her listeners to harken to the linnets, blackbirds, larks, thrushes, doves, nightingales and cuckoos, saying that "all they mean / Is love" (144-149). Similarly, the summer environment in "Three Seasons" (I.55.1853) compels the speaker to shout, "A Cup for love!," making her blush like "summer after snow" (7-8). And in "A Bride Song" (I.197-98.1875 ed.), the lush summer landscape "frothing with flowers, -- / In opulent June" inspires the bride to sing, "Thro' the vales to my love!" (16-17). Rossetti's summer worlds, as a result, evoke love among human beings, succeeding, as in Le Morte D'Arthur, to "renew a man and woman," bringing to their minds "old gentleness and old service" (Malory 69).

While both spring and summer are joyous in their growth and abundance and symbolic of the festive stages of human life -- birth, love and marriage -- summer, however, exudes a sweetness absent from spring. In "Serenade," Christina describes the orange blossoms which "Breathe faintest perfume from the summer bowers" (1-2) while the night-wind "sighs forth so languidly / Laden with sweetness" (8-9) and while the turtle-dove "murmurs ever of its love" in the "balmy hour" (13). The moon, whose rays are melancholy, "shines proudly in a flood of brilliancy" (4) upon the maid who "looks forth from her latticed bower" (15). The landscape is one of excess sweetness, inspiring the speaker to exclaim, "Come, wander forth with me!" (1). As we are not presented with a guitar-playing suitor, the title of the poem, "Serenade," implies that the balmy summer night-scape is serenading the woman who gazes from her window and singing to the speaker who imagines her.

The same excess sweetness emerges in "A Peal of Bells" (I.48-9.1857) in which the speaker celebrates the heavy fruitfulness of summer. Rossetti writes:

All my lamps burn scented oil,
Hung on laden orange trees,
Whose shadowed foliage is the foil
To golden lamps and oranges.
Heap my golden plates with fruit,
Golden fruit, fresh-plucked and ripe;
Strike the bells and breathe the pipe ... (5-11).

The scented oil, golden lamps, golden fruits and golden plates form exotic images which appeal to the reader's senses. Words like "heap," "hang" and "laden" imply heaviness and plenitude, infusing the setting with a potency

that weighs down the senses, creating a narcotic effect which is reiterated in the speaker's command to "breathe the pipe" (11) and in her mention of the incense-like oil.

In short, Rossetti creates summer settings that are sweetly enticing and overwhelm her speakers. Significantly, she creates a similar vision of love. In "Love and Death" (III.123-24.1844), Rossetti tells the tale of Bianca, a noble princess who elopes with Gonsalvo, a stranger to her land. The two lovers descend to the water in the moonlight and escape in a gondola while Gonsalvo promises to crown Bianca with a crown of roses and ropes of pearls. They abandon their families and kingdoms for love just as they submit themselves to the water under the moonlight. For Rossetti, relinquishing one's will to the sensuous nature of the summer world becomes synonymous with abandoning oneself to love.

However, as with spring, Rossetti notices the complexities of the summer landscapes, recognizing that while being sensuous and alluring, summer is volatile. While May and June bring "gorgeous blossom-days," frothing with flowers and echoing the jovial nature of human love, July is tempestuous and dark, emphasizing what Rossetti sees to be the dangerous qualities of male-female relationships. Jerome J. McGann, in "Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and Revaluation" (1980), comments on the changeability and betrayal Rossetti conceives as part of love. He writes:

The great value of Christina Rossetti's work ... lies in its pitiless sense that the world is a scene of betrayal and that betrayal appears most clearly and most terribly, in the relationships between men and women ... Men and women, their "true loves," their marriages: Christina Rossetti examined these subjects in the life and art of her world and saw the piteous networks of destruction in which they were all, fatally as it were, involved (McGann 241-46).

McGann brings to light the explosiveness Rossetti views in the love

relationships she beholds.

The volatility of love discussed by McGann, however, manifests itself through the eruptive July settings Rossetti creates. In "A Year's Windfalls", Rossetti writes about "the blast of scorched July" which drives "the pelting hail, / From the thunderous lightning-clouds, that blot" the blue heaven "grown lurid pale" (129-130). Similarly, in "The A Pageant," she portrays the July sky as "purple and fire, / Blackness and noise and unrest" and she depicts the earth as "parched with desire," lifting up her "famishing life" (194). The unrest of the July landscape, for Christina, parallels the inconstancy she sees between Passages like "I did not chide him, tho' I knew / That he was false to me ... " ("Heart's Chill Between" III.16-7.1847) or "Where were you last night? I watched at the gate" ("Last Night" III.37-8.c.1863) are common to Rossetti's poetry, revealing the betrayal she witnesses in human In "Last Night," the speaker, having told of her love relationships. lover's unfaithfulness, immediately compares love to the summer landscape, arguing that it is,

> As the first spring day, or the last summer day, As the sunset flush that leaves the heaven grey, As a flame burnt out for lack of oil Which no pains relight or ever may (21-24).

The shifting landscape, consequently, becomes a vehicle for revealing what Rossetti understands to be the changeability of love.

The sweet, intoxicating nature of the summer world, which Rossetti parallels to the alluring sensuousness of physical love, is also dangerous; it forms, in several of her poems, a poison which Rossetti translates into the potential for contamination of body and soul in love relationships. The landscapes Rossetti employs to reveal love's poison are often magical in nature, exotic, perilous settings which resemble the

fairy worlds discussed by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories":
"The realm of fairy-story," Tolkien argues, "is wide and deep and high and
filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there;
shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an
ever-present peril" (Tolkien 11). Rossetti creates summer fairy worlds
which, in their magical and seductive nature, mirror the hunger, the
emotional and physical depletion, the forgetfulness and the inability to
forget she ties to worldly love.

One of the most intriguing, magical summer-scapes in Rossetti's poetry is the haunted glen in <u>Goblin Market</u>. The twilight-hued glen with its "reedy brook" (216), "purple and rich golden flags" (220) and "summer weather" (250) through which goblin men troop with an array of exotic fruits all "ripe together / In summer weather" (15-16) is everything a fairy world should be: beautiful, enchanting and dangerous.

Critic David F. Morrill, In "'Twilight is not good for maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in <u>Goblin Market</u>" (1990), labels the poem as Rossetti's "own lurid tale of young maidens threatened by the sexual possibilities of an evil, seductive brotherhood" (Morrill 1). He, alongside critics Dorothy Mermin, Janet Galligani Casey and Winston Weathers, interprets the goblins and their fruit as symbols of erotic love. Through these symbols, however, we see what Rossetti conceives as the hunger within and the consuming nature of that love. The juice of the goblins' fruit creates insatiable hunger and thirst in those who eat it; the more one consumes, the more famished one grows. Laura sucks and devours rather than eats: "She sucked and sucked and sucked the more ... / She sucked until her lips were sore" (134-136). Upon devouring the fruit, she sits "with sunk eyes and faded mouth," dreaming

of melons "as a traveller sees / False waves in desert drouth" (288-290). David Morrill argues that Laura's vampiristic sucking and feeding illuminates the parasitic nature of physical love, demonstrating "how, in the love relationship, one partner gains mastery and fattens emotionally as the other wastes away" (Morrill 5).

Morrill's assessment is important because it brings to light the issue of devouring that Rossetti connects to erotic love. In "An Artist's Studio" (III.264.1856) she portrays Dante Gabriel as feeding off his subject, Lizzie Siddal's face, claiming, "He feeds upon her face by day In "An Echo From Willowwood" (III.53.ed.1896), she and night" (9). describes the wistful faces of two lovers "craving each for each" (10). Each lover feels the hungering heart of the other which leaps up and sinks, tasting the bitterness "which both must drink" (6-7). And in "A Triad" (I.29.1856), Rossetti depicts three women -- two of whom feed off love, growing "shamed," "gross" and "soulless" and one of whom is consumed by love, becoming famished and then dying (9-11). As a result, love, for Rossetti, like the magical fruit of the goblins, involves men and women in parasitic relationships in which one devours the body and spirit of the other. Significantly, the July earth, in "The Months: A Pageant," is also thirsty as in "her parched unrest," she lifts up her famishing life to the sky and "opens her mouth to drink" (188).

Other perils, as well as poison, which Rossetti creates in her summer lands are sleep and forgetfulness, narcotics which symbolize the inertia she believes that time brings to earthly love relationships. In "The Lotus-Eaters: Ulysses to Penelope" (1847), the river is "sleepy" and "drowsy" beneath the horizon's "twilight-purple rim" (11). The lethargy in the summer ambience of "The Lotus-Eaters" reflects the forgetfulness

Rossetti sees attached to human love. In "Have you forgotten?" (III.173.1849), Rossetti asks:

Have you forgotten how one Summer night
We wandered forth together with the moon,
While warm winds hummed to us a sleepy tune?
Have you forgotten how you praised both light
And darkness ... (1-5).

If spoken to a lover of the past, this passage reveals the forgetfulness time brings to love. And if uttered to herself, it conveys her own forgetting of her enthusiastic, youthful desire to embrace both the light and dark sides of love -- a desire I will be discussing later in this chapter. The warm winds which hum a sleepy tune, like the drowsy river in "The Lotus-Eaters: Ulysses to Penelope," echo the forgetting which, for Rossetti, is connected to romantic love.

For Rossetti, however, forgetfulness in love, as lethargy in the magical summer worlds she creates, is ambiguous in that the more one tries In "The Lotus-Eaters: Ulysses to to forget, the more one remembers. Penelope," the opium-like atmosphere of the island is wanted by Ulysses' travellers; "they love it," claims Rossetti as she has them succumb to the dreamy world in which all things are "resting everywhere" (36). Rossetti, certainly, would have observed her brother, Dante Gabriel's struggle to forget his past, watching his self-destructive attempts to erase Lizzie Siddal from his mind and learning to acknowledge the desire to forget as the aftermath of love. In A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1949), Oswald Doughty comments on Dante Gabriel's fight to obliterate his past, claiming, "In the life of the senses he sought to forget the unfulfilled promise, the vain idealism of the past, the long dreary embittered 'courtship,' the brief, unhappy marriage, the sordid, enigmatic end" (Doughty 343).

Rossetti, however, while she would have observed her brother's efforts to forget love, also would have realized the irony of his trying to forget, learning that his striving to eradicate the past only would have embroiled him further in painful memories. Rossetti's understanding of this irony emerges in her work; while the summer environment, in some of Rossetti's poems, drugs the characters, compelling them to forget, in others, such as "Serenade," it makes them remember. In "Serenade," the landscape, while it sighs, murmurs and floats, soothing the speaker with a lullaby effect, reminds her of those she has "loved long dead" (23-25), which makes her sad. The melancholic setting of "Serenade" resembles Dante Gabriel's Willowwood whose gently rippling pool reflects back at him the image of his lost lover and whose groves hold her wandering when he is desperately trying to forget her (Willowwood Sonnets). Remembering, as a result, as well as forgetting, is part of the magical summer world and of love, for Christina Rossetti.

In spite of its complexities, however, Rossetti demonstrates a willingness to embrace human love. In "Serenade," calm melancholy floats upon the moon's rays, invoking in the speaker a "passionless sadness without dread, / Like the thought of those we loved long dead" (23-25). The summer night-scape evokes the loss, sadness, dread and death that pervade Rossetti's understanding of love relationships between mortals. Yet, the phrase "Come, wander forth with me!" which forms the framework of the poem reveals the speaker's eagerness to explore the realms of summer and love in spite of their pitfalls. Similarly, in "Praise of Love" (1847), Rossetti questions, "And who would give Love's joy to 'scape its paining? / Yea, who would lose its sorrow and its gladness?" She concludes, "Then let us bear its griefs without complaining." Having

acknowledged love's pain, she expresses her willingness to experience both the pleasure and the suffering inherent in love.

Looking toward a heavenly love relationship with God fuels, in part, Rossetti's desire to accept earthly love. In "Love defended" (III.87-8.1846), she argues that the eventual entry into Heaven is "a recompense / For a little pain" in love (13-16), adding,

So, tho' Love may not be free Always from a taint of grief, If its sting is very sharp, Great is its relief (17-20).

While love is not free "from a taint of grief," it "makes the world habitable, / Love is a foretaste of our promised Heaven" ("Praise of Love" 6-7). In its foreshadowing of love with Christ, Rossetti concludes, "Love is all happiness, love is all beauty" (16); its glory overshadows its painful elements.

Rossetti realizes her desire to "wander forth" into a human love relationship, as she does in her springtime poetry, through her relationship with her mother who she elevates to the position of lover in the lines of the following untitled sonnet (II.59.1881 ed.):

Sonnets are full of love, and this my tome
Has many sonnets: so here now shall be
One sonnet more, a love sonnet, from me
To her whose heart is my heart's quiet home,
To my first Love, my Mother ...
I love you, Mother, I have woven a wreath
Of rhymes wherewith to crown your honoured name:
In you not fourscore years can dim the flame
Of love, whose blessed glow transcends the laws
Of time and change and mortal life and death (1-14).

While Rossetti expresses her love for her mother as she does in her Valentine poems, revelling in the human love critics argue she has sought to avoid, she supernaturalizes her mother, acknowledging her love as a

spiritual love which supersedes the boundaries of human life: time, change, mortality and death.

Her supernaturalization of the love she shares with her mother is echoed in her supernaturalization of summer. In "Summer", she transforms the season into a goddess who breathes into nature, compelling the flowers to grow, animating the bees and the birds and breathing warmth into the wind. Rossetti writes:

And now she alights on the Earth

To play with her children the flowers;
She touches the stems, and the buds have birth,

And gently she trains them in bowers
And the bees and the birds are glad,

And the wind catches warmth from her breath (25-30).

Having rendered summer as a supernatural power, Rossetti has her transcend the boundaries of time and physical space, compelling her to push away her pall, leaving the dying autumn earth behind her and flying across the seas to gladden people in distant lands (167).

Rossetti's spiritualization of her love for her mother and her supernaturalization of summer typify a fundamental goal of the Pre-Raphaelite movement which sought to erase the "simplistic dualisms" of "natural versus supernatural," sense versus spirit (Bump 324), counteracting the assertion of Jerome Bump who argues that Rossetti "was not able to embrace the version of the Pre-Raphaelite revolt against dualism which most attracted Hopkins: a vision of the supernatural in the natural" (328). Rossetti's elevation of summer and love to the spiritual realms also undermines the argument of Catherine Musello Cantalupo who asserts that Rossetti resists "the contemporary heresy that naturalizes the supernatural and vice-versa" (Cantalupo 300). Through her praise of summer and of the love she feels for her mother, Rossetti clearly closes

the gap between sense and spirit emphasized by recent Rossetti criticism.

Rossetti's spiritualization of worldly love, moreover, extends to the love shared between man and woman. In "Tasso and Leonora", Tasso, asleep in his prison cell, receives a "glorious vision" which "hovers o'er his soul" (1), the apparition of Leonora "with large humid eyes, / Gazing upon him in the misty light" (13-14). Leonora's form, here, penetrates the boundaries of sleeping and waking, transcends the prison cell and causes all the planets to roll in "glowing adoration," inspiring the stars to move "with heavenly loves and harmonies" (11). Tasso, consequently, is able to escape, mentally, his cold, physical surroundings: his "weary bed," his "hard pillow" and his water bowl. Human love, then, whether between mother and daughter or man and woman, becomes, at times, a spiritual force which surpasses the physical world as summer which flies across the seas to gladden people in distant lands.

Rossetti's glorification of summer and of the love relationships she sees exemplified by summer extends to herself, allowing her to celebrate a momentary union of sense and spirit as she does in the spring imagery of "A Birthday." In momentarily mending this rift between sense and spirit, Rossetti becomes what Thomas Burnett Swann calls, in <u>Wonder and Whimsy</u> (1960), "one of the archetypes of the Pre-Raphaelite lady with the eyes of a saint and the mouth of a nymph, looking heaven-ward but earthbound by desire" (Swann 21). In "From early dawn until the flush of noon", she revels in the "flush of noon," the "hushed night," the "deep sun," the "silver moon," the "trees," the "bushes," the "fruits," the "flowers" and the "sea." Her revelling in these elements of the physical summer landscape engages her heart, soul, spirit and senses in a moment of joyous union. "My heart & soul & spirit are in tune. / My sense is

gladdened with an inward light" (5-6), she claims, adding, "A better day was not I think & ne'er / Was I so full of joy as I am now" (12-13). Her heart and spirit are, as in "A Birthday," like a singing bird in a watered shoot.

The moment's poignancy, furthermore, is heightened, by the speaker's knowledge that "a chill shall come & this shall go hence" (14). While in "Praise of Love," "Love defended" and "Serenade" Rossetti displays a willingness to explore the summer landscapes and the love which they embody for her, in "From early dawn until the flush of noon," she connects herself directly with the physical environment, enabling herself to experience an amalgamation of sense and spirit which transcends the awareness of sorrow in love and darkness in summer that pervades so many of her poems.

However, Rossetti's desire to embrace love and her achievement of a love which is both physical and spiritual are counteracted by her yearning for a love which is static like the frozen spring settings she describes in "Paradise" and "Saints and Angels." This "pure" love, for Rossetti, can only be achieved with Christ. Significantly, Rossetti wishes for purity in the summer landscape; she wants summer to stand still at June forever, to remain untainted by the tempestuous nature of July. In "Summer", she sighs:

If the year would stand
Still at June forever,
With no further growth on land
Nor further flow of river,
If all nights were shortest nights
And longest days were all the seven, -This might be a merrier world
To my mind to live in (17-24).

As in "Paradise" and "Saints and Angels," Rossetti wants a still world

with no growth and no flow because movement and change remind her of humanity's movement toward death.

Rossetti's yearning for a June landscape which is frozen in its loveliness mirrors her desire for a love relationship with Christ which she imagines to be free of the hunger, lethargy, betrayal and debilitation she sees tied to worldly love. In an "Later Life: A Double of Sonnets" 7 (II.141.1881 ed.), she discusses the mutability of love, the forgetfulness it brings, the hatred it evokes and the torment it creates for the human race. She, then, claims that she will ring her marriage bell in spite of love's downfalls because love gives her hope. In the sestet, however, we learn that the love for which she yearns is "perfect" as she writes:

Love is the goal, love is the way we wend, Love is our parallel unending line Whose only perfect Parallel is Christ, Beginning not begun, End without end (9-11).

The love she discusses here, like the static June landscape which she craves, is an "unending line" which runs parallel, to Christ. But the love she posits is also the <u>goal</u> for which she strives, the love of Christ. Her unpublished sonnet "Will you be there? my yearning heart has cried" (III.313.1870) reveals her wanting to enter into a union of love with Christ as she writes:

Will you be there? my yearning heart has cried: Ah me, my love, my love, shall I be there To sit down in your glory and to share Your gladness, glowing as a virgin bride (1-4)?

Her desire to be joined in love with an entity which has no beginning and no end reveals her wanting purity and stability in love -- a yearning that is reflected in her demand for a summer setting which is frozen at June forever.

Ironically, the love relationship with God conceived by Rossetti is fraught with problems which undermine its presumed purity; it is a relationship which contains rejection, uncertainty, jealousy and fear of betrayal. In "Twice" (I.124-26.1864), the speaker discusses the times during which she has rejected male-female love and offered her heart to God. She writes:

You took my heart in your hand
With a friendly smile,
With a critical eye you scanned,
Then set it down ...
As you set it down it broke... (11-18).

The problems of human love relationships extend to her relationship with God; here, although God is friendly, He rejects her heart and sets it down, breaking it. Uncertainty also surfaces in Rossetti's anticipation of a union with Christ. In "Will you be there?" (1870), she asks Christ if he will be waiting for her in Heaven; her question conveys a lack of trust in Christ -- an uncertainty she feels also within herself as she adds, "Shall I be there" (2)? Jealousy, in addition to rejection and uncertainty, creeps into her questioning as she asks, "Or will another dearer, fairer-eyed, / Sit nigher to you in your jubilee," and adds, "And mindful one of other will you be / Bourne higher and higher on joy's ebbless tide?" (7-8). Her concern about whether or not God will be seated beside another fairer than she and engaged in a joyous union with that person indicates that rivalry enters into her relationship with God, undercutting the perfection and constancy she conceives it to embody.

However, Rossetti moves toward this love and away from the romantic love she associates with summer. She rejects summer with its

volatility and changeability, alienating herself from its warmth as she withdraws herself from the vitality of springtime. In "From Sunset to Star Rise" (I.191-92.1865), Rossetti commands, "Go from me, summer friends, and tarry not: / I am no summer friend, but wintry cold," closing herself off from summer and clinging to the coldness she associates with She withdraws from summer to "shiver on the wold, / winter and death. Athirst and hungering on a barren spot," likening herself to Shakespeare's Mariana who exiles herself to the moated grange. Diane D'Amico, in "Christina Rossetti's 'From Sunset to Star Rise': A New Reading" (1989), comments on the title of the poem, arguing that it "suggests a time when God's presence is not felt, for it describes the time after sunset and before the first star appears ... Thus we can conclude that when Rossetti places her speaker in the twilight darkness without sun or star in her sky, she is depicting a loss of Christian hope" (D'Amico 87). Ironically, by instructing her "summer friends" to depart, Rossetti is throwing herself deeper into the darkness she is straining to avoid. Rossetti, by cutting herself off from summer and by shrouding herself in darkness is severing herself from what she sees as symbolic of human love. Human love, she argues in "Praise of Love" is "a foretaste of heavenly love" which makes the world more habitable. Consequently, by denying herself earthly love, she finds it more difficult to foresee the love she yearns to experience in Heaven.

As well as rejecting summer, she relinquishes romantic love and marriage. Kathleen Jones in <u>Christina Rossetti: Learning not to be first</u> (1992) discusses Christina's refusal of James Collinson in 1849 and of Charles Cayley in 1867. In "Twice," Rossetti alludes to her renunciation of marriage in order to give her heart to God. In rejecting male-female

love on earth, Rossetti rids herself of the foretaste of God's love she discusses in "Praise of Love." The absence of love in Rossetti's life creates the same void discussed by Diane D'Amico in her analysis of "From Sunset to Star Rise" -- a void that evolves out of Rossetti's exile from her "summer friends," erasing the hope that emerged in several of her portrayals of spring. Instead, we are presented with impenetrable images of imprisonment, paralysis, delirium and desperation which leave Rossetti dreaming of the death which she has striven to avoid.

While Rossetti exiles herself from summer, she violently cuts herself off from love, writing in "So I Began My Walk of Life (III.342-43.1849)), "The heart puts forth her boughs; and these we lop / For very wantonness; until the gale / Is rank with blood ... " (5-6). She brutally severs any sign of life growing from her heart, contaminating the gale Her tampering with her heart, the ultimate physical with her blood. symbol for her love, then, immediately becomes an action which sparks disease. As well, it creates the same sense of imprisonment we are faced with in her portrayals of spring. In "From Sunset to Star Rise," having isolated herself from her summer friends, she expresses her feeling of entrapment, drawing upon the same thorn imagery she employs in her spring settings. She laments, "For I have hedged me with a thorny hedge, / I live alone, I look to die alone" (9-10). The same sense of imprisonment emerges in "Yes, I too could face death and never shrink" (III.298-99. 1904 ed.) in which she writes:

Yes, I too could face death and never shrink:
But it is harder to bear hated life;
To strive with hands and knees weary of strife;
To drag the heavy chain whose every link
Galls to the bone; to stand upon the brink
Of the deep grave ...(1-5).

The speaker compares herself to a prisoner, weighed down by a chain that galls "to the bone," conveying feelings which are vastly different to the joyous moments of freedom she is able to achieve when revelling in the summer landscapes and the love she understands them to represent.

As an exile from spring and summer and from the life and love they embody for her, and as a prisoner within herself, Rossetti feels frozen, experiencing a state of paralysis which is accompanied by nostalgia for the green world she has lost. In "Heart's Chill Between", she writes:

And often thro' the long long night
Waking when none are near,
I feel my heart beat fast with fright,
Yet know not what I fear.
Oh how I long to see the light
And the sweet birds to hear!

To have the Sun shine upon my face,
To look up through the trees,
To walk forth in the open space,
And listen to the breeze,
And not to dream the burial place
Is clogging my weak knees (25-36).

In these lines, Rossetti gives the same impression of being encompassed in darkness pinpointed by Diane D'Amico in her reading of "From Sunset to Star Rise," a feeling of being caught in a world void of Christian hope. Moreover, she employs an image of being crippled which echoes her description of her spirit which "cannot soar / As it did once" in "The spring is come again not as at first" (10-11); this time, the burial place clings to her knees, locking her into the death she has wanted to evade in her rejection of romantic love. Her crippled state is augmented by her feeling of emotional numbness as she later claims, "Sometimes I can nor weep nor pray, / But am half stupefied," continuing, "My grief nor grows

nor doth decrease" (37-45). Her feeling of stasis foreshadows the images of self-freezing she develops in her winter portrayals while recalling the state of paralysis she embraces via the frozen spring worlds.

While Rossetti feels paralysed in a state of death, she expresses her longing to be reunited with the light, the birds, the sun, the trees and the wind of the summer environment she has rejected. Similarly, she searches for the love she perceives to be exemplified by the flourishing summer landscape. In "I seek among the living & I seek" (III.320.1896 ed.), she writes, "I seek among the living & I seek / Among the dead for some to love ..." (1-2). She is nostalgic for summer and the love she sees within it as she is for spring and the vitality it exudes.

Alienated from spring and summer, seasons which reveal Rossetti's potential to experience life and love in the world, Rossetti's sense of delirium intensifies. In "Heart's Chill Between," her mental position in darkness makes her "heart beat fast with fright" (27) and in Sonnet 12 ("Later Life: A Double of Sonnets" II.143.1881 ed.), her dreams compel her to scream; "A dream there is wherein we are fain to scream," she states, continuing, "While struggling with ourselves we cannot speak / And much of all our waking life" eludes us "like the dream" (1-4). Rossetti's need to scream while struggling with herself conveys her anxiety. Furthermore, it reveals her knowledge that her life has eluded her "like the dream" in which she feels caught.

Summer, then, like spring, provides a conduit for analyzing Rossetti's intricate ideas about love between human beings; Rossetti writes into the summer settings she creates the elation, the fruitfulness and the magic she sees in love, mingling those positive traits with the explosiveness, betrayal, hunger, depletion, forgetfulness and heart-ache

she views as contaminators of that love. Through summer, moreover, Rossetti expresses her yearning to embrace love because, she believes, although painful, that it foreshadows the holy love she anticipates that she will experience with Christ in Heaven. She achieves the love she craves, in part, by elevating her mother to the position of lover and, in addition, by revelling in the beauty of the summer landscape which, momentarily, inspires her to love herself. These singular moments of love which are both physical and spiritual in nature allow her to understand that male-female love can also transcend the material world. they give way to a stronger desire for a love which is "pure," a love which, for Rossetti, can only be experienced with Christ. Wanting to prepare herself for a holy union with Christ, she mentally shuts herself off from summer and the worldly love it represents for her, thwarting the rituals of physical and spiritual healing she initiates in her celebrations of love and of summer. Ironically, the holy love for which she opts is also fraught with problems: rejection, rivalry, jealousy and uncertainty. In alienating herself from the affirmative movements toward healing in her celebration of summer and in loving the world and the people within it, like her mother, as in isolating herself from spring and all it signifies for her, Rossetti falls into a state of depression; she feels frantic and alone, frightened and sad, wondering "What will it be to die / Not in a dream, but in the literal truth" ("Later Life: Sonnet 27" II.149-50.1881 ed.).

Chapter Three: Autumn

Autumn, while less present in Rossetti's poetry than spring and summer, also reveals the complexities she views in human life, further exemplifying, in its changing landscapes, the pain and struggle of her own She emphasizes the colour, abundance and activity in the autumn world, metaphorically interpreting the harvest as life in order to emphasize the spiritual wealth human beings should gain and the joy they should feel upon reaching the final phases of their lives. The celebration of the harvester or gleaner in poems like "Seasons" (III.41.1863) or "Venus's Looking-Glass" (I.209.1872) comes to represent, for Rossetti, the contentment and fulfilment a person should feel as he/she contemplates his/her life experiences and looks toward a future In accentuating autumn's festive nature, Rossetti, at times, empowers autumn, just as she spiritualizes summer, again revealing herself as a Pre-Raphaelite poet and reverting to a Romantic vision of nature, like that of the image of fall presented by Keats in "To Autumn."

Rossetti vacillates, however, between romantic and Christian notions of the earth while in poems like "Annie" she transforms God into the all-powerful harvester who wields the ultimate power over the earth rather than Autumn itself who, in "Venus's Looking-Glass," wends its way through the woods and fields. Continuing her God-as-harvester analogy, she displaces the fruitfulness of the earth's harvest onto Heaven,

rendering autumn a foreshadowing of heavenly gain as, also in her summer imagery, she renders earthly love a foretaste of God's endearment.

Furthermore, she draws out the intoxicating sweetness of the maturing autumn world, emphasizing in poems like "Autumn" the satisfaction and elation which the life-gain it represents brings to humankind. While Rossetti imaginatively both creates and participates in this richness of life, she expresses her loneliness and isolation within the exotic imaginary world she creates, suggesting that, in some way, she is estranged from herself. Autumn, understandably then, takes on the starker meanings pinpointed by Northrop Frye and G.B. Tennyson, representing, for Rossetti, isolation and death as well as joy and thanksgiving. Yet, Rossetti still fixes upon the complexities of this autumn-dying symbolism, acknowledging memory and forgetfulness as inherent in both the fading autumn world and waning human life. For Rossetti, remembering and forgetting, while ironically intertwined, are connected to our dying.

The universally acknowledged equation between autumn and human death, which G.B. Tennyson labels "conventional wisdom," in turn, becomes Rossetti's personal wisdom. The falling leaf, as she states in "A Better Resurrection" is her life. The spirits of the past inherent in the autumn landscape become symbolic of her memory. The numbing effect of the dying earth signifies her forgetting. As in her summer portrayals, Rossetti's feelings of numbness feed her sense of being paralysed, imprisoned and anxious in life. Yet these desperate feelings, while excessively bleak, are not final; while they may overwhelm her moments of happiness, making her despair, they do not prevent her from wanting to linger in the world

as she does in her poem "An Apple Gathering".

While Rossetti links autumn with the archetypes of old age and human dying in many of her poems, reiterating what G.B. Tennyson labels "conventional wisdom" (Tennyson 352-3), she frequently draws out the nuances of the autumn landscape, employing those nuances to illuminate the complexities she perceives to be at the root of the human aging process. Unlike Northrop Frye who views the "sunset, autumn and death phase" as representative of the myths of the "fall of the dying god, of violent death and sacrifice and of the isolation of the hero" (Frye 683), Rossetti notices the fruitfulness, beauty and fullness of autumn and interprets them as reflectors of the satiation, joviality and contentment human beings should feel as they contemplate the past. In "Seasons" (III.41.1863), Rossetti emphasizes the celebration, fruition and pageantry of autumn, claiming:

Oh the shouting harvest-weeks:

Mother Earth grown fat with sheaves;
Thrifty gleaner finds who seeks:

Russet golden pomp of leaves
Crowns the woods, to fall at length;

Bracing winds are felt to stir,
Ocean gathers up her strength,

Beasts renew their dwindled fur (17-24).

Rossetti renders autumn a time of festivity with its "shouting harvest weeks," of birth with its earth "grown fat," of pageantry with its "Russet golden pomp of leaves," of re-strengthening with its ocean and of renewal with its animals' fur; she accentuates its life rather than its dying.

In its merriment, autumn comes to represent the celebration of the life and love experienced in the earlier stages of human life. In "Venus's Looking-Glass" Rossetti depicts Venus, the goddess of love, walking through the autumn fields, surveying the wheat: "But when flushed Autumn thro' the woodlands went / I spied sweet Venus walk amid the wheat" she writes (11-12). Upon seeing Venus, she continues, every harvester gives "o'er / His toil," laughs, hopes and is content (11-14). Autumn, in conjunction with Venus, brings to light the richness of human existence.

Significantly, Rossetti personifies autumn as Keats does in "To Autumn" while embracing the classical figure Venus in her work. In doing so, she reverts to a classical, romantic image of nature characteristic of Pre-Raphaelite art and at odds with Christianity's "insistence on seeing the natural world as a declaration of the glory of God" (Cantalupo 278). As well, she empowers autumn, enabling it to invoke the spirit of love in the harvesters, causing them to relax, laugh and hope for the future. Her empowerment of autumn parallels her supernaturalization of summer in "Summer" (III.74-6.1845) contradicting critics like Cantalupo and Bump who argue that Rossetti resists elevating nature to spiritual realms. Furthermore, while autumn invokes love in the harvesters, it also inspires Venus' presence in the speaker; the speaker, who has observed the "Queen of Love" sing and dance in spring, spies her again in autumn, implying that she also is a reaper of the world's pleasures. While she describes the harvesters as laughing and singing, rather than herself, she is aware of love which wends its way through the autumn world.

The merriment of the autumn environment that Rossetti describes in poems like "Seasons" and "Venus's Looking-Glass" also exemplifies the warmth and fellowship she views among human beings, a mirth which foreshadows the festivity she attributes to winter. In "The Months: A Pageant," October compensates for September's complaints of death by commanding the audience to celebrate at the fireside. October exclaims:

Crack your first nut and light your first fire, Roast your first chestnut crisp on the bar; Make the logs sparkle, stir the blaze higher ...

Dance, nights and days! and dance on, my hours! (264-73).

The fall of the year is a time for gaiety, for dancing and for enjoying the rewards of the year's toil as old age is a time for contemplating and celebrating the past while anticipating a future with God.

The bringing in of the harvest and the festivities thereafter signify hope for Rossetti in a Christian sense also; they not only exemplify what Christians conceive as God's generosity toward humankind, but also become metaphors for the spiritual abundance she believes she will reap with God after death. In "Annie" (II.217-21.1853) she writes:

God puts the sickle to the corn.

And reaps it when He will

From every watered valley

And from every fruitful hill.

He holdeth time in His Right Hand

To check or to fulfill (85-90).

By characterizing God as the reaper who decides when the sickle will cut the corn, she re-establishes God as the creator and overseer of the fields, valleys and hills that are the earth. As well as testifying to God's ultimate power over everything, Rossetti's autumn imagery, like her summer-love imagery which she renders a foretaste of God's love, acts as a precursor to the harvest she hopes to experience with God in Heaven. Having rendered God reaper of the earth in "Annie," she continues:

There shall come another harvest
Than was in the days of yore:
The reapers shall be Angels,
Our God shall purge the floor:
No more seed-time, no more harvest,
Then for evermore (91-96).

While Rossetti perceives the harvest of the year to symbolize the reaping of the rewards she hopes to achieve with God after death, she conceives an after-life which is stagnant similar to the frozen heavenly world she reates with her spring imagery. She claims that in Heaven there will be "No more seed-time, no more harvest, / Then for evermore" (95-96) indicating, as through her paradisal spring settings, that there is an absence of birth, growth, development and gain in the after-life. Similarly, in "I have a message unto thee" (III.237.1855) she mentions the "undecaying saps" in "heaven's own harvest field" (61-62) envisioning a world which, while beautiful, forms a static, limited environment which blocks movement and change.

In comparison with her heavenly autumn settings, Rossetti's worldly autumn environments are places of activity and movement, both physically and emotionally. In "Autumn", Rossetti creates in her imagination an image of figures floating down a river, "love-songs gurgling from a hundred throats"; they have obviously indulged themselves in the worldly pleasures she associates with summer, succumbing to the lethargy Rossetti also attributes to erotic love. Rossetti writes:

Fair fall the freighted boats which gold and stone And spices bear to sea: Slim, gleaming maidens swell their mellow notes, Love-promising, entreating -- (7-10).

Her picture is reminiscent of Shakespeare's image of Cleopatra who floats down the Nile in her barge:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold; Purple the sails, and so perfumed that The winds were lovesick with them ... (Antony and Cleopatra II.ii.191-4).

Rossetti's languid maidens "lulled to sleep with rest and spice and balm" (47-8), like Shakespeare's Cleopatra who floats amidst the winds lovesick from the perfumed sails of her barge, form an image of woman satiated with love and intoxicated with its pleasures; all are concluding their journeys

fulfilled. Autumn, moreover, is the inspiratory force behind the image, evoking Rossetti's romantic vision of the earth that parallels Keats' season "of mists and mellow fruitfulness" which bends "with apples the mossed cottage-trees" (5), fills "all fruit with ripeness to the core" (6), swells the gourd and plumps the hazel shells (7). Rossetti uses similar images of fullness and heaviness in "Autumn" to mirror the satisfaction she imagines humans to feel having experienced the erotic love she sees symbolized in the opulent but dangerous summer landscapes.

Rossetti, however, places herself outside the abundant autumn setting she creates in "Autumn"; she accentuates her alienation from the sweet, indulgent songs of the maidens, claiming "I dwell alone -- I dwell alone, alone" (1). Angela Leighton, in her discussion of "Autumn," argues that Rossetti's position of exile allows her to feel the love and life of the maidens more vehemently than if she were embroiled in the sensuous autumn world she portrays:

The mis-communications and mis-timings of Rossetti's poems are, paradoxically, like her goblins, also the sources of its erotically delaying, dallying, pleasure-loving rhythms: 'Love-promising, entreating--/Ah! Sweet, but fleeting'. By being out of time with pleasure, she can keep a hungry ear on all its licence. By being out of life itself, ghostly and unknown, she can feel its pulses more strongly and waywardly (Leighton 151).

While Leighton brings to light the connection Rossetti feels with worldly pleasure from her isolation and points out that her isolation intensifies that connection, she still presents Rossetti as an observer of the sensuous autumn world rather than a participant in that world.

Rossetti, as the creator of the autumn setting in "Autumn," takes possession of it rather than merely observing it. Expressions like "my river" (2), "my strand" (5), "mine avenue" (28) and "my fertile trees" (31) suggest that she <u>is</u> embracing fully the imaginative landscape she has

created. Moreover, while she may feel alienated from the languid maidens who float along her river, she positions herself in a setting which is full of life:

Mine avenue is all a growth of oaks,
Some rent by thunder strokes,
Some rustling leaves and acorns in the breeze;
Fair fall my fertile trees,
That rear their godly heads, and live at ease (28-32).

If we interpret the physical landscape as symbolic of Rossetti's imagination, the avenue filled with oaks, rustling leaves, acorns and fertile trees reveals the fullness and depth of Rossetti's life-experience and imaginative development; it unveils a person who can "live at ease," at times, in spite of the turmoil implied by the few trees "rent by thunder strokes" (29).

The following stanza, however, while it augments the vitality and fertility of Rossetti's imaginative setting, reveals her reluctance to participate in that setting. She writes:

A spider's web blocks all mine avenue;
He catches down and foolish painted flies,
That spider wary and wise.

Each morn it hangs a rainbow strung with dew
Betwixt boughs green with sap,
So fair, few creatures guess it is a trap:
I will not mar the web,
Tho' sad I am to see the small lives ebb (33-40).

Although she imagines and describes the web, she refuses to tamper with it; she will not involve herself in the activity of life it embodies. In this sense, she becomes like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott -- a comparison made by Angela Leighton -- weaving pictures of reality without being able to incorporate herself into the reality she weaves. Her creation of an imaginative landscape and her abstinence from participating in that landscape becomes an example of the psychological estrangement she feels

within herself, a self-alienation she expresses in the poem's opening lines:

I dwell alone -- I dwell alone, alone, Whilst full my river flows down to the sea, Gilded with flashing boats That bring no friend to me (1-4).

Her portrayal of <u>her</u> river gilded with flashing boats parallels the Byzantine settings discussed by Dolores Rosenblum in "Poetic Sequence," exotic settings which emerge in Rossetti's religious poetry. Yet, the sensual quality of Rossetti's autumn landscape is contrasted by the isolation and barrenness she feels within that landscape. "My trees are not in flower, / I have no bower," she writes, concluding, "And gusty creaks my tower, / And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand" (60-3).

In "The Lady of Shalott: Cracks in the Mirror" (Woman / Image/ Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature 1991), Lynne Pearce presents Tennyson's Lady of Shalott as a symbol of woman who has been oppressed throughout history, claiming that "the she exemplifies imprisoned woman, the condemned woman, the murdered woman of many centuries" (Pearce 74). However, she also emphasizes the Lady of Shalott's creativity within her confinement, stating that she "is not following a pattern, but designing her own tapestry from the images she sees reflected in the mirror" (76). The Lady of Shalott, she concludes, "may be read as a symbolic figuration of the ideological contradictions by which she is riven" (76). Rossetti's speaker in "Autumn" fits the mould pinpointed by Pearce; while shaping the autumn world in her mind, she demonstrates creativity and imaginative power yet is unable to explore the world she creates. She is, in this sense, alienated from herself.

Rossetti's exile from the sensuous autumn world and the joviality and satiation it embodies is better understood when analyzed in contrast

to the starker meanings she attributes to autumn; in spite of the affirmative qualities of human life she understands it to represent, she reverts to its more conventional symbolism, linking it, like Northrop Frye, to the waning of human life, death and isolation. In contrast to her energetic depiction of autumn in "Seasons," in Sonnet 18 of "Later Life: A Double of Sonnets" (II.46), she describes it as pallid and cold, infusing it with an ambience of death, claiming:

So late in Autumn half the world's asleep,
And half the wakeful world looks pinched and pale;
For dampness now, not freshness, rides the gale;
And cold and colourless comes ashore the deep
With tides that bluster or with tides that creep;
Now veiled uncouthness wears an uncouth veil
Of fog, not sultry haze; and blight and bale
Have done their worst and leaves rot on the heap (1-8).

Significantly, Rossetti portrays autumn in terms that could easily be used to describe human death; autumn's dying mirrors the process of human dying. Like a corpse, autumn, in the first phase of death, is half-numb, looking "pinched and pale" before becoming damp, cold and colourless and before being shrouded in an "uncouth veil." It finally rots as would a corpse.

Rossetti equates autumn with humanity's dying more directly in "Vanity of Vanities" (II.315.1858), "Tempus Fugit" (II.94-5) and "A baby's cradle with no baby in it" (II.22). In "Vanity of Vanities," she argues that the falling autumn leaf suggests grief to the human world; "Of all the downfalls in the world," she claims, "The flutter of an Autumn leaf / Grows grievous by suggesting grief" (1-3). The grief she sees exemplified by autumn, moreover extends to everything in the world; the cankered apple, the snared robin, the silenced voice, sight, sound and silence sting because they remind her of human imperfection. Similarly, in

"Tempus Fugit," she asserts that "Nothing can last," "Can be cleaved unto" or "dwelt upon" (10-2) -- a theme echoed later in Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

So Eden sank to grief So dawn goes down to day Nothing gold can stay (6-8).

As well, in "A baby's cradle with no baby in it" which appears in <u>Sing Song</u>, she depicts the autumn leaves as they "drop sere" on a baby's grave (2). The falling leaves parallel the descending blossoms in "Sweet Death" which alight upon the churchyard graves in spring, illuminating the ephemeral nature of human life and emphasizing the sadness and death that can mar all phases of existence.

In "Love God and Die -- Christina Rossetti and the Future," G.B. Tennyson argues that to assert that Rossetti employs the seasons, in this case autumn, to show that "human life, like the seasons, runs its appointed round and must endure its autumn and winter even if it enjoyed its spring and summer" is to reiterate "conventional wisdom" (Tennyson 352-3). Rossetti, however, as in her spring and summer portrayals, goes beyond autumn-dying symbolism, exploring the nuances of that symbolism, transforming it into personal wisdom and using it to express her own feelings of loneliness and despair as she does via spring and summer.

Autumn's dwindling represents the passing of Rossetti's life and her submission to death. In an untitled verse (II.316), she writes, "Life slowly grows and dwindles breath by breath: / Death slowly grows on us; no word it saith..." (6-7). Similarly, in "For Each" (II.279.c.1892) she links her life to the completed harvest, writing:

My harvest is done, its promise ended, Weak and watery sets the sun, Day and night in one mist are blended My harvest is done (1-4).

Rossetti's view of autumn pertains directly to her own life. In "A Better Resurrection," she writes, "My life is in the falling leaf..." (7); her use of the word <u>in</u> as opposed to <u>like</u> suggests that Rossetti, somehow, sees herself bound to the earth -- her death and the falling leaf are one and the same. In this single line, then, Rossetti acknowledges and affirms her connection to the world. She later adds:

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk;
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk (9-12).

While Rossetti understands autumn to symbolize human dying, she embraces it as a personal symbol of her own movement toward death.

As well as rendering autumn an emblem for death, she also perceives it as a symbol for memory. In "Three Seasons" (II.55.1853), she exclaims:

"A cup for memory!"

Cold cup that one must drain alone:
While autumn winds are up and moan
Across the barren sea (9-12).

The speaker advocates autumn, clearly, as a time for remembering the past stages of her life. Yet through words such as "cold," "alone" and "barren" she implies that the memory she associates with autumn is isolating and makes her feel sterile and frozen. Unlike the merry harvesters in "Venus's Looking-Glass" who joyously contemplate Venus' reappearance in the wheat fields, the speaker of "Three Seasons" must drain her cup of life alone. The image is one of emptiness, solitude and finality rather than one of plentitude and hope for the future which is to be celebrated among friends.

In "Under Willows" (II.292-3.1864), Rossetti again links autumn

with the memory of the vitality and love she associates with spring and summer. She describes someone who meets a lost lover under the willows "among the graves" (5) sometime in autumn when "each wild wind raves / And whirls sere leaves away" (7-8). She concludes the poem, writing:

Under willows among the graves
I know a certain black black pool
Scarce wrinkled when Autumn raves;
Under the turf is cool;
Under the water it must be cold;
Winter comes cold when Summer's past;
Though she live to be old, so old,
She shall die at last (17-24).

Angela Leighton, in <u>Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart</u>, interprets the black black pool as "a figure for the depths of consciousness which go back as if beyond the boundaries of memory" (Leighton 147). She then adds that the "misrecognition between lovers triggers a self-knowledge which is cold rather than forlorn, dark rather than self-reflecting" (147).

If we accept Leighton's interpretation, I believe that the impenetrable blackness of the pool in autumn reminds Rossetti of the blackness she feels subconsciously within herself. The autumn landscape, while it resonates with the memories of summer love-affairs for others, reflects back emptiness at Rossetti. In "Despised and Rejected" (I.178-80.1864), she conveys her feeling of being shrouded in darkness: "My sun has set, I dwell / In darkness as a dead man out of sight" (1-2) she claims, positioning herself in the same abyss, void of Christian hope, discussed by Diane D'Amico in her analysis of "From Sunset to Star Rise." Similarly, in "Ah welladay and wherefore am I here?" (III.319.1896 ed.) she writes, "I watch the sun arise, I watch it sink / And feel no soullight tho' the day is clear" (3-4) again reiterating the absence of hope

and feeling of being shrouded in darkness evident in "From Sunset to Star Rise."

Ironically, autumn also contains forgetfulness for Rossetti. The autumn world, like the magical summer environments she creates, lulls people to sleep, making them forget the past and their lives. In "Autumn," the calm river, like the drowsy river in "The Lotus-Eaters: Ulysses to Penelope," lulls the maidens to sleep "with rest and spice and balm" (48). More specifically, autumn evokes forgetfulness in Rossetti, compelling her to write in "Cor Mio" (III.346.c.1875):

So late in autumn one forgets the spring,
Forgets the summer with its opulence,
The callow birds that long have found a wing,
The swallows that more lately gat them hence:
Will anything like spring, will anything
Like summer raise one day the slumbering sense?
(9-14).

In "A Yawn" (III.277.1858), Rossetti again expresses her conception of her submission to the lethargy that leads to death, claiming:

I grow so weary: is it death
This awful woful weariness?
It is a weight to heave my breath
A weight to wake, a weight to sleep;
I have no heart to work or weep (1-5).

Her state of inertia, furthermore, feeds her belief that she is numb and frozen. Her feeling of being weighed down, unable to work or sleep, parallels the numbness she attributes to life which "sighs like Autumn round an aimless walk" ("Later Life: A Double of Sonnets" 26.II.149.c.1881).

While autumn illuminates Rossetti's feeling of being numb to the world, it reminds her of the brokenness and emptiness she suffers within herself. In "Have Patience" (III.168-70.1849), the feasting and

celebrating she sees in autumn and in the latter phase of human life is rapidly transformed into fragmentation and hollowness. Rossetti comments that the "goblets all are broken, / The pleasant wine is spilt," adding that the "songs cease..." (1-3). The broken goblets parallel the brokenness she feels within herself, echoing her assertion that her life "is like a broken bowl," a bowl that "cannot hold / One drop of water" for her soul ("A Better Resurrection" 17-9).

Rossetti's brokenness, while it parallels the sense of being crippled that she expresses in her spring and summer imagery, augments her feeling of entrapment in life. In "If Only" (I.181.1865), she writes:

My tree of hope is lopped that spread so high; And I forget how summer glowed and shone, While Autumn grips me with its fingers wan, And frets me with its fitful windy sigh (5-8).

She emphasizes the mutilation she feels has been done to her life; her tree has been lopped like the boughs of her heart in "So I Began My Walk of Life." She reiterates her sensation of forgetfulness while accentuating her feeling of imprisonment; Autumn grips her with its fitful windy sigh. Consequently, autumn, like spring and summer, makes her anxious and frightened.

Like her spring settings, though, Rossetti's autumn landscapes are not conclusive in their reflection of her pain and sorrow; Rossetti expresses her desire to linger within them in spite of the entangled meanings they hold for her. In "An Apple Gathering", Rossetti has her speaker reminisce about a past lover while walking home from an apple gathering. The speaker observes her friends as they return at sunset with their baskets "heaped up" and "full" (10-3). Although she returns "empty-handed back" (8), she lingers: "... I loitered, while the dews / Fell fast I loitered still," she claims (27-8). While it could be argued that

the speaker's lingering reflects Rossetti's nostalgia for the life she has lost or rejected, I suggest that it reveals her yearning to savour the autumn evening and revel in the memory of her lost love. "So once it was with me you stooped to talk / Laughing and listening in this very lane," she states, concluding, "To think that by this way we used to walk / We shall not walk again!" (21-4). Her separateness from the revellers, in this case, allows her to contemplate the evening and delve into her memories of love, compelling her, as Leighton argues, to feel the pulses of life "more strongly and waywardly" (Leighton 151). As in the spring setting of "Song" in which the speaker's tears are subsumed by the sea, her lament is made more poignant by its acknowledgement that love is fleeting and painful and by the speaker's willingness to linger in the autumn setting that reminds her of that love. There seems to be a force in the physical autumn landscape that keeps Rossetti bound to life in spite of the pain she vehemently expresses in her other poetry. The void of her life which Rossetti links to the darkness of autumn and the paralysis which grips her within that void are counteracted faintly. "So I Began My Walk of Life" (III.342-3.1849) Rossetti writes:

> Therefore my sweets grew bitter, and I thrust Life back, till it stood still and turned to must. Yet sometimes through the great stagnation calls Of spirits reach me: is it so with you? (11-4).

Autumn, as a result, like spring and summer, brings to the forefront the complications Rossetti perceives in the final stages of human existence and, more specifically, in her own life. She pinpoints the festive, abundant nature of autumn to draw out the sense of achievement and joy she feels human beings should experience as they grow older and as they anticipate the after-life with Christ. In doing so, she unveils an imagination which welcomes life rather than renounces it,

affording a fullness and depth to her imaginative experiences. However, unable to participate in the luxuriant autumn settings she imagines, she attributes the more painful meanings of isolation and death to autumn, exploring the realms of memory and forgetfulness she sees tied to the process of human dying. Yet, Rossetti, while applying autumn's darker symbolism to all humankind, embraces it as a form of personal symbolism, claiming in "A Better Resurrection, "My life is in the falling leaf..."

(7); she utilizes it to illuminate her dying, her remembering and her forgetting -- processes which evoke the same feelings of brokenness, imprisonment and anxiety expressed through her spring and summer imagery. Like her spring settings, though, Rossetti's autumn worlds offer her some consolation; they exude an aura, as in "An Apple Gathering," which holds her to the world, enabling her to feel the spirit of life despite "the great stagnation."

Chapter Four: Winter

Rossetti's winter settings, like her spring, summer and autumn environments, bring out ambiguities in her life often bypassed by her critics while reinforcing her increasing sense of isolation and despair in the world. Winter, however, unlike spring, summer and autumn, is adopted overtly by Rossetti as her season rather than pushed away. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979) interpret Rossetti's adoption of whiteness, a colour I am associating with winter imagery in form of self-imposed as a death and manifestation of female rebellion against the oppressive society in which she writes. Likewise, Angela Leighton, in Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart, basing her argument on Rossetti's poem "Winter: (I.47.1857), argues that Rossetti veils herself in winter, rendering herself an enigma and thereby wielding power over her reader.

Such assessments, however, assume that Rossetti is unquestioning of winter as a symbol of freezing and death. On the contrary, Rossetti often views winter as emblematic of creation and symbolic of the birth of Christ -- a celebration which feeds her praise of the parent-child bond she shares with her mother. Her acceptance of winter as a personal symbol, then, in part, demonstrates her momentary experiencing of life rather than her undeniable rejection of it as does her revelling in the positive meanings she attributes to spring, summer and fall. The potential for freedom and comfort in the winter world Rossetti begins to carve for herself is stunted, however, by her regression to winter as a

static symbol of death and imprisonment. In poems like "Seasons," "Memory" (I.147.1857-65) and "Autumn" (III.301), she fixes upon the starker, colder aspects of winter, distancing herself from the merriment of the world she sees exemplified in the other seasons and in the celebratory strains of the winter world. In doing so, she fuses herself to the bleaker winter settings she creates. Her continual reference to snow, wind and ice, as a result, reiterates the feelings of loneliness, sterility and grief she expresses through her spring, summer and autumn imagery, rendering her evolution toward self-discovery an irreversible movement toward loneliness and despair rather than an open-ended journey toward freedom as Angela Leighton suggests.

Several critics argue that Rossetti employs imagery of whiteness and winter to demonstrate her power as a female writer; they assert that Rossetti's renunciation is chosen and, therefore, a display of the power she holds over herself. Gilbert and Gubar discuss Victorian women writers' tendency to clothe their subjects in white -- a tendency which brings to light the concept of "living burial and its corollary notion of the 'living dead' ..." (Gilbert and Gubar 620). Primarily writing of Emily Dickinson's employment of the white dress, they note that,

Partly, no doubt, she did this to come to terms with the pain of that white dress in which so many nineteenth-century women were imprisoned. At the same time, however, her insistence upon the "White Election" emphasizes her feeling that she has not only been chosen by whiteness but has freely chosen it herself. Like the subject of Christina Rossetti's sonnet "A Soul" -- yet another woman in white -- she has chosen to stand "as pale as Parian statues stand," to stand like "a wonder deathly-white ... patient nerved with inner might, Indomitable in her feebleness, / Her face and will athirst against the light" (621).

Emphasizing strength in feebleness or the "aesthetic of renunciation," they add that the woman who clothes herself in white "enacts the enigma

that she perceives at the heart of her culture" while paradoxically escaping her culture's strictures by imposing that enigma on herself (621).

Many of Rossetti's women shroud themselves in whiteness, a colour which is simultaneously symbolic of purity and death. In "The Dead Bride" (III.101-2.1846), Rossetti decides to make her subject's white bridal garb her shroud, writing, "There she lay so still and pale, / With her bridal robes around her," adding, "Joy is fleeting, life is frail, / Death had found her" (1-4). She describes her female subject in "Dead Before Death" (I.59.1854) similarly when she writes, "Ah changed and cold, how changed / and very cold," continuing, "With stiffened smiling lips and / cold calm eyes!" (1-2). The smiling woman certainly typifies the aesthetic of renunciation discussed by Gilbert and Gubar. Rossetti also embraces whiteness herself as she writes in her series of verses "Gifts and Graces" (II.255.c.1892):

WHITENESS most white. Ah to be clean again
In mine own sight and God's most holy sight!
To reach thro' any flood or fire of pain
Whiteness most white (1-4).

In choosing to clothe her female subjects in white and by claiming whiteness herself, Rossetti makes a conscious decision to render herself and her subjects dead before death. As Angela Leighton writes, her "'posthumous' women are not dead from pique or self-pity ... nor are they dead from waiting too long. Instead, their death is a kind of capricious and determined choice" -- a choice which locks them into a perpetual state of innocence and purity (Leighton 163). This choice, in turn, becomes demonstrative of woman's ultimate power over her body.

Leighton, like Gilbert and Gubar, argues that Rossetti chooses winter; she asserts that in "Winter: My Secret" Christina employs winter to protect herself, to hide or freeze the essence of her being and to tease the reader with her secret, wielding power over the public. In "Winter: My Secret," Rossetti claims:

To-day's a nipping day, a biting day;
In which one wants a shawl,
A veil, a cloak, and other wraps:
I cannot ope to everyone who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling through my hall;
Come bounding and surrounding me,
Nipping and clipping through my wraps and all (11-8).

The winter draughts compel her to wrap herself in cloaks, concealing her person before the world. Her shrouding of self, in turn, gives her a sense of security as she continues, "I wear my mask for warmth" (19). At the same time, however, she employs winter to tease the reader: "Suppose there is no secret after all, / But only just my fun," she writes (8-9). But whether or not the reader attempts to guess her secret, Christina has ultimate power over it: "Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell," she taunts (6). As Leighton asserts, by upholding "the idea of some inherent, unlockable meaning" in her work, Rossetti demonstrates a mischievous, manipulative power of self; the "sealed place" within her, encircled by the winter snow, becomes a source of strength for Christina Rossetti (Leighton 163).

Leighton, Gilbert and Gubar, however, while accentuating Rossetti's power of choice in her use of images of whiteness and winter, are still interpreting winter as a symbol of death and freezing. Rossetti's portrayals of winter, though, are often pictures of celebration and hope as are many of her spring, summer and autumn settings. Winter as the mother-nurse of spring, winter as the time of Christ's birth, the apex

of the Christian year and winter as the harbinger of fellowship and communion among family and friends are characterizations of winter which suggest that Rossetti, in adopting winter as her secret, is not choosing to renounce the world; she is choosing to live and celebrate it. The meanings of the winter plants she catalogues in her poems are significant here because they reiterate the jovial and hopeful nature she sees in winter. If Rossetti rejects the life and relationships she understands to be exemplified by spring, summer and autumn, she embraces other earthly experiences through winter, gripping a hope that has seemed elusive in the other seasons of the year.

At times, Rossetti emphasizes the cyclical motion of the seasons, characterizing winter as the creator of spring, a force which, while it destroys, conceals and releases new life. "There is a Budding Morrow in Midnight" (II.172. 1888 ed.) celebrates winter, naming it "the mothernurse of Spring / Lovely for her daughter's sake" (7-8); it is beautiful because it is the womb of spring, the season which is "out of sight" yet "Ready to burst through" or "about to break" (6-12). Similarly, November, in "The Months: A Pageant," rocks the "cradle of the earth," lulling "her with a sigh" and knowing "that she will wake to mirth / By and by" (291-By giving November power over the earth and by infusing it with insight (November knows the earth will wake to mirth), supernaturalizes it spiritualizes she summer and autumn. Significantly, winter as creator, in both works, becomes a feminine power through the metaphor of mother-nurse.

Winter as mother and creator also emerges in Rossetti's poem "Advent" in which Rossetti portrays the frozen earth as pregnant with life, writing:

Earth grown old, yet still so green, Deep beneath her crust of cold Nurses fire, unfelt, unseen: Earth grown old (1-4).

When will fire break up her screen?
When will life burst thro' her mould?
Earth, earth, earth, thy cold is keen,
Earth grown old (8-11).

Again, Rossetti presents the winter world as the nurse of spring-fire, the harbinger of green-life.

Winter, as well as implying the coming of spring, encompasses Christmas, a highpoint of the Christian year which celebrates the birth of Christ. The Christian calendar, as a result, brings to light the ambiguity of winter, revealing that it symbolizes birth as well as death. In "Christmas Carol 3" (II.175.1888 ed.), Rossetti sings:

Lo! newborn Jesus
Soft and weak and small,
Wrapped in baby's bands
By His Mother's hands,
Lord God of all (1-5).

In its embracing of Christ's birth into the world, moreover, Christmas, in winter, is "Brighter than the blazing noon" and "Warmer than the heat of June" ("Christmas Eve" II.213.1885 ed. 1-4).

As the mother-nurse of spring and as the harbinger of Christmas, winter appeals to Rossetti, inspiring her to celebrate life rather than renounce it. In "The Months: A Pageant," December concludes the play by linking his hands with the other months who "troop in from the garden, or advance out of the background": "The Twelve join hands in a circle, and begin dancing round to a stately measure as the Curtain falls" (final stage directions). December's celebratory dance as well as his wielding of holly, which signifies foresight, and mistletoe, which signifies

obstacles to be overcome, suggests that winter, for Rossetti, is a time to celebrate, to anticipate and to work toward the future. Her realization of winter's symbolism of hope and mirth arouses in her the same physical and spiritual elation she expresses in "A Birthday." In "A Hope Carol" (II.172-3.1888 ed.) she claims that sweet voices reverberating with "a rising falling tune" are calling her "Below the stars, beyond the moon" (9). In "Christmas Eve," she commands the earth to strike up its music for her, "Birds that sing and bells that ring" (12).

Christmas, in addition, reminds her of her mother's love as does her spring and summer imagery. In "A Valentine: 1882" (III.317.1882), she writes:

My blessed Mother dozing in her chair
On Christmas Day seemed an embodied Love,
A comfortable Love with soft brown hair
Softened and silvered to a tint of dove,
A better sort of Venus with an air
Angelical from thoughts that dwell above,
A wiser Pallas in whose body fair
Enshrined a blessed soul looks out thereof (1-8).

Christmas, which epitomizes Mary's love for Jesus, becomes symbolic of the worldly bond shared by Rossetti and her mother, a bond which transcends the material world as Frances Rossetti is transformed into an embodiment of Love. Winter, consequently, becomes a time of joy, causing Rossetti to write in "Later Life: A Double of Sonnets: 19" (II.146.1881 ed.), "but now the nights / intense and long, hang out their utmost lights," adding, "Such starry nights are long, yet not too long; / Frost nips the weak, while strengthening the strong" (10-14). Consequently, Rossetti, in accepting winter as her season, is embracing the life-affirming movements she sees it to represent: creation, nurturing, celebration, life and love -- love of the earth, love of Christ and love of her mother.

Sadly, however, Rossetti's embracing of life through winter is limited to a degree by her reverting to winter as a monolithic symbol of death and by her wielding of that symbol to freeze herself. Winter, as it congeals into a mirror of her feelings of isolation, frigidity, barrenness and eternal captivity, becomes an oppressive force which overpowers the Christina who wants to embrace the world freely and comfortably. In "Seasons," having praised the cheer of spring, summer and autumn, Rossetti writes:

Oh the starving winter-lapse,
 Ice-bound, hunger-pinched and dim:
Dormant roots recall their saps,
 Empty nests show black and grim,
Short-lived sunshine gives no heat,
 Undue buds are nipped by frost,
Snow sets forth a winding sheet
 And all hope of life seems lost (25-32).

While the word "seems" implies that hope is present in Rossetti, the images of darkness are more readily on her tongue; adjectives like "starving," "hunger-pinched," "dim," "dormant," "empty," "black," "grim" and "short-lived" describe a bleak season of stasis and emptiness rather than one of movement, pregnancy and birth as Rossetti's more uplifting winter poems suggest. The shroud-like winding sheet formed by the snow, moreover reinforces the winter-as-death analogy that emerges also in "A Year's Windfalls." In "A Year's Windfalls," the fog, which "forms and shifts," loosening the leaves from their "sapless twigs" and curtailing the sun with "its bleak raw wind" becomes a shroud that conceals the dying earth (81-96). The images are of lifelessness and darkness.

While Rossetti acknowledges the creative forces of winter, implying that by adopting winter as her season, she is affirming life, the dreariness of winter that surfaces in "Seasons" and "A Year's Windfalls"

is the dominant element she strives to embrace. While in "Memory," Rossetti calls upon winter which "comes and goes" with its "nip-wind" (24-5), in "Seasons," she cries, "Dreary winter come at last: Come quickly ... Dark and sluggish Winter" (13-5). Similarly, in "Autumn" (III.301.1850), she writes, "Go, chilly autumn, / Come, O winter cold," commanding, "Let the green stalks die away / Into common mould" (5-8). She adopts winter's staleness and death in place of its joy and hope.

Her claiming of the death she perceives as inherent in winter reaffirms her increasing alienation from the life-fulfilment she connects to the jubilant aspects of all the seasons, revealing a painful on-going experience of renunciation that seems far from capricious as Angela Leighton suggests in her analysis of Rossetti's "Winter: My Secret." In her poem "Memory", Rossetti discusses the crushing and laying cold of the life and joy she has expressed in other poems:

None know the choice I made; I make it still.

None know the choice I made and broke my heart,
Breaking mine idol: I have braced my will

Once, chosen for my part.

I broke it at a blow, I laid it cold, Crushed in my deep heart where it used to live. My heart dies inch by inch; the time grows old, Grows old in which I grieve (12-9).

While Christina makes no direct references to winter in these lines, she articulates the hurt within herself caused by her rejection of what she perceives as life's vanities, expressing a suffering which is ongoing because her choice to renounce life is one that she has made and makes still.

Having obliterated the warmth in her heart and having encased herself in winter, Rossetti joins with the winter-scapes she adopts, immediately exiling herself from other human beings who she imagines to be

involved in loving human relationships. In her Christmas carol "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" (I.216-17.c.1872), Rossetti accentuates the bleakness of the English winter countryside, presenting the earth as "hard as iron" and the water "like a stone" (3-4). Earth and water, traditionally conceived as symbols of life and fluidity, here represent stasis and death, a frozen state reinforced by the snow which falls "snow on snow / Snow on snow" (5). Kathleen Jones, mentions the carol in her biography, claiming, "Her Christmas carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter,' written sometime in the eighteen-sixties, is a chilling evocation of winter's iron grip on flesh and mind. The traditional coupling of winter with depression and sterility was always at the forefront of Christina's thoughts" (Jones While Rossetti quickly juxtaposes the cold winter landscape with the warmth generated between Mary and Christ, a human warmth conveyed through the "breastful of milk," the "mangerful of hay" and the "kiss," we realize that she is a bystander, observing the scene; she is excluded from the physical exchange of love between mother and child, estranged, as in "Autumn," from the heart of her own imaginative creation.

In fusing herself with the death-symbolism she attributes to winter, consequently, Rossetti becomes an onlooker of, rather than a participant in, life. In "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil" (1982), Dolores Rosenblum emphasizes Rossetti's female speakers' tendency to observe rather than participate:

the language of the Bible provides Rossetti with a crucial metaphor for her personal myth, the visual metaphor whereby 'seeing' stands for knowing, loving and having ... her poetry is pervaded with references to faces, masks, eyes, spectacles and displays, and the acts of seeing, looking, staring, gazing and watching (Rosenblum 36).

In her carol, then, it becomes evident that the speaker, in order to make

Christ the focal point of her life, must relinquish her heart, the core of her being. She is the only "object" that she is able to give to the child; like the lamb, the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh, her heart becomes an offering to Christ. Having relinquished her heart and having relegated herself to the wintry margins of life, she can only keep vigil over others who indulge in the warmth and passion of human relationships.

Having enclosed herself in her winter prison, experiences an overwhelming sense of isolation which is heightened by her In "At Home" (I.28.1858), Christina imagines her observance of others. dead spirit as it gazes down at friends still living. While it watches them feast "beneath green orange-boughs," sucking the pulp "of plum and peach," singing and jesting and revelling in life, it shivers cold: "I shivered comfortless, but cast / No chill across the tablecloth," Rossetti writes, adding, "I all-forgotten shivered, sad" (25-7). Similarly, in "A Daughter of Eve" (I.208.1865), she laments, "No more to laugh, no more to sing / I sit alone with sorrow" (14-5). Likewise, in "Memory," she states, "I have a room whereinto no one enters / Save I myself alone ... While winter comes and goes -- oh tedious comer! -- " (21-5). employment of words like "comfortless," "all-forgotten" and "alone" convey her sense of isolation from the world.

As well as isolating Rossetti from the life enjoyed by others, her adoption of winter demonstrates her feelings of frigidity and barrenness, emotions which are particularly significant with respect to her renunciation of motherhood. In her biography, Kathleen Jones cites "Downcast" (1856) to describe the "state of emotional and spiritual ardity" in Rossetti's life, quoting, "I, only I / Am changed and sad and cold, while in my soul / The fountain of delight is dry" (22-4). Rossetti

continues the dry or frozen fountain image in "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness" (III.265-66.1857), furthering her depiction of her feelings of "Bear with me: I must bear to wait, / A fountain sealed sterility: through heat and cold," she writes (43-44). Echoing the frozen water image in "In the Bleak Mid-Winter," these lines express Rossetti's feelings of impotence, stasis and emptiness. Similarly, in "What Would I Give!" (I.142.1864), Rossetti's speaker likens her heart again to ice, claiming, "this heart of stone ice-cold ... Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all" (2-3). She presents winter as a source of frigidity and sterility, overlooking its positive attributes. Significantly, while critics like Winston Weathers and Dorothy Mermin argue that Christina moves toward a reconciliation between sense and spirit in Goblin Market through Lizzie and Laura, in many of her other poems, she assumes the sterility embodied by Jeanie who pines and pines away, who dwindles and grows grey; she rejects the life-affirming relationship experienced by Lizzie and Laura at the close of the poem who opt for marriage and motherhood, linking their adult hands with little hands.

Having utilized winter to reflect her isolation and her feeling of sterility, she renders it the harbinger of a moment of clarity in which she realizes the losses of her life. In "A Daughter of Eve," she writes:

A fool I was to sleep at noon,
And wake when night is chilly
Beneath the comfortless cold moon;
A fool to pluck my rose too soon,
A fool to snap my lily.

My garden-plot I have not kept;
Faded and all-forsaken,
I weep as I have never wept:
Oh it was summer when I slept,
It's winter now I waken (1-10).

Her words voice her feeling that she has bypassed summer and woken during

winter which she dominantly characterizes as a season of dissolution and despair. Similarly, in "A Dirge" (I.195.1865), she asks herself, "Why did you die when the lambs were cropping?" and "Why were you born when the snow was falling?" (1-7). Her questions reveal an acute awareness that she has, largely, wasted the fruitfulness of her life, only to waken during winter which she, here, renders a season of death and stasis.

Significantly, Christina's moments of clarity are accompanied by her overwhelming nostalgia for the vitality she has continually crushed and laid cold. Surrounded by the snow, wind and ice of winter, she expresses her nostalgia through her yearnings for spring, summer and autumn. From her "winter prison," her psychological captivity, she writes in "Another Spring," "If I might see another Spring -- / Oh stinging comment on my past," continuing, "I'd laugh to-day, to-day is brief; / I would not wait for anything" (17-22). Aware of life's brevity and of her passivity in the world, she longs to experience the happiness she has associated with spring. Similarly, in "The Key-Note" (II.59.c.1882), she writes:

Summer has followed after Spring;
Now Autumn is so shrunk and sere
I scarcely think a sadder thing
Can be the Winter of my year (5-8).

She laments the passing of spring, summer and autumn, in spite of the painful meanings she attributes to them in her other poems, and saddens at the coming of her death; her lament reveals her nostalgia for the life-experiences she feels she has lost.

Nostalgic for the joy she has crushed, Rossetti, understandably, expresses a frantic desire to melt the winter prisons she has constructed around herself and to experience the earthly pleasures she has rejected. In "What Would I Give!," she exclaims, "What would I give for a heart of

flesh to warm me through, / Instead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I do!" (1-2). She later adds, "What would I give for tears! not smiles but scalding tears, / To wash the black mark clean and to thaw the frost of years..." (7-8). Having frozen her sensuousness and renounced her vitality, she now wants to thaw the "frost of years" which has congealed the life she holds within; she wants to experience rather than to watch. Winter now becomes something she strains to get out of rather than something she strives to embrace as in "Winter: My Secret."

However, her wanting to destroy her psychological prison is futile. In "Shut Out" (I.56.1856), the speaker gazes with longing at the summer landscape -- a garden "pied with all flowers bedewed and green" in which song-birds pass "from bough to bough" and where moths and bees flutter "from flower to flower" -- from her position of confinement. Meanwhile, a shadowless spirit guards the gate, building a wall of mortar, leaving "no loophole great or small" through which her "straining eyes might look" (17-20). Imprisoned without hope of freedom, the speaker sits "quite alone," "blinded with tears," mourning the loss of her "delightful land" (21-24). Her blindness here echoes her feeling of being engulfed in darkness in "From Sunset to Star Rise." In "At Home," also, the speaker shivers alone, unable to unite with her life-indulgent friends. Her position apart from the world, expressed through her submission to winter, suggests that her desire to be melted back to life is hopeless.

As a result, she must sit in the prison she has made for herself and wait for death. In "A Sorrowful Sigh of a Prisoner" (III.56.1893), she writes:

Lord, comest Thou to me?

My heart is cold and dead.

Alas that such a heart should be

The place to lay Thy head! (1-4).

As well as revealing her resignation to her role of prisoner in life, sadly, her interrogative phrase "Lord, comest Thou to me?" suggests that she is uncertain of God's presence in her life. Yet, even her anticipation of God's coming is overshadowed by her feelings of emptiness and sorrow, emotions which underlie her yearning to die. In "Today and Tomorrow" (77-78), she writes:

I wish I were dead, my foe, My friend, I wish I were dead, With a stone at my tired feet And a stone at my tired head (19-22).

Winter, as a result, is not so secretive; like Rossetti's spring, summer and autumn settings, winter, in its changing guises, mirrors the contradiction she sees in the world: the interconnectedness of life and Significantly, Rossetti allies herself with winter more than with the other seasons, leading critics like Gilbert, Gubar and Leighton to believe that, in choosing whiteness and winter and the death and frozenness they imply, she is demonstrating her individual power as a Victorian female writer. Such conclusions, however, rely on the assumption that Rossetti conceives winter as symbolic of death only, ignoring the positive meanings she attributes to winter: creation, birth, love and joy. Rossetti's acceptance of winter and the life-affirming experiences she perceives it to represent allow her moments of personal elation and instants of communion with the world overlooked by recent Rossetti criticism. Her tendency to revert to winter as a monolithic symbol of death, however, undercuts the celebratory definitions she bestows upon it, revealing feelings of loneliness, frigidity, dissolution and despair that overwhelm her existence making her feel dead before death.

Conclusion

Rossetti's seasons, then, while revealing the inconsistencies she conceives to pervade human experience, assume an intense personal significance in her poems, unveiling the contradictions embedded in her own turbulent life-journey; they illumine the ironies of Frye's archetypes and G.B. Tennyson's conventional wisdom while illustrating the joyous and despairing emotions of the female writer who imagines them.

Spring's flourishing and beauty, when linked with Rossetti's mother and grandfather, accentuate the poignant relationships developed with them; its abundance and freshness, when connected with images of herself, demonstrate an affirmation and an elevation of the female self rather than a repudiation of it. In turn, spring's cruelty, augmented for Rossetti by April's remembrance of Good Friday when the sun and moon hide "their faces in a starless sky" ("Good Friday" 10-1) and its brevity, epitomized by its falling blossoms, uncover the violence and death Rossetti perceives to be bound up with birth and life -- for her, the result of humanity's original sin. Heaven, in contrast, Rossetti imagines, provides its dwellers with a perpetual spring-life which never changes or dies. While anticipating a holy union with God in this eternal setting, Rossetti begins to emphasize her separateness from earthly spring and the problems of life it embodies for her. Ironically, her mental dissociation from spring brings her closer to the pain she has sought to The springtime happiness experienced by others reminds her of her avoid. own loneliness and sadness in the world, transforming her work, or what

Betty S. Flowers defines as her song, into a lament for the depression that dominates her life.

Summer, which Northrop Frye associates with the rituals of love and marriage, with its enchanting, mysterious landscapes, symbolizes the depths of erotic love for Rossetti; its flowering and sweetness, while paralleling the celebratory and alluring nature of romantic love, have poisonous undertones which Christina equates with the deception, emotional and physical depletion, immorality, forgetting and painful remembering she By supernaturalizing summer. attributes to human love relationships. allying herself with Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite writers, she acknowledges the spiritual potential of human love -- a love which she strives to achieve by elevating her mother to the position of lover and by revelling in the summer environment, an act, which although exceptional, enables her, fleetingly, to love herself. Such inspiratory brushes with the love she writes into her summer images become precursors to the love she anticipates with Christ. These moments, however, are overpowered by her yearning to divorce herself from summer and the turbulence it represents And, as with her separation from spring, her alienation from summer thrusts her deeper into the darkness of the human experience she strains to reject, severing her from what she has described as the "foretaste of God's love" and eroding the hope that keeps her bound to Christ.

For Christina Rossetti, autumn, also, reinforces the complications of life, mirroring, in its fruitfulness, the completeness humans should experience at the close of their physical lives and reflecting, in its dying, the decay that infects the body and the bitterness that penetrates the mind as we approach our deaths. Through

her autumn imagery, as in "Autumn," Rossetti uncovers the imaginative fullness she has achieved throughout her life, an abundance conveyed in other works through the plentitude of the harvest. Transforming autumn into a romantic figure, like Keats' figure in "To Autumn," Rossetti again supernaturalizes nature, revealing herself as a Pre-Raphaelite artist who is able to dissolve the boundaries between sense and spirit. Aligning herself with the bleaker meanings of isolation and death traditionally attributed to autumn, however, Rossetti reveals her continual tendency to succumb to the loneliness, sadness and pain she has expressed through her spring and summer imagery. Surprisingly, her depression does not stop her from wanting to linger in the world and contemplate her life experiences.

Rossetti's winter settings, like her spring, summer and autumn worlds, convey the entanglement of life, love and death that she views in the world while mapping out her own intricate descent into isolation and despair. While some argue that her adoption of winter as her season is a demonstration of the power she has over herself and the control she has over the reader, when analyzed through the uplifting meanings she writes into winter, it becomes an overt embracing of life rather than a form of self-imposed death. Her affirmation of life wavers, however, when she renders winter an unquestionable symbol of death; when regressing to winter's more conventional symbolism, her acceptance of it locks her into the darkness, pain and emptiness she has approached through her alienation from the festivity, love, joy and thanksgiving she has connected to spring, summer and autumn. Rossetti's seasons of the year, as a result, are more than a reiteration of conventional wisdom; they unveil the continual train of ambiguities that she sees running through human life while reflecting the twists and turns of her particular life-experience.

Notes

- 1. I am interpreting Valentine's Day as a spring celebration because English springtime generally begins early in February, much earlier then March 21, the first day of spring according to the calendar.
- 2. The meanings attributed to flowers by the Victorians are taken from The Language and Poetry of Flowers (1867).

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